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Religion matters: Beware the American 'cultural Jew'

When being culturally 'Jew-ish' in America means little more than lox and bagels and a vague duty to repair the world, Israel should also be worried.

By Rabbi Leon A. Morris | Oct. 9, 2013 | 5:30 AM | 8

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The recent Pew Study revealed that 22 percent of American Jews describe themselves as having “no religion” (up from just 7 percent a decade ago). What those interviewed for the survey didn't say is what I'm accustomed to hearing all the time as a rabbi: “I'm Jewish, but not religious.” Instead, when asked, “Are you Jewish by religion?” they simply said “no.”

The data reveals a group of American Jews who are, well, Jew-ish – an identity that is not only absent of faith, Torah and mitzvot, but also largely absent of anything that matters much at all. Only 12 percent consider being Jewish “very important” in their lives (compared with 56 percent of Jews by religion). Leaving synagogue membership aside, only 4 percent of them are members of any Jewish organization. Only 20 percent of them donate to Jewish causes. Yet, when we consider that 83 percent of these “Jews of no religion” (and also 55 percent of “Jews by religion”) maintain that being Jewish is mainly a matter of ancestry or culture, it becomes apparent that one must make a distinction between “thick” and “thin” Jewish culture.

American “Jews of no religion” are clearly not the counterparts of Israeli secular Jews who speak Hebrew, celebrate Jewish holidays, have some (albeit not enough) fluency in Jewish texts and have a sense of collective identity with the Jewish people. I leave it to Israelis to distinguish between thick and thin culture among Israelis. But, as the Pew study reveals, a sense of Jewish culture without Jewish religion in America essentially means Jews who have reduced Jewishness to asking good questions, telling funny jokes and some abstract commitment to repair the world.

American “Jews of no religion” are neither Ahad Ha'am nor Ruth Calderon. When American Jews say “I'm a cultural Jew” they tend to mean they like to pepper their speech with Yiddish words and expressions (often used incorrectly) and they have a fondness for lox and bagels. The attitudes and behaviors of Pew's “Jews of no religion” are not the building blocks of a thick culture. Their attitudes and beliefs warrant no urgency to perpetuate them for future generations (indeed two-thirds of these Jews are not raising their children as Jews), nor do they embody any personal responsibility for or obligation to the Jewish people. A thick Jewish culture is rooted in language, literature and holidays, all derived from and in relationship with Jewish religion. Cultural elements such as these express the kinds of values that matter enough to want to see them perpetuated.

Conceptually, it may seem possible to separate Jewish culture and ethnicity from Jewish religion. However, the unusual and complex nature of Jewish identity makes religion and culture two inseparable strands of a single cord. Modernity has seen many failed attempts to isolate one strand to the complete exclusion of the other. Classical Reform Judaism in the late 19th century declared that the Jews were “no longer a nation, but a religious community.” Likewise, many socialist Zionists saw the Jewish people solely as a political and national entity, entirely divested of religion.

There may be a sense of triumphalism or schadenfreude in the American Orthodox camp. Unlike the non-Orthodox denominations, they are retaining their own, have higher birthrates and show deeper levels of commitment. But the troubling results of this survey actually underscore the urgent need for non-Orthodox Judaism to be successful. If a case needed to be made that the vast majority of American Jews will never become Orthodox, this study makes the case clearer than ever. The synagogues that have the greatest potential to reach the growing number of “Jews of no religion” are the non-Orthodox ones. If American Orthodoxy cares about the survival of Jewish life in America, the results of this study should in fact encourage American Orthodox leadership to work together more closely with the Reform and Conservative movements. Those movements are the shock troops for deepening Jewish life for the most endangered Jews described in this study.

Likewise, Israelis shouldn't rejoice over these findings either. While this may serve as an immediate confirmation to them that Jewish life in the Diaspora is untenable, this is not good news for Israel. The majority of American Jews will not be moving to Israel. In the study, caring for Israel was in a statistical dead heat with having a sense of humor as an indicator of Jewish identity (43 percent and 42 percent, respectively). Among Jews of no religion, only 24 percent view caring about Israel as a component of Jewish identity. Israel needs a robust Jewish diaspora for political and financial support. Additionally, a broad spiritual vision of Zionism relies upon a Jewish people outside the land to be influenced and to influence the Jewish state.

For those of us who are non-Orthodox rabbis and educators, this study should prompt a heshbon nefesh, or soul-searching, of our own. The results underscore the challenge and the urgency of our work. The data should urge us to lead with greater passion and with a clear vision. We must increasingly steer away from pragmatic responsiveness to what the “amkha,” the people on the street, tell us they want, and be leaders of a vision that is passionate and not afraid of aspiring to be more. We need to simultaneously deepen the notion of “culture” that seems to resonate so positively for American Jews, and persuasively articulate why a religious life matters. Rather than step away from ritual, we need to explain how ritual helps to transmit the values embedded within it, how sacred texts are the literature of our nation, how prayer is the poetry of our people. We are best positioned to demonstrate how Jewish culture and Jewish religion are as inseparable as they have ever been.

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