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*How Economic Choices Shape  
Religious Tradition*

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### **Judaism in Israel and the United States**

In the United States, most religious institutions are congregational. This means that synagogues, like most churches and other places of worship, are founded, financed, and managed by their congregants. Synagogues are run by officers and board of directors, typically lay people elected by the congregation's members. The synagogue board and its officers hire—and fire—clergy (typically a rabbi and a cantor) to lead congregational prayers and provide pastoral services as needed, an executive director to manage the day-to-day operations of the synagogue, and an educational director to run the synagogue's Hebrew school. The synagogue's budget, including salaries of the clergy and other employees, is financed entirely by its members, who pay annual dues supplemented by voluntary contributions solicited by various fund-raising activities during the course of the year. Many synagogues establish a cemetery, or consecrate a section of a larger cemetery, which they finance by selling burial plots to their members. Synagogues typically join an umbrella organization, like the Union of Reform Judaism (URJ, previously UAHC), United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism (USCJ), formerly USA), or the Orthodox Union (OU). These organizations provide useful services and a national religious leadership, but membership in them is completely voluntary and synagogue governance remains entirely with the congregation.

Israel also has some synagogues that are similarly congregational, but most are organized very differently. Israel's government has a Ministry of Religious Services that grants monopoly "licenses" to representatives of several religious groups, including Muslim, Christian, Druze, and Bahai, as well as the Jewish community. Jewish religious affairs are the responsibility of a central Board of Rabbis, composed exclusively of Ashkenazi (Orthodox) and Sephardi (also Orthodox) representatives who elect a chief rabbi from among their members. This central board

is aided by local religious councils funded jointly by municipalities and the Ministry of Religious Services, but the central board must approve the appointment of a municipal rabbi as well as any synagogues, schools, charities, and clinics to which the Ministry gives financial support. Local religious councils thus face clear economic incentives to follow the religious directives of the central rabbinate and the administrative guidelines set by the Ministry.

The considerable power exercised by the central Board of Rabbis derives from the fact that the government of Israel recognizes them—and only them—as the highest religious authorities for Israel’s Jews. This effectively grants the Orthodox religious authorities a monopoly over religious matters in the Jewish community, including family law in a country where civil authority does not cover this area. Local religious councils have the legal power to register Jewish marriages in Israel, but the chief rabbi and the central board decide which rabbis may perform those marriages. The Board of Rabbis also manages a central Rabbinical Court, with exclusive power for Jewish conversions, and a dozen other Rabbinical Courts with absolute authority over Jewish divorces. Local councils manage the ritual baths (*mikva*) within their municipal boundaries, but the central religious authority oversees a network of kosher supervisors, determines who may be buried in a Jewish cemetery, and responds to queries on religious matters from Jews around the world.

### **Monopoly versus Competition in the Religious Marketplace**

In earlier chapters we saw how economic circumstances create incentives that affect the religious behaviors of individuals and the shape of communal institutions. Throughout the twentieth century, as American Jewish immigrants found their economic niches and as the U.S. experienced rapid economic development, wage rates rose dramatically, time-intensive activities become more costly, and American Jewry developed less time-intensive patterns of religious observance. For some people this led to secularization of Jewish life, but for most it meant joining a Reform or Conservative synagogue congregation and supporting Jewish parareligious communal organizations.

Israeli Jews were also immigrants with rising wage rates, and Israel also experienced rapid economic development, so we can imagine that time-intensive religious traditions were becoming increasingly costly for them as well. Yet because synagogues in Israel were established—and clergy hired—by the central Rabbinate instead of their congregants, Israeli Jews did not have the flexibility of their American cousins when it came to changing synagogue practices or establishing new congregations. After the destruction of European Jewry, the Israeli Rabbinate focused on preserving older religious traditions and showed less interest in adapting to modern times. Like many monopolists, they also took a “take-it-or-leave-it” attitude that discouraged independent innovation in religious matters. As wage rates rose and time-intensive traditions become more costly, Israel’s highly-educated high-wage Jews increasingly neglected the synagogues except for special occasions.

Although synagogue attendance may be low among educated Israeli Jews, Jewish expression typically emerges in the form of Zionism and nation building. Israelis have also developed forms of Jewish human capital highly complementary to their secular knowledge of history, geography, literature, and the arts. Israelis speak modern Hebrew as their mother tongue, so learning to read from Torah and the other religious classics is far less difficult—and less time intensive—than for their American cousins. Israelis live and work in the very places described in Scriptures, so biblical stories resonate as the history of their native land. Archaeology has brought modern scholarship to bear on this history, connecting past and present in a spiritually meaningful way. Because this innovative approach to religious expression typically occurs outside the synagogue and beyond the scope of the official Rabbinate, Israelis often describe it as “secular” Judaism despite its intrinsic religious content.

Many of the differences between Jewish religious observance in Israel and the United States derive from differences between the two countries in their respective “Church-State” relationships. In the United States, where government takes a laissez faire approach to religion, Judaism is defined by its adherents, synagogues display a great deal of diversity, and the extremes—that is ultra-Orthodox and the ultra-secular—are relatively small. In Israel, where government confers monopoly power to a religious establishment, Judaism is defined by the

official Rabbinate, few synagogues accommodate the religious interests of the majority, and a much larger proportion of the population is either extremely traditional or extremely nonobservant.

Jewish communal institutions and parareligious organizations, so vital a part of American Jewish life, are virtually absent in Israel, where most of their functions are performed by the Rabbinate or by the government itself. The official Rabbinate also functions as a lobby group on behalf of its own version of religious Judaism. Unlike the United States, where government is constrained from supporting any religious establishment, Israel's government determines not only the amount of resources allocated to the Rabbinate but also the degree to which it will use the power of the State to enforce a religious monopoly. This provides a substantial economic incentive for the religious establishment to influence government policy. It does so not only by advocacy for particular causes but also by supporting "religious" political parties that field candidates for parliament as well as for cabinet ministries. In close parliamentary elections (of which there have been many), Israel's religious parties often have determined which major party could form a government, thus exerting a strong political influence disproportionate to their representation in the electorate.

### **Israel's Place in Today's American Judaism**

Israeli culture is now thoroughly woven into Jewish education and religious life in the United States. Marriages between Israelis and Americans have greatly increased the family ties between the two communities. The Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist synagogue movements celebrate Israel's Independence Day on the religious calendar and incorporate a prayer for the State of Israel in the synagogue liturgy immediately following the prayer for our own country. An Israel Experience trip is rapidly becoming a rite of passage that complements an American Jewish religious education. Many young Americans today see Israeli Jewish lifestyles as legitimate alternatives to the varieties available in the United States.

One day our older son came home from college and announced that he wanted to move to Israel with some of his friends. This came as a surprise to us, but perhaps it shouldn't have. Growing up decades after

the Six-Day War, Jews of his generation have little of the emotional baggage or even fears still evident among their elders. They can follow their chosen career path as easily in Israel as in the United States, so that is usually not a major factor in their migration decisions. Our son and his friends wanted to live in a place where Jewish observance is well integrated into society's mainstream, a place where they could live the Zionist dream updated for today's economic environment. Accustomed to a variety of Jewish lifestyles in pluralistic America, they saw Israel's religious lifestyles not as an alternative but rather as an expansion of their Jewish options. Like many Americans today, Jews raised in a religious lifestyle chosen by their parents may change as adults to another one more in keeping with their own preferences (and, of course, costs).

Our son is now an American-Israeli, part of an Israeli ethnic group made up of American (mostly Jewish) immigrants. Some American-Israelis immigrated as young singles, while others moved as a family unit. Some immigrated as children with their parents, others because they married an Israeli citizen, and still others after retirement from an American career. Although no longer part of the American Jewish community, most American-Israelis continue to have strong ties with parents, children, siblings, cousins, friends and colleagues in the United States.

Israeli-Americans form a similar ethnic group composed of Israeli immigrants to the United States. Israeli-Americans are often very secular or very observant, but both of these extremes have American counterparts to which the immigrants can assimilate. Similarities between our two countries in economic life—especially technology and education—stimulate an active two-way movement of students, teachers, scientists, artists, and businesspeople, as well as tourists eager to experience life in each other's country. The cousins whom I met as a child still live in Israel, but all have spent time in the United States either professionally or as tourists, and they have many American friends and (of course) relatives. Americans now have many opportunities to meet individual Israelis, thus enhancing the personal connections between American Jews and Israel.

## **Israeli Religious Politics and American Judaism**

American synagogue movements have also strengthened their connections with Israel. Many American-Israelis are Orthodox, comfortable with the Judaism protected by the official Rabbinate. Others prefer non-Orthodox lifestyles and establish Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist congregations, most of which are egalitarian (that is, they welcome both women and men in ritual roles). The Israeli Rabbinate resists all of these non-Orthodox innovations as illegitimate forms of Judaism, refusing to legitimize their clergy or support their synagogues. In response, non-Orthodox American synagogue movements have subsidized Israeli congregations, providing them with clergy and establishing rabbinic seminaries in Israel. These so-called American congregations also attract Israelis of many backgrounds, especially high-wage people trying to reconcile religious observance with competing uses of time. The non-Orthodox movements in Israel are still small, but they are growing and are challenging the Rabbinate for official recognition and support. They are also pressuring for women's rights to conduct full religious rituals in public, most notably at the Western Wall in Jerusalem.

Many Israelis, frustrated by the chief rabbis' monopoly control over family matters (especially marriage, divorce, and burial), feel the problem would be solved by introducing civil law alternatives for all its citizens. Some want to break the religious monopoly of the Orthodox establishment by officially recognizing the non-Orthodox movements, whether within the current Rabbinate or by adding a separate Rabbinate for each new synagogue movement. At some point, however, proliferation of religious establishments would become cumbersome, if not inefficient, so some people argue that the Israeli government should follow the American precedent and divest itself of all control of religion and religious matters.

As American Jews acquire more experience with Israel—whether firsthand, by personal connections, or through the activities of religious and parareligious communal organizations—they become more involved in what is essentially a domestic Israeli political controversy over the church-state relationship. Yet American Jews have a strong stake in the outcome, for it actually comes down to the very nature of Judaism in a Jewish state. If Israel is to be a homeland for all Jews everywhere, American Jews want respect for our modern Jewish

religious heritage. American Judaism has been deeply affected by the very fact of Israel as an independent Jewish State and by the Jewish religious cultures that have evolved there as Israel had advanced to its current economic status as a high-technology country. Israel's influence on American Judaism in the coming decades will depend in part of how it resolves these religious issues.

## **Israel's Security and American Judaism**

Israel's security, and its integrity as a Jewish country, pose other dilemmas that its citizens must decide at the ballot box. Yet American Jews have a large stake in these outcomes as well. We want Israel to continue to be there for us, contributing richness to the Jewish culture of the American society to which we belong. Because we are Americans, and because we are Jews, we feel free—even obligated—to express our political opinions passionately. If we think Israel's political decisions will undermine its strength as a Jewish state, we say so. We do not face the physical threats that Israelis must live with, nor do we have their military experience, which is why the decisions must ultimately be theirs. Yet we do have the perspective of distance, providing insights that might not be apparent close by. American Jews can be passionate supporters of Israel's continued security even if they sometimes seem to be arguing against some policies of the Israeli government.

Many of us also see the hostility of Israel's enemies as modern forms of anti-Semitism, focusing on Israel as the national embodiment of Jews and Judaism. Arab neighbors may have a real dispute with Israel over territorial boundaries, but the intensity of hatred directed toward Jews is fed by explicitly anti-Semitic propaganda developed in tsarist Russia and Nazi Germany. Anti-Semitism is also reappearing in Europe in new forms, sometimes by attempts to outlaw Jewish religious practices like *brit milah* (infant male circumcision) and *kashrut* (especially the ritual slaughter requirements for meat), sometimes by anti-Jewish vandalism or outright violence, and sometimes by supporting the delegitimization of the Jewish State of Israel. As one commentator recently observed, "Death to the Jews" is not a legitimate political slogan in any democratic society.

War, terrorism, and intractable territorial disputes are an integral part of Israeli life. Despite the way these factors dominate the international news, however, they are more like a subtext in Israel's story today. Israeli Jews—and many American Jews—are acutely aware of these dangers and work hard to deal with them effectively. Yet perhaps the greatest achievement of all is that this existential threat does not dominate daily life in Israel. The major themes of Israeli life are family, community, education, technology, consumption, culture, and religion. Israel's achievements in these areas are impressive and well documented. These are also the main source of interactions between Israeli and American Jews.

Living a full “normal” Jewish life even if the face of mortal danger is a fundamental Jewish value and an important survival trait for the Jewish People. Living for two millennia as a small minority in various parts of the world, often subject to discrimination if not outright persecution, Jews developed a culture that emphasizes living a full life despite these external threats. Jewish holiday observances often involve stories of such threats with lessons how to face them with integrity. This approach is so fundamental that Jews sometimes take it for granted, finding it difficult to understand why people from other cultures might choose other coping mechanisms. Judaism views external threats like anti-Semitism or hostility toward Israel as situations that must be faced and dealt with, but without distracting from the main purpose of a “normal” life.

Israel's success in this regard is an important contribution to the new Small Tradition of today's Judaism.