What Jewish Denominations Mean to Me



Here’s a question: Why do you affiliate Jewishly the way that you do? I sometimes pose this question to my students or my Shabbos guests. Often, when those around the table (or classroom) were all raised in Orthodox homes, I phrase the question, Why are you Orthodox? It is an interesting question that we rarely ask ourselves. Mostly for good reason.

For the past half-century, and even more so in the last two decades, different forms of Jewish life and practice are rarely introduced to those who haven’t grown up with it, and the ideology behind each of these movements is rarely discussed in any sort of serious historical or theological way. For the most part, we take the Jewish world that we grew up in for granted. It is hard to imagine any other way aside from stopping to engage in Jewish life altogether, a route that sadly too many have consigned themselves to. We will return to this opening question, but I want to first explain why I never had the luxury of avoiding it.

All four of my grandparents were born in the United States between 1915 and 1921. Both of my parents grew up in environments where their Jewish life and practice could not be taken for granted; both were products of small-town Judaism, my mother from Portland, Maine, where my grandfather served as an Orthodox rabbi, and my father from North Adams, Massachusets, where they belonged to an Orthodox synagogue but were not Shabbos observant; both grew up in a world where if you didn’t actively opt into some Jewish community of practice, in all likelihood your Judaism would be lost. I don’t mean that in a judgemental rabbinic sense. I mean it in a very real way.

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I have close family members who are no longer affiliated in any way with any Jewish life or practice. Aside from my grandfather the rabbi, none of my grandparents were learned in any way but they very much wanted to preserve their Jewish family. I don't think my father's parents would be considered Orthodox based on today's standards, but they evinced a form of Jewish commitment that is rarely asked of Jews in our generation. They had to make a concrete choice about what kind of Jewish life they wanted to live—and they didn't have any of the social repercussions or motivations that make Jewish practice now so fixed. If my Bubbe stopped keeping a kosher kitchen, though she never did, it's not like she had to be worried about what the neighbors would say or how her kids would get a shidduch. She had to really *want* to keep kosher.

Aside from the fact that I never miss an opportunity to wax nostalgic about the Yiddishkeit of my ancestors, there is a more essential reason why I'm telling you all this: I grew up in a home with the knowledge that Jewish life can be lost in a generation. I grew up with real-world relationships and family that allowed me to see the consequences of our communal affiliations. So, the question of Why are you Orthodox? was more complex because I had intimate exposure and relationships with those who chose otherwise, decided to leave, felt their own (and my own) version of Jewish affiliation too watered down, and wanted to discuss real decisions about how to build their lives.

In many ways, this gave me more confidence in my own Jewish affiliations. But spending time with those who have a very different conception of Jewish life also has consequences of its own. There are times (and I know I can't be alone in this) when I question what the Orthodox community stands for and what it produces. The luxury of seeing communities other than your own is a mixed bag—sometimes it boosts confidence, other times it raises questions.

Why am I Orthodox? Extrinsic vs. Intrinsic Motivation

In 1967, Gordon Allport, one of the first psychologists to explore personality, wrote an article entitled, "Personal Religious Orientation and Prejudice," that explored why people affiliate religiously. According to Allport, religious motivation can be characterized based on two binary poles: intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. He succinctly defines this scale:

> Perhaps the briefest way to characterize the two poles of subjective religion is to say that the extrinsically motivated person uses his religion, whereas the intrinsically motivated lives his religion. As we shall see later, most people, if they profess religion at all, fall upon a continuum between these two poles. Seldom, if ever, does one encounter a "pure" case.

And anytime you ask someone about their religious affiliation, the answer is usually somewhere on this spectrum. Those more extrinsically motivated might point to social relationships, the kiddush club, or the general comfort of the community. Those intrinsically motivated, however, point to a very different set of reasons for their religious affiliation: They believe the precepts and ideology of their community are true. Like, they *actually* believe. And, as Allport emphasizes, there are no purely intrinsically or extrinsically motivated people. Everyone, to some degree, draws upon both when choosing how to affiliate.

So, why am I Orthodox? I don't mean the intrinsic reasons, my belief in the Torah and the commandments. I mean the extrinsic reasons for community affiliation. Why am I part of the Orthodox social community?

I wish I could say I believe wholeheartedly in everything the Orthodox community values and preaches. I don't. I'm not sure anyone does. In some parts of the Orthodox community, you can find all sorts of shtick, dissonance, unhealthy materialism, muted racism, and cultural appendixes that can alienate. Honestly, it's not hard to find fault in close-knit communities. Anyone who has lived in any community long enough will know its imperfections. But my starting point is that there is no such thing as a perfect community. By definition, community is designed for the masses–no individual is ever perfectly aligned with their community.

I am Orthodox because I know the values that the community cultivates I would never be able to sustain alone. When looking around the Jewish landscape, I cannot find any other denomination that consistently emphasizes communal prayer, a deep commitment to Shabbos, and creating opportunities for life-long Torah learning. I heard once quoted in the name of Rabbi Ethan Tucker, one of the leaders of the non-Orthodox halachic egalitarian movement, that they will only be truly successful when their community is able to sustain a mincha minyan on a random Wednesday. In contrast, I actually admire the rote of the Orthodox community, the way it seamlessly builds religious commitment as a part of daily life. As my friend Elli Fischer once said (maybe quoting Chaim Saiman with more colorful language): You know a commitment is real when you see people doing it by rote. And I find that both true and moving. I love seeing breakaway minyanim, faster Daf Yomi, no-frills megillah reading. It makes the underlying commitment feel more tangible.

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What do I seek out of my denominational affiliation? I seek a community that cultivates and sustains communal religious life, and I can think of no community that does it better than the Orthodox community.

What Kind of Jew Should We Be?

But that doesn't mean that I think everyone should be or even can be Orthodox. The system works for those raised within it, but it can be very difficult to join. The language, the culture, the educational background, the cost (!) make it nearly impossible for many to just pack their bags and join the Orthodox community. But that doesn't mean that other communities do not have a great deal to learn from Orthodoxy's internal community building of the last century. And it also doesn't mean that Orthodoxy has nothing to learn from other movements.

Much of how you feel about denominations comes down to three questions:

1. Why do you think people affiliate with any denomination? (Intrinsic or extrinsic motivation.)
2. Do you think the denominational differences describe individual behavior or communal affiliations? (There was a time when someone identifying as Orthodox described their synagogue or school affiliation rather than their personal beliefs and behavior. In much of the Sefardic world, this remains true.)
3. Do you think there is one denomination that could theoretically service the entire Jewish world? And if not, why?

And here's the bottom line: I think everyone, whether they know it or not, uses the methodology from each of the major Jewish denominations to figure out their own lives. Each of the major denominations—Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox—has their own methodology to manage communally. And each methodology, in my opinion, is used when building our Jewish lives. Let me explain.

We are all Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox

Everyone has essentially three different levels of Jewish identity: individual, familial, and institutional. There is the Judaism we feel in our individual hearts, what we think is true, serious, and divine. There is the Judaism we build in our homes—balancing our kids, our spouses, our siblings and our parents. And then there is the Judaism we want to see upheld within our Jewish institutions—our schools and synagogues. Many spend their entire lives fruitlessly hoping that each of these identities perfectly aligns with one another as if they could draw a straight line connecting them together, as if they were all exactly the same. They rarely are. There are commitments we emphasize in a family setting or downplay as individuals or quietly disagree with on an institutional level.

Let me say it more bluntly: I think the methodology we use to build our Jewish lives differs depending on what level of identity we are discussing. On an individual level, we are all Reform, on the familial level we are all Conservative, and on the institutional/communal level we are all Orthodox. This concerns methodology, not the outcomes of our practice.

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On the individual level, we are all Reform: Many factors contributed to the rise of Reform Judaism. At the heart of the early movement was creating a Jewish life that seemed palatable to the nascent modern Jew. They wanted a movement that could command the same dignity and class as their Christian neighbors whom, for one of the first times in Jewish history, they were able to live beside with equality. This led to many accusations, sometimes correct, that Reform Judaism was trying to Christianize Judaism. Whether or not that is true, the underlying methodology of Reform was, and in many ways continue to be, *embracing a Judaism that could resonate in the modern mind*. So they ended up discarding a lot of practices that they felt were either no longer relevant nor binding.

But whichever your denomination, the only thing that can command someone in the privacy of their lives is what they feel in their heart is true—whether belief in God, halachic observance, connection to Zionism. And different people, depending on their educational background or personality, have different conceptions of what is right or true. Nothing other than my own moral conscience binds me to keep Shabbos when I am alone in a hotel room. The methodology that governs us as individuals—regardless of how we denominationally affiliate—is what we think is true, real, or divine.There are plenty of Orthodox Jews who, in the privacy of their lives, don't keep certain aspects of halacha because, rightly or wrongly, they do not feel ready for it. That's why I think it is periodically healthy (religiously) to spend some time alone; it allows people to discover what they really feel, think, and believe about their Jewish life. We should explore and discover what we believe as individuals. Our hearts and personal lives are where the most intimate connection to Jewish life and practice emerges.

On the familial level, we are all Conservative: The Conservative movement is the most misunderstood of any denomination. By and large, as Michael R. Cohen argues in his book *The Birth of Conservative Judaism*, it was a product of American Judaism developed by the students of Prof. Solomon Schechter. What was the guiding methodology of Conservative Judaism? There is a Talmudic phrase often cited in Conservative literature that stands at the heart of much of their conception of Jewish law: "פוק חזי מאי עמא דבר", which means "go out and see what people normally do." In some ways, this is similar to Prof. Haym Soloveitchik's notion of a mimetic tradition, where people do what they saw their parents do. It's a sensible methodology that allows for rich Jewish practice tethered to normal communal acceptance but requires that people actually have a clue about what they should be doing. One of the acknowledged errors of the Conservative movement was formally allowing people to drive to synagogue on Shabbos. Their methodology, in many ways, arrived at that decision: "Well, everyone is driving anyways— encourage them to come to shul!" The mistake was insisting that individual, familial, and institutional identity should all perfectly align. As Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove, a Conservative rabbi, has shared, people didn't want their movement to fashion a Judaism that perfectly reflected their own lives—people want a Judaism that is aspirational and almost other-worldly. But on a familial level, seeing "what is normally done" is actually a very healthy methodology. No one wants to grow up in a home where Judaism feels like a rule book or a disciplinary code. Jewish life in the home should have an organic rhythm and cadence, and ensure that it factors in the educational background, emotional capacity, and inner lives of those who live in the home. Parents should not be their children's rabbis but instead model a Jewish life that is socially well-integrated and communally sustainable. That doesn't mean that a family should drop expectations for the Jewish practice of their children. Parents should just not have *unrealistic* expectations for their children's Jewish life that are enforced in the same way a principal enforces a school dress code. Your religious life at home needs to feel normal, well-adjusted, and comfortable. Sometimes that may mean not imposing certain stringencies or practices that may be personally fulfilling or even true on everyone in the household. People go out and see what is normally done, what is a healthy or realistic expectation. On a familial level, we are all Conservative Jews.

On the institutional/communal level, we are all Orthodox: Being a part of a community is very challenging. Every community, by definition, asks that we sacrifice or inhibit some of our individual identity for the sake of communal belonging. Every community, synagogue, and school—regardless of denomination—needs standards, expectations, and a culture to reinforce what they think is correct. A Reform congregation has set liturgy, practices, and behavior that they expect from their affiliates. Much of Orthodox practice is developing a set standard—figuring out the details, ideals, and traditions that Jewish life expects. Reform congregations generally will not convert someone who still believes Jesus is their savior. Well, why not? The answer, of course, is that even movements with a more progressive or liberal approach to halacha still have boundaries. In most Orthodox synagogues, there is a rule that says you can't bring baked goods from home to serve in the shul. Well, why not? Does the shul think I don't keep kosher? No, no, no. In order to ensure that everyone is comfortable gathering communally, we need a set standard and cannot rely on everyone's individual kosher practices. Everyone is Orthodox on the institutional and communal level.

With the right methodology, there is a nourishing Judaism for each of us.

So, that's my shpiel on denominations. I really do think there is something to learn from each denomination, their histories, and their struggle. And I think, especially in this moment, where so many are searching and reflecting on their Jewish identity, it is important to understand that our individual, familial, and institutional identities will never perfectly align even though we need all three to nourish our Judaism. We need to discover individual identity of our deepest beliefs, family life that allows others to discover their own, and communal institutions that provide spiritual nourishment in ways that individuals can't do on their own. That's why when I look for community, I actually prioritize communities that don't perfectly align with my individual practice—because I want the community to provide me with something I couldn't just do in the privacy of my home. And the methodology we use to construct each of these identities, also by definition, will vary to some degree. The goal is not to become Orthodox, Conservative, or Reform—labels that have only existed for 200 years. What I think most people are in search for is a Jewish life that nourishes their individual self, their family, and their community. And with the right methodology, there is a nourishing Judaism for each of us.