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American Jews Need to Discuss Obligation

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As part of the Hartman Fellowship for Emerging Jewish Thought Leaders, fellows were given a deceptively simple task: write a short persuasive essay or create a persuasive piece of multimedia that grapples with big Jewish ideas. The fellows proved themselves equal to the challenge and responded with an array of remarkable and powerful projects on a vast array of subjects, representing a wide array of political positions. We have highlighted a number of the pieces which showed particular originality or writing and production excellence.

American Jews Need to Discuss Obligation

Obligation in Judaism is a loaded subject. It might bring to mind images of authoritarian religious schoolteachers or bitter bickering among Facebook commenters about what makes a “real” Jew. It’s a common experience for many American Jews to question their observance level at some point in their lives. Should they be as observant as their parents? What exactly is obligated of them? Is faith in a higher power necessary for religious observance? These questions are intense and sensitive, and somewhere beneath them there is a genuine struggle with what exactly is obligatory in Judaism. I certainly cannot answer those questions exactly, yet I believe having wide and open conversations about obligation will assist in sustaining American Judaism in the 21st century.

The roots of Jewish obligation come from Judaism’s central holy text, the Torah. The main basis for Jewish religious obligation is found in a set of laws (mitzvot) that comprise a covenant with G-d, or Hashem. The Torah establishes that keeping a unique covenant with Hashem will set apart Jews as a people in their relationship with Hashem, and will affect their daily lives—what sacrifices they make, what days they sanctify as holidays, what animals they eat and don’t eat, and so on. In Exodus 19:5, Hashem tells Moses at Mount Sinai to tell the people of Israel the following:

”וְעַתָּה, אִם-שָׁמוּעַ תִּשְׁמָעוּ בְּקוֹלִי, וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם, אֶת-בְּרִיתִי--וְהֵייתֶם לִי סֻגְלָה מִכָּל-הָעַמִּים, כִּי לִי כָל-הָאָרֶץ.”

“Now then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples.”

Hashem requests that the Israelites listen and act accordingly to His word—the basis of the Jewish legal covenant. This establishes the foundation of religious/ritual obligation that is expounded upon later in the Sinai encounter and more thoroughly explained in D’varim—the second and third paragraphs of the Shema being good examples. The Torah commandments are elaborated upon and explained in the oral Torah (the Talmud), a compendium of rabbinic rulings and commentaries on Torah law compiled before the Middle Ages. It is followed by further rabbinic commentators that began to establish a formal yet elastic Jewish legal code called Halacha. Moving forward in time, around the time of the Enlightenment, groups of Jews would start to interpret their obligation away from pure Halachic understandings and became more influenced by secular thought. And thus, different Jewish denominations were born—the very ones that characterize modern American Judaism. The denominations (the main ones today being Orthodox Judaism, Conservative Judaism, and Reform Judaism) interpret Jewish obligations differently, attuned to their varied religious and non-religious priorities. Despite a modern Jew’s level of religious observance or outlook, in accepting any aspect of ritual practice, they join all religious Jews in a feeling of obligation of some sort. Talking about these obligations can be uncomfortable because it can be a very personal subject matter, yet I believe it is exactly conversations about obligation that will be key to keeping American Jews together as history moves forward.

In the 21st century, the US has been experiencing a significant increase in the religious unaffiliated among its population and has seen the unaffiliated become more secularized. The Pew Research Center reports an increase of the religious unaffiliated in America from about 36.6% in 2007 to 55.8% in 2014 (see Figure 1, page 4) and also reports that they are becoming more secular (see Figure 2, page 5): They report they pray less and increasingly do not believe in G-d. This trend is spread across much of the US population, regardless of demographics. Of course, American Jews are also impacted by this shift. According to Pew, as of 2013, 22% of Jews did not identify as being religiously Jewish, and 62% of Jews see Judaism as an ancestry or culture and not as a religion. In addition, religious Jewish identity decreases by generation, with 32% of millennial Jews not identifying as religiously Jewish. These statistics paint a picture of diminishing religious Judaism in America. While some may argue that assimilation is simply the natural future of American Judaism, as a proud religious Jew, it is difficult for me to accept such an argument. I think the strength of Jewish culture and thought is buoyed by its religious practice. This is the underlying reasoning of my passion in advocating for the preservation of religious American Judaism. In order to counter the downward trend in religious identification and involvement, I believe we need a shift in strategy in religious Jewish spaces.

Being involved in Conservative Judaism myself, I am aware of any number of youth outreach efforts done by Conservative synagogues to attract younger folk, whether they be abbreviated or outdoor services, introducing musical instruments to Shabbat services, or putting an emphasis on kiddush lunch over the Shabbat service in synagogue advertising. I appreciate the importance of outreach and the recognition of needing to bring in more young Jews to synagogue. However, to help combat the current weakening of religious Judaism in America, I propose an additional approach: I believe we should talk about Jewish obligation more openly and earnestly.

To develop and maintain genuine and enduring connections among younger and unaffiliated Jews as well as all self-identifying Jews, we have to carefully discuss obligation in our Jewish spaces. As different denominations and communities adhere to different levels of religious obligation, I am not promoting a specific level of observance but rather stating that in openly discussing and outlining obligation, congregations can approach religious practice in a more unified and engaged manner. Whatever the observance level of the congregation, I believe straightforward discussion on why certain things are obligatory or not can be extremely beneficial. Oftentimes, the “whys” of obligation are either pushed aside or assumed to be accepted by all—they’re rarely explored. If communities were to hold open forums discussing obligation, there is great potential for them to foster communal unity and confidence, with congregants and newcomers being able to better understand different religious approaches as well as reflect on their own practices. I believe this enriched understanding will facilitate stronger communal bonds and ritual habits. It is these reinforced connections that will keep American Jews more engaged and involved against the tide of assimilation. A fresh look at obligation can happen in any and every Jewish community. This might look like Orthodox communities discussing the “whys” of their devoted lifestyle and expanding their intercommunity dialogue; or Reform communities discussing what modern Jewish obligation looks like and how social action obligations differ from ritual obligations; or

Conservative communities discussing how to balance issues of tradition and change and explore the reasonings of different observance levels within their movement. Other topics of exploration might be how communal responsibility relates to individual obligation in Judaism or what unique Jewish familial obligations look like. Discussing obligation can unite Jewish communities in understanding of each other—within and between denominations. It can also help Jews foster genuine connections to their religion by exploring the underlying reasonings behind observance. I believe engaging in these deep questions of why can directly address internal struggles with observance and engage those disaffected with Judaism by bringing them into conversation. Regardless of the specific topics discussed or the specific observance levels of those discussing them, American Judaism can greatly benefit from opening up a new dialogue on obligation.

In discussing issues of obligation, American Jews can specifically define what their religious responsibilities look like. I believe this clearer understanding will help build a stronger and more confident American Judaism. Right now, American Jews' challenges of identity and belonging are especially urgent. If American Jews embrace a new dialogue surrounding obligation, a clearer path forward for the religion can be paved, one where American Jews can approach their religious practice armed with a better understanding of their ritual belonging. Some of the most fundamental attributes of Judaism throughout history have been its endurance in spite of severe adversity, its culture of open discourse, and the coexistence of its diverse sects and factions. Opening up a wider conversation about obligation will continue the legacy of these attributes and anchor the future of religious American Judaism.

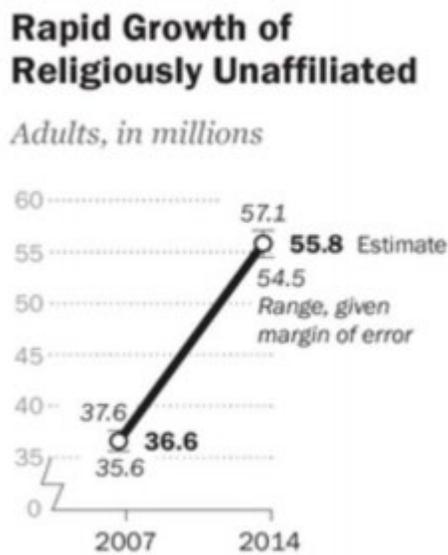
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<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/11/11/religious-nones-are-not-only-growing-theyre-becoming-more-secular/>

Figure 1:



Source: 2014 Religious Landscape Study, conducted June 4-Sept. 30, 2014

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Figure 2:

How the U.S. Public Became Less Religious

As of 2014, the religiously affiliated are, by and large, about as religious as they were in 2007 ...

Among the religiously affiliated

Believe in God 97% 97

65 Pray daily 66
64 Religion is very important to them 62
63 Attend religious services at least monthly

... but the percentage of adults who describe themselves as religiously affiliated has shrunk.

% of adults who are religiously affiliated
83 77

At the same time, the percentage of adults who are religiously unaffiliated has jumped about 7 points ...

% of adults who are religiously unaffiliated
16 23

... and the "nones" have become even more secular in their beliefs and practices.

Among religiously unaffiliated

Believe in God 70 61

22 Pray daily 20
16 Religion very important 13
10 Attend services at least monthly 9

The net result is an overall U.S. adult population that has become slightly less religious.

Among all U.S. adults

Believe in God 92 89

59 Pray daily 55
56 Religion very important 53
54 Attend services at least monthly 50

Source: 2014 Religious Landscape Study, conducted June 4-Sept. 30, 2014.
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