

By Gal Beckerman Nov. 12, 2018

When a gunman slaughtered 11 worshipers in a Pittsburgh synagogue on a Shabbat morning last month, American Jews were left with a jumble of intense emotions: horror and fear, certainly, but also an old embattled feeling, centuries in the making. They were victims, in America, a country that has never seen even a hint of a pogrom. In their pain and worry, individual Jews had a rare chance to feel themselves part of a larger community — one that mourns together, gets angry together, imbued with a separate and unique identity, threatened yet resilient. And in this, victimhood offered an illusion.

For one thing, the violence of Pittsburgh is far from the everyday reality of American Jews. They live in a country that has offered them a great deal more love than it ever has hate. We're beyond mere tolerance. A recent Pew poll found that Americans felt "warmer" about Jews than any other religious group. There is an accumulated sense of comfort and acceptance that has persisted even with a president whose winks have emboldened thousands of internet trolls and hundreds of white men bearing tiki torches. The positive side of the ledger remains plentiful.

A shared sorrow may have provided the briefest taste of unity after Pittsburgh, but anti-Semitism is not what defines the experience of Jews in America today; assimilation is. To hear the professional worriers in the Jewish community, it's love, not hate, that poses the bigger existential challenge. A vast majority of Jews — 72 percent among the non-Orthodox — now marry outside the tribe. The infrastructure of Judaism, from the synagogue to the long-established liberal denominations, is being steadily abandoned. Almost a third of millennial Jews are so unidentified with Judaism they say they have no religion at all. And Israel, which once inspired, now alienates many, especially the young. Even the massacre in Pittsburgh, for those who knew where to look, offered hints of this demise. The average age of the victims, those mainstays who turned on the lights and made sure the grape juice and cookies were set up for the kiddush, was 74. Three congregations gathered in one synagogue that morning because of dwindling numbers.

Once the candlelight vigils are over, where is the solid ground for the future of American Jewish identity? It won't come from being victims — it shouldn't — and cultural and ethnic identity, the bagels and lox version, is disappearing fast. From where then? As a handful of new books make abundantly clear, there really is only one source left: the religion — Judaism itself, and its unique capacity for adaptation.

Reformers have been here before, in a radical moment of reinterpretation during the 19th century when a minuscule community numbering in the thousands ripped up received rituals and theology in order to adjust to the new reality of living in an open society. But it has been some time since American Jews have needed a dynamic religion to give them purpose. The 20th century brought the Holocaust and the foundation of Israel, two events that offered greater, world-historical, anchors of identity — the genocide creating an obligation to the murdered, and the Jewish state creating a homeland that offered dignity and pride.

Those anchors, weighty though they were, have now come unmoored. The last Holocaust survivor will most likely die within the next decade or two, and Israel, increasingly since 1967, is a thornbush. American Jews are now back to where they once were: on their own, as they haven't been in over a century, left to try to sustain themselves. The choice, according to Tal Keinan, the author of a new book to which I'll return, is stark and, to my mind, true: "Create meaning in Judaism or accept extinction."

How American Judaism Evolved

The great transformation of American Judaism began in the early 19th century with younger religious dissidents who felt alienated from their own faith. "Almost no one understood the language," complained Abraham Moise, a congregant living in the 1820s in Charleston, S.C. — which, with 700 Jews, then had the largest Jewish population in

the country. “Substance has yielded to form, the religion of the heart to the observance of unmeaning forms and ceremonies.”

Within a few years, that Charleston congregation would split in two over the question of whether to add an organ to their synagogue. The reformers sought to imitate the practices of their Christian neighbors in order to make Judaism less alien to the dominant other — and to themselves. They no longer wanted to split their identity between the Americanized peddlers and podiatrists and businesspeople they had become in the outside world and the practitioners of an ancient religion in a dead tongue they turned into inside the synagogue. Soon English replaced Hebrew. Women and men sat together, sang hymns together, even in choirs. They abandoned as a relic anything stodgy or primitive-seeming. A few congregations even replaced the gnarled ram’s horn blown on the high holidays with a shiny brass trumpet.

By midcentury, an influx of German Jews, including the first trained rabbis to arrive in America, brought some intellectual and theological heft to these reforms. They were emerging from the ferment of the Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment, in which thinkers like Moses Mendelssohn searched for ways that Jews, freshly emancipated in Western Europe, could embrace the new secular gods of rationality and progress and nation. The key was to let go of 1,800 years of yearning and praying for a return to Zion, and instead root themselves more firmly where they lived. They should stop seeing themselves as a people apart — and certainly not a “chosen” one. Theirs would be a religion like any other.

For Jews in America, this made perfect sense. The reformers began excising the prayers for the messiah and a return to Palestine. One rabbi, dedicating the arrival of the organ at that Charleston congregation in 1841, made the shift away from the diasporic status quo very explicit: “This synagogue is our *temple*, this city is our *Jerusalem*, this happy land our *Palestine*, and as our fathers defended with their lives *that temple, that city and that land*, so will their sons defend *this temple, this city and this land*.”

“Chosenness” would have new meaning and intention. Since Jews were no longer waiting for the messiah, they themselves would become “a messianic *people* designated by God to guide the world to its eventual redemption,” as Steven R. Weisman writes in his thorough new history of this era, **THE CHOSEN WARS: How Judaism Became an American Religion (Simon & Schuster, \$30)**. American Jews would embrace a “high-priestly mission” to act as models of ethical behavior. Action in the world would define them.

By the 1880s, just as the boats loaded with Eastern European Jews were about to start arriving at Ellis Island (turning a community of 250,000 into four million within a few decades), Reform rabbis had profoundly redefined “what it is to be a Jew,” Weisman writes, “and what the purpose of a Jew in America should be.” When they gathered in Pittsburgh in 1885 to produce a statement crystallizing their beliefs, they went all in on America. (“We consider ourselves no longer a nation, but a religious community.”) Their role in this country would be to promote a social gospel, “to participate in the great task of modern times, to solve, on the basis of justice and righteousness, the problems presented by the contrasts and evils of the present organization of society.”

One hundred and thirty-three years later, this statement still expresses how a vast majority of American Jews think about what it means to be a Jew in this country. To be a Jew is to join the A.C.L.U., to travel to the border and act as a pro bono lawyer for immigrants, to join in the Women’s March. It’s the part of American Jewish identity that points with pride to the fact that Barack Obama won 78 percent of the Jewish vote in 2008 and beams at Ruth Bader Ginsburg’s status as a liberal rock star.

The sociologist Jack Wertheimer dismisses this as “Golden Rule” Judaism in **THE NEW AMERICAN JUDAISM: How Jews Practice Their Religion Today (Princeton University, \$29.95)**, lamenting that as a form of religious practice — even with a faith that stresses deeds over beliefs — it represents a slide toward the empty

and platitudinous: “A rich, complex and at times contradictory religious system has been reduced to a set of vague slogans — ‘Justice, justice, shall you pursue,’ ‘Made in God’s image,’ ‘Love the stranger’ and ‘Repair the world.’”

Wertheimer is harsh on this form of Judaism, seeing it as an easy, self-congratulatory way to slap a seal of tradition onto pre-existing liberalism. He’s wrong to discount it as meaningless. Some of the most vibrant activity around synagogues every weekend has to do with food banking or raising funds for Syrian refugees. But I do share his assessment that as religious practice, this is pretty thin. It’s not hard to imagine a day when American Jews stop thinking about their commitment to social justice as Jewishly inflected and see it instead as just that, a commitment to social justice. What then of the more thickly religious practices, the world of ritual and spirituality?

Most American Jews (the 90 percent who are not Orthodox but belong to one of the liberal branches of Reform or Conservative Judaism or are simply unaffiliated) are in a process of mixing and matching, practicing what Wertheimer calls a “cafeteria religion.” “Picking and choosing only those morsels of Judaism that seem personally appealing is the new — and perhaps only — norm among Jews,” he writes. It’s what explains why the premier Conservative synagogue in Washington, D.C., sponsors a Jewish Mindfulness Center, which includes meditation practices, healing services, yoga, Jewish mysticism classes and immersion in the mikvah (the ritual bath, previously an exclusively Orthodox practice). American Jews have not quite abandoned Judaism — according to a Pew Research Center survey in 2013, a majority still attend a Seder for Passover and fast on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement; at weddings and funerals, people still want *something* Jewish — but they are being extremely idiosyncratic about it all, sucking out whatever spiritual and personal sustenance the tradition has to offer and spitting out the pits.

Two Proposals for Change

The affliction the sociologist Herbert Gans calls “terminal ethnic identity” is a condition of white ethnic groups like Jews and the Irish, who by the third generation of their family’s existence in America would, as Gans predicted in a 1979 paper, view their heritage as “more of a leisure-time activity” (like, say, watching “Seinfeld”). By the seventh, “their secular cultures will be only a dim memory.” A majority of American Jews in that 2013 Pew survey rated “humor” and “intellectual curiosity” much higher than community and religious practice as indicators of Jewishness. This would put them on the path to terminal. At this rate, American Jews are two or three generations away from being as Jewish as “Irish” people whose Irishness consists of drinking green beer on St. Patrick’s Day.

If a revitalized form of Judaism is the counterweight to Gans’s predictions, it will have to be much more expansive and inclusive than its current iteration. This is also the assessment of Robert Mnookin, a Harvard law professor, in **THE JEWISH AMERICAN PARADOX: Embracing Choice in a Changing World (PublicAffairs, \$28)**, a lucid legal brief of a book that proposes what would amount to a revolutionary (some would say heretical) revision.

It no longer makes sense, Mnookin thinks, to use matrilineal descent, or any descent really, to determine who is a Jew. If you feel yourself to be a Jew, you get to be one. “The ‘chosen people’ must become the ‘choosing people,’” he writes. And it’s a strategic move. Jews can’t afford to be exclusive — leaving out children with only a Jewish father or a non-Jewish spouse. Why negate them while allowing membership to people who couldn’t care less about it? He wants a “Big Tent”: “Inside the Tent the table is set with a smorgasbord of Jewish values, music, food, traditions, rituals, spirituality, language, philanthropic causes and connections with Israel. At this table some will nibble; others will feast. But all will have options and none will be turned away.” Within the tent, if some want to set up their own purity tests for inclusion in a subgroup, Mnookin is fine with that. But the entrance should be wide.

A push for inclusivity of this sort might even offset the impact of intermarriage. The increasingly high rate of Jews marrying non-Jews (coupled with a birthrate that, with the exception of the Orthodox, is relatively low) is spoken of by Jewish leaders in terms of dread usually reserved for global warming. If the trend continues, the next generation of children born to two Jewish parents will be less than 40 percent the size of the current generation. The generation after that will be 13 percent the size of today's. These are scary numbers for those holding onto the assumption that the future of the Jews is dependent on the number of Jewish babies born to two Jewish parents. But Mnookin thinks that by redefining Jewishness more openly you can actually net a higher number of people who could become invested in the religion. There is even some evidence to back this up. The recent Pew study showed that among respondents with one Jewish parent, millennials were more than twice as likely to identify as Jewish as those over 65. Growing up in a community that doesn't see you as lesser or ineligible might make a difference.

What about Israel? Is it really no longer capable of exerting a magnetic pull on the whole Jewish people? Not really. For hundreds of years of diaspora, Jews, scattered everywhere, had to negotiate between two impulses, universalism and particularism. They did so on a case-by-case, community-by-community basis, balancing their tribal needs with their desire to engage with the world at large. This dynamic has been replaced by a bipolar Jewish world with two centers of Jewish life, each basically representing opposed values. Israel's primary mission is the security of the Jewish people, and its government is beholden to an Orthodox establishment that narrowly defines Judaism (its leaders regularly denigrate Reform Jews, with one recently calling them "a group of clowns who stab the Holy Torah"). For their part, American Jews care primarily about the health and well-being of American society — issues like immigration or human rights or reproductive health. (Israel's actions, meanwhile, especially when it comes to the conflict with the Palestinians, are difficult to understand and often perceived as deeply immoral.)

This schism has impoverished all Jews. Tal Keinan's **GOD IS IN THE CROWD: Twenty-First Century Judaism (Spiegel & Grau, \$28)** is a pox-on-both-houses indictment. Having grown up in a fully assimilated household in America and then moved to Israel to become a fighter pilot, Keinan became disenchanted with both places. He sees two poles of identity and outlook, unique and intransigent, that are destroying themselves by staying so far apart. What American Jews and Israelis need to recapture is the "Wisdom of the Crowd," his altogether too TED-talky phrase for the collective knowledge and decision-making that occurred during the diverse and dispersed period of Diaspora. Without "dogma from above," Keinan writes, the Diaspora "wrestled with its own moral governance. It reached conflicting conclusions and reconciled them over time, incorporating new projections and evolving realities, leaving its members to correct for the winds that prevailed in specific eras — and to choose their own destinations."

By way of getting American Jews to return to this "active struggle between Particularism and Universalism," Keinan offers a few ideas, like giving every Jew in the world a vote for the Israeli presidency, which would turn a largely symbolic post into one with the authority to settle all matters of Jewish identity (like who is eligible for citizenship in Israel — a power now in the hands of the prohibitive Orthodox rabbinate). This is an improbable solution to put it lightly, but it has a worthy aim: to shock American Judaism out of "complacency."

The Key to Survival

The killing in Pittsburgh made me stop and consider, for the first time in a long time, my own American Jewish identity, what it adds to my life. As much as I enjoyed the feeling of warmth that emanated from the havdala services that closed that miserable Shabbat last month, there was something sad about identity flaring just in these moments of defensiveness and grief. I want a Judaism that also offers positive sources of meaning, for the boundaries between sacred and profane that it creates to enhance and elevate my

day-to-day existence in the modern world. And not just mine. I fear without this “added value,” to be crass about it, my two young daughters won’t have anything to hold onto.

I thought back to the most recent high holidays — a time of the year when my family and I, unaffiliated Jews that we are, end up nomadically wandering from congregation to congregation, always promising that next year we’ll finally join somewhere, though we never do.

I attended one service at a Reform synagogue that looked, from the peeling paint, as if it had hit its high point sometime around 1955. The sanctuary itself resembled a theater and the service was performed from a stage, the cantor singing the entire operatic liturgy himself as the audience passively looked on, eyelids drooping, only perking up when a cello briefly joined in. The English prayer book helpfully offered up poems, including one by Robert Frost, which the rabbi read flatly for what seemed like perhaps the thousandth time.

The other experience was with a New Age-y, slightly neo-Hasidic, experimental, post-denominational congregation. There were half a dozen musicians, looking like a raggedy drum circle and including a Palestinian man with an oud (who at one point would offer a Muslim prayer in Arabic). The rabbi, wrapped in a prayer shawl, sometimes completely covering his head, Hasidic-style, used a direct and personal tone, tinged with a rhetoric of self-help. The service was participatory, as raucous as a megachurch. At one point, the rabbi asked anyone who had been “othered” over the past year to come up and participate. Under a canopy of prayer shawls, congregants stood with their arms around one another, swaying.

Between the music, the rabbi’s accessible, emotional approach and the sense of engaged community, this second service was strangely more moving than any religious ceremony in recent memory (my daughters were riveted too). I say strangely, because it also felt completely ridiculous, a silly amalgam of plucked rituals and forced feeling. But the ridiculousness was, in its way, hopeful, and allowed me to tie together the two high

holiday experiences. Because even though that Reform service — performative, decorous (a cello!), incorporating English — did nothing for *me*, it had also once seemed ridiculous. To a 19th-century Jew, it must have appeared preposterous — until it wasn't.

Daring ridiculousness may be American Judaism's most important survival tool, the willingness to reach deep and to search both within the tradition and outside it in order to make the religion feel alive. It's a benefit of being a people without a pope. In an essay, "Many Lights, Not One Light," included in a new collection, **DEAR ZEALOTS: Letters From a Divided Land (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, \$23)**, the Israeli novelist Amoz Oz praises this quality of Jewishness, the "anarchist core, the rebellious gene" that prompts constant interpretation, reinterpretation and counterinterpretation. "I regard blind obedience as a deviation from tradition even when it purports to be the embodiment of that tradition," Oz writes.

For Oz, Israel is the place where most of the ridiculousness — or, as he would put it, "curiosity and imagination" — has played out recently through the construction of a secular Hebrew culture. But what of America, a society for which reinvention is second nature? What better place to work out what Oz thinks is the central quandary facing Jews today: "Does our past belong to us, or we to it?"

American Jews surely know the correct answer to this question. For Oz, the Jewish imperative to remain fresh and relevant is summed up in a line from the Book of Lamentations, "Renew our days as of old." To which I'd only add: Or else.