

Varieties of Jewish Secularism

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It is a daunting task to come at the very end of a long lecture series or, for that matter, a long evening.

Years ago, when I was affiliated with the Reform movement and was a rabbi in Indianapolis, the local rabbis took turns giving invocations and benedictions at major community dinners and events. I wished I could do the prayers at the Indianapolis 500, but that was reserved for the local archbishop or a high level priest because the track was owned by the Hulmans, a Catholic family. I always liked hearing the priest offer the blessing of "God Speed" to the drivers as they set out to crash into each other.

Much less exciting for me was being invited to give the benediction for the local Bureau of Jewish Education's annual dinner. Because it was held on a Saturday night, and, to accommodate the preferences of the Shabbat-observers, the dinner couldn't start until after sunset, and because it was held in August, we couldn't get started until very late. When I finally came on for the benediction around 11:30pm I had been falling asleep myself and the audience was thinning out. So I appreciate your staying power, those of you who have come lecture after lecture, and also for the reasonable time of our gathering.

I've been thinking of this assignment for a long time ever since Larry first approached me. But things started to really take shape last month just at the time when fall chill was settling in.

We were in the midst of a season of changing leaves and the delicious choices of fall apples was upon us. There are an amazing variety of apples, but most of us only know a few major brands – like Red Delicious, McIntosh, Granny Smith, Cortland, Mutsu, and whatever your own favorite might be. Actually, there are 100s of apple types out there with lots of local offshoots. And once, according to an article in the Times last month, the United States was home to more than 10,000 varieties, all giving expression to their unique apple identities. ("The Curious Cook; Stalking the Placid Apple's Untamed Kin," Nov. 21, 2007, Harold McGee, New York Times).

And I thought: this is just like us, Jews in general, and secular Jews in specific.

Our array of secular varieties, we hasten to point out, are as popular as they come. Far from obscure or eccentric, exotic or rare, our secular varieties are normative and mainstream. In fact, some fifty per cent of Jews self-identify as secular.

We have, of course, our hardy and reliable perennials, our Benjamins, our Daniels, our Rebeccas and Sarahs, our Jakes, our Maxes, and also and Rachels and Sophies. Go to the local playground on the Upper West Side and you think there's a meeting going on among old-time Jews. But to this list we add our newer varieties, our Samanthas and Chloes, our Brians and Wyatts.

Some varieties are dying out or have died out - our Chaims and Morrisises and Sherwins – and others have taken their place - our Bennetts and Larrys, our Adriennes and Joannes.

Just as there are apple hybrids – such as the Jonalicious, the Jonagold, the Jonamac – we have our hybrids too. Bujus are the most familiar, those Buddhist Jews or Jewish Buddhists who blend the east and the west. There are also a slew of other multi-cultural mixtures that verge on the exotic.

Once, a Jewish mixed marriage occurred when we cross-pollinated two quite distinct types, a Litvak and a Galitzianer. A generation or so later, it happened when a Jew from Brooklyn married a Jew from the Bronx. These days our hybrids are more likely to go further afield and are also more likely to propagate than our inbred version. In fact, nearly half of our varieties are mixed blends, of Jews and Christians, or Moslems, or African-Americans, or Asians or, almost remarkably, two Jews marrying each other, but perhaps their child or children come from China or Guatemala or one of the republics of the former Soviet Union. Our offspring, in effect, are becoming ever more hyphenated.

For me, the varieties of Jewish secularism are really the embodiment of different types of secular Jews. I'd like to try to define these categories a bit more specifically.

The first distinction I want to make has to do with the issue of age and seniority. In the apple metaphor, we talk about early season, mid-season, or late season apples. The same applies to the secular Jewish world. The question that arises is whether they are all equal or whether early is better than later.

In our secular Jewish world, we have a generational divide. "For most of the older generation," writes Bennett Muraskin, "Jewish secularism needs no explanation. It flows directly from their Yiddish immigrant background and their experience as progressives. However, this will not suffice for many English-speaking, mainly middle-class North American Jews, their children and grandchildren."

Those in that older generation, who perhaps because of their passion, constantly defy the notion of curtailed longevity, grew up with Jewish secularism in their veins, if not their mother's milk. They breathed its air. They sang its music. It was not a casual life-style choice, squeezed in with soccer games, dance lessons, and summer camp – unless those camps were part of the movement and had their own version of internecine color war that wasn't so peaceful. Consider, in fact, the well-documented animosity between Camps KinderRing and Kinderland, that stared at each other uneasily across Sylvan Lake a few hours north of here. KinderRing, sponsored by Workmen's Circle, was socialist and anti-communist. Kinderland, on the other hand, was an affiliate of the communist party and condemned KinderRing, in turn, for being "social fascists." If this weren't enough, its campers often tried to raid and attack the other camp.

The point is that these were not benign times. The older generation had their battles, externally and internally, and they have the scars to show for it. Theirs was an era of fighting – for their causes in the outer world, and for their principles within. As Judy Seid has pointed out, this was a period of bitter factionalism. This gives that aging and diminishing generation some degree of bragging rights. It also can make them very protective over their particular formulation of what it means to be a secular Jew. They may feel like they get to set the definitions and any way but their way might be seen as an aberration, a watering down, a selling-out. Regrettably, it can or could bring out a certain degree of internal political correctness, orthodoxy and intolerance to upstart newcomers who haven't a clue about the heroic struggles of this generation not to mention the bitter in-fighting which has been reduced to a simmer compared to the full boil that it once was.

The younger people who do know about those experiences first-hand, or maybe once-removed, are the children of that older generation and who now constitute their own variety of secular Jew. Perhaps the most identified form were the red diaper babies who are now the aging boomer generation with children of their own, some already out of college. These secular Jews were raised in the shadow of their parents' causes. They were witnesses and now have important stories to tell. They grew up in an atmosphere of fervor and fear. Many still feel the heartbeat of their parents' passion. Others have an instinctual paranoia. How do they honor the legacy that has been handed down to them and at the same time free themselves from the demons that often haunt them? Many grew up in homes where "victimhood" itself was some sort of badge of Jewish honor. Their challenge now is to break away from that mindset of perpetual suffering. Likewise, according to midrashic

commentary, the children of our ancient ancestors, mythologically rooted in Egyptian slavery, had to discover how to live as new people, free of the physical and emotional scars of their parents' servitude.

The same task holds for another variety of second-generation secular Jews. They are the ones whose parents went through the Holocaust, who were secular before and remained secular after, or who were religious before and became secular after. Whether children of survivors or refugees, this group was also shaped by their parents' experiences, sometimes explicitly, sometimes more subtly. Either way, this next generation needs to forge its own identity honoring those memories, but freed of them too. What part of this past will they distill and pass down to their children?

There's also a much more recent variety of Jewish secularism, that is comprised of people who don't have any of these earlier connections. Many of this group may have been here in this country for generations already. They were likely raised comfortably in the suburbs or on the Upper West Side or its equivalent, far away from teeming tenements of the Lower East Side or the socially-active co-op apartments of the Bronx. More significantly, while their parents and grandparents may have always voted Democrat, they do not particularly know from progressive politics and used to proudly wear the label "liberal" before it became a target of relentless, inflammatory derision.

Even more significant, and germane to our discussion, many of their families once had synagogue or temple affiliations that would mystify most old-time Jewish secularists and defy comprehension, so alien was that world to them. But those affiliations were mostly in name only, not in any real conviction.

That's because most of this group lived their lives as secularists all along. They may have mouthed a theistic message in services a few times a year, but their day-to-day life was this-worldly, in the here and now, and based on reason, critical inquiry, and self-reliance. The improvement of the human condition was a material question, not a spiritual one, and was best achieved through human efforts, not supplications before deities or other supernatural beings.

Historian Yehuda Bauer has a label for these people. He calls them "closet" secularists. As Bauer puts it, "they may pay lip service to organized religion in its various forms because they know of no other way to express their membership in the Jewish community. They maintain their temple or synagogue affiliation, but if and when they go there it has no intrinsic meaning for them."

But one day many of them, or their parents, woke up and decided that wasn't their world. They sought out another variety of Jewish identity that they could embrace, and many of them landed more definitively on the title "secular Jew."

But what kind of self-identifying secular Jews are these? Certainly not ones who are steeped in the lore and legend and personal experience of a historical movement. Well, that's not entirely true. For many, their historical movement was the anti-Vietnam War protest. It was championing modern feminism. Or equality for gays and lesbians. But who in this group has heard of Chaim Zhitlovsky or Simon Dubnow, the founding fathers of Jewish secularism? Or what about their latter day champions and interpreters, like Max Rosenfeld, founder of the Philadelphia Jewish Children's Folkshul, or Morris Schappes, long-time editor of *Jewish Currents*, in whose honor we gather for these lectures? And how many know more than a handful of words or phrases of Yiddish, once the *sine qua non* requirement for membership in the club.

Of course, I'm not telling you anything new. These modern Jewish secular Jews live in an entirely different *zeitgeist* than the previous generations.

Besides the matter of language are several other litmus test signifiers. First, is the notion of ceremonial practice. There is one variety of secular Jew for whom practically all rituals are off-limits. For them, these

practices are considered archaic vestiges of our bubbes and zaydes. They are no longer even quaint. If these secular Jews ever gather together it is not to form a community, per se, but to have a book discussion, perhaps a lively debate, but never for a Shabbat service or High Holiday gathering.

Other secular Jews, however, are unapologetically drawn to these kinds of celebrations. They like taking old rituals and readings and figuring out how to make modifications that may bring some of them alive to this generation. Or taking old familiar melodies and applying new words – what I call putting new wine into old bottles – so that connections can be made.

These secular Jews also understand that the path to realizing this new form of Jewish identity is not in isolation but in solidarity with others. Whether organized through Workmen’s Circle, the Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations or the Society for Humanistic Judaism, they form communities, they build schools, and they create congregations that can support their ventures and each other.

But joining these communities is not so easy for many people. They often have to overcome years of conditioning that spoke negatively about “organized religion.” As one friend told me, her father, who she described as a total rejectionist, would be rolling over in his grave if he knew she had joined our congregation, even knowing it is humanistic. Another said that his mother saw no need for Jewish life for herself, yet somehow believed in Jewish continuity and chose to send her children to a secular Jewish school for their education. But this kind of mixed message may also transmit ambivalence that becomes its own tradition and variety and gets handed on from generation to the next.

For some, of course, there’s no struggle at all. They are simply non-joiners. This actually fits one variety of the iconoclastic secular mold quite well and is particularly suited for those who want to “do their own thing” which may actually be nothing at all.

For those who do join or are at least more affirmative about their secular Jewish identity, there is no sense of uniformity. There are several divides.

One has to do with personal beliefs and the range of beliefs that people can tolerate in each other. Among one variety of Jewish secularists, the only plausible belief system – or lack thereof – is atheism. According to this camp, if you’re not an atheist, you can’t be a secularist. And you better be proud and vocal about it too. Or else you don’t count either.

But the reality is that secular Jews are all over the place with their personal beliefs. They range from militant atheists to reluctant atheists to agnostics and humanists, with all sorts of offshoots in between. In the end, this internal divide may not even be about beliefs but about civility. And, ultimately, the more productive conversation will be about what we do believe, not what we don’t believe.

Another split has to do with the oxymoronic idea of a secular rabbi. For many secular Jews, this is an impossible notion. They can’t get past the idea that a rabbi of any kind must be hierarchically regressive and smacks of theocratic authoritarianism, even if the theocracy part is removed.

But others welcome the learning and guidance that secular rabbis bring, not to mention the comfort of compatible thinking at important life cycle moments. They also are pragmatic and think that communities need professional staff to function.

A different split occurs over the use of certain words and ideas. For example, can there be such a thing as a secular blessing? Or are all blessings religious by definition? Or what about a secular bar or bat mitzvah if we don’t read from the Torah or subscribe to the idea of mitzvot as God-given commandments? And what

about the whole idea of spirituality and the search for inner peace? Can secular Jews be spiritual? Or is that some sort of contradiction in terms?

And which is the preferred spelling for various terms? Some hold to a Yiddish-based transliteration. Others prefer a Hebraicized version. Is one correct and the other not? Or is this a vestige of battles for turf and ideology? The answer, of course, is that for every two Jews there are three opinions, and even more when you're trying to figure out how to spell Chanukah. The same holds for those of who identify as secular.

This variety of views also pertains to feelings about Israel. There is nothing new here either. Historically, there has always been a split in the secular Jewish world about the place of Zionism and later the state of Israel. Is it central, peripheral, a source of pride, a source of embarrassment, or somewhere in the middle? Putting the matter of personal identity and politics aside, what is our connection to the secular Jews who live there? They are clearly a variety different from our own, equally complex and of course split with their own sub-divisions.

And how, while we're on the subject, do we make connections to the secular Jews of the former Soviet Union who now live in America and are their own variety? They now live among us, their kids go to our colleges, but they also live apart from us, or are beginning to live among us. Their lack of Jewish literacy may parallel that of most American-born Jews but they have a whole different set of memories and experiences and cultural heritage.

We should also note that with its emphasis on Yiddish, Jewish secularism has essentially been an ethnocentric Ashkenazic creation. But aren't there secular Jews who are Sephardi or Mizrahi, or at least among their children and grandchildren? Where's the bridge that will connect all of us together?

Finally, there is one last category of Jewish secularism we shouldn't forget. These are people who I would call former secularists who, like certain ex-Catholics, are still very much defined by and rooted in the church that they reject. Or, they are like the author Shalom Auslander, who broke away from his Orthodox upbringing and practice, but remains incurably and miserably fearful of God's vengeance.

In the case of these so-called ex-secularists, they betray their discomfort in the theistic world by the energy they devote to saving the rest of us sad souls who they left behind. An exemplar of this is a certain West Coast rabbi who, in an article in *Moment Magazine* (2002), described with appreciation his secular, Yiddishist, and socialist upbringing in the Bronx in the 1920s. But then, with apologies to his father, he found the rabbinate and, apparently, God as well. He reveres the commitment and passion of his parents' generation, but he doesn't have kind words for today's secularists who, he says, have an anemic Jewishness without depth or commitment. While some of this may be true, his hope of reintroducing secular Jews to traditional teachings is not enhanced by his unfavorable critique. Perhaps the real truth is that he is still a secularist in his core who yearns for his old compatriots and the ferment of his old neighborhood which proves that you can take the boy out of the neighborhood, but maybe you can't take the neighborhood out of the boy. And that's why I consider ex-secular another variety of Jewish secularism.

I began by talking about apples and so I will end by talking about apples. Just as apples are described by their taste, secular Jews can also be sweet, tart, prickly, tough skinned, and, most definitely, complex. Is one variety better than another? Is one more pure? Or are we better off for the blend that all these competing tastes and styles and viewpoints meld together?

Yehuda Bauer, who I quoted earlier, has written that "secular Jews come in different shapes and forms: nonreligious Zionists, non religious Yiddishists, and those who do not choose to identify as either Zionists or Yiddishists but ... also feel their Jewishness quite strongly and wish to identify with Jewish matters and causes."

I think this description worked for an earlier generation, but one wonders, however, if these historical categories are still useful. Their hard edges have been softened and the boundaries are no longer severe or even recognizable. In fact, I'm not sure that most secular Jews today would relate to those classic choices. For many of them, the description, "just Jewish" serves them fine. It's a non-descript classification that doesn't pin them down. It doesn't require a whole lot of commitment either, or passion or contemplation, but maybe they're not asking for more.

There's also a new variety that seems to be emerging that aspires to push everything else aside. These days we occasionally read about Jews who describe themselves as post-denominational or non-denominational. Maybe it is also time to consider if there is a category called post-secular. Perhaps that is what some call a cultural Jew, whatever and whoever that is, and a topic for another conversation and another lecture series.

