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# Why Peter Beinart's Judaism is doomed

Moshe Koppel's new book, "Judaism Straight Up: Why Real Religion Endures," explains why powerless, diasporic Judaism has no future.



**(June 7, 2021 / JNS)** The recent war between Israel and Hamas has, like previous rows of violence, confirmed the ideological gap that separates Israel from non-Zionist American Jews. On social media and in newspaper editorials, Jewish critics of Israel have been vocal and acerbic.

Prominent among them is Peter Beinart, who wrote back in July 2020 that he no longer supports the idea of a Jewish state. Unlike other Jewish Israel-bashers, such as Noam Chomsky and Norman Finkelstein, Beinart is an observant Jew. He keeps kosher, but rejects the idea that Jews are entitled to national self-determination because, in his opinion, Israel does not meet his moral standards.

In that sense, Beinart follows in the footsteps of Hermann Cohen, Franz Rosenzweig, Martin Buber and Judah Magnes. Buber and Magnes had some form of commitment to Judaism (the former translated *The Bible* into German; the latter was a Reform rabbi), but they opposed Jewish statehood and advocated a Jewish-Arab binational state—never mind that Jews were persecuted and massacred by Arab regimes. In their view, Jews were entitled to statehood only if their state could meet impossible standards of morality, and if the Arabs would end their rejection of a Jewish state.

Beinart is merely recycling the discredited Kantian idealism of German Jews. His powerless and diasporic Judaism, however, has no future. If you want to understand why, read Moshe Koppel's **new book**, *Judaism Straight Up: Why Real Religion Endures* (Maggid Books, 2020).

In his **book**, *The Prime Ministers*, the late Israeli diplomat Yehuda Avner recounts a memorable encounter with a Holocaust survivor on two separate occasions. On the ship that brought Avner to British Palestine in 1947 was an Auschwitz survivor, Yossel, who carried two letters in his traditional frock coat: one from an Orthodox uncle who implored him to go back to religious life in Jerusalem's Mea Shearim neighborhood; and a second one from a secular uncle who begged him to become "a new Jew" in the Mishmar HaEmek kibbutz. Yossel is torn, but the reader is left in the dark about his decision. Until, that is, Yossel's unexpected reappearance towards the end of the book.

As Avner addresses a Los Angeles crowd 35 years later, he is approached by Yossel, who now goes by the name "Jay." It turns out that had had chosen the kibbutz over Mea Shearim. After getting wounded in the Six-Day War, he moved with his family to the U.S., where his two sons married non-Jews. "Of course I'm heartbroken" Yossel/Jay confesses to Avner. "I'm forever a survivor. So keep your opinions to yourself."

Yossel's personal tragedy raises a double question: Is remaining Jewish that important, and why? Moshe Koppel dives to the core of this question in his book.

Koppel was first confronted with this question at Princeton University, when a secular Jewish student named Heidi castigated him for his "tribal loyalty" to Judaism and to the Jewish people. Koppel is loyal, indeed, having grown up in New York among Holocaust survivors, often praying with his grandfather in a shtetle of Gerrer Hassids who retained both the lifestyle of their forefathers and the scars of the Holocaust.

Koppel confronts Heidi's *Weltanschauung* with that of one of these Hassids, his grandfather's best friend, Shimen, to assess whether loyalty to religion in general and to Judaism in particular is justified. This dialectic, Koppel argues, encapsulates our "bifurcated lives" between tradition and modernity. And Koppel's conclusion, spelled out at the beginning of the book, is straightforward: Heidi's world is doomed because "members of a society, in order to be willing to make the sacrifices necessary to sustain that society, must genuinely believe that they are part of a meaningful, directed project that will long outlive them."

As Heidi started studying at Princeton and making friends from different backgrounds, she felt that her identification as a Jew was arbitrary. Social justice appealed to her more than the ethnic and religious particularism dear to Shimen.

Koppel zooms out of the dividing line between Heidi and Shimen by referring to the research of Richard Shweder and Jonathan Haidt, which shows that there are roughly two categories of people when it comes to handling values such as fairness, loyalty and restraint: Members of traditional communities tend to respect all three values, while liberal Westerners tend to prefer fairness over loyalty and restraint.

Koppel argues that societies that respect loyalty and restraint are more functional, because people trust one another and cooperate in mutually advantageous ways when they share a commitment to norms. "By demonstrating a willingness to sacrifice for the community's well-being, and deference to its authorities and customs," Koppel writes, "members of a community convince others that they are good types who can be depended on to cooperate for the long term."

Hence the downside of Heidi's exclusive commitment to fairness: Her daughter (Amber) has no loyalty whatsoever to the Jewish people and zero intention of displaying the restraint that communal loyalty entails. Yet, unlike her mother, Amber is Orthodox—though her orthodoxy has nothing to do with Judaism. Her diet follows strict rules (organic, locally grown, not genetically modified); she holds religious beliefs on climate change (sceptics are "heretics"); and she hates Israel (which happens to be on the wrong side of her Manichean chart).

Amber's obsession with Israel, however, belongs to a wider phenomenon that Koppel confronts head-on. His explanation for the persistence of anti-Semitism is that Jews are the ultimate antichrist—not because they rejected Jesus as the Messiah, but because their unique lifestyle and beliefs are incompatible with the utopian message of most religions and ideologies.

Jews obstinately observe strict rules in the present and skeptically hope for a better future (their messiah is longed for and forever deferred—unlike taxes and death). Jews, in other words, are the ultimate party-poopers of religions and ideologies that offer redemption here and now.

Hence did the Church revile Jews for rejecting Christianity; hence did Enlightenment philosophers revile Jews for engendering Christianity; hence did Nazis revile Jews for supposedly belonging to an inferior race; hence do today's "anti-racists" revile Jews for supposedly being racist; hence did 19th century European nation-states revile Jews for being stateless; and hence do today's post-national Europeans revile Jews for safeguarding their own nation-state.

Like Yossel's grandchildren (mentioned at the beginning of this article), Heidi's daughter is disconnected from the chain of Jewish continuity. Shimen, for his part, has no descendants, since his family was murdered by the Nazis. Yet he feels estranged from America's modern-Orthodox Jews.

Koppel draws a comparison between Judaism and language to explain the gap between Shimen and modern Orthodoxy: to Shimen, *Halacha* (Jewish law) is a mother tongue; to many observant American Jews, it is an acquired language learned from books. In a nutshell, Koppel writes: "If Shimen only had grandchildren, he'd undoubtedly kiss them during prayers, and God have mercy on the earnest yeshiva boy who'd point out to him that the codes forbid this."

Koppel's comparison between *Halacha* and language also helps explain why certain rules are respected despite not being enforced. People follow the rules of language because they want to be understood. French speakers say "*le weekend*" and "*le chewing gum*," even though the Académie Française objects and devised alternative expressions that are unknown to most and ignored by all.

Unlike language academies, treatises of *Halacha* have not decreed rules, but rather have codified accepted practices. Indeed, Jews who observe *Halacha* do so willingly (admittedly under social pressure in ultra-Orthodox communities), and not because of state enforcement. Precisely because *Halacha* requires loyalty and restraint, it does not need the state's involvement. The worldviews of Heidi and Shimen happen to converge on the need to keep the state out of our moral choices, but they diverge on the role of communities.

As Koppel explains earlier in the book, traditional communities tend to have the same level of deference toward fairness, loyalty and restraint, while secular societies have a higher level of deference toward fairness. To Heidi, the state should manage fairness but not loyalty and restraint; to Shimen, the community should handle all three.

Yet Heidi is not willing to let a community such as Shimen's get its hands on what she agrees should be outside the state's realm. That is because, in Koppel's own words, "Shimen wants freedom to participate in a specific communal project that connects the past with the future and that gives his life meaning and purpose," while "Heidi wants freedom from such projects." Heidi's rejection of community-based values, transmitted from generation to generation, has side effects personified by her daughter, Amber.

If Heidi is a "live and let live" type of person, Amber is not. She is a crusader and an inquisitor who wants to shut down religious institutions that do not allow same-sex marriages, delicense doctors who refuse to practice abortion and end the career of professors who question the use of hormone blockers on dysphoric teenagers.

Amber is more orthodox than Shimen but, unlike Shimen's orthodoxy, hers threatens the freedom of all. "Like many true believers," Koppel writes, "Amber wishes to use the power of the state and the wrath of the mob to silence heretics and banish idolaters." Shimen, by contrast, lives his life according to *Halacha*; his is a disciplined life, but he does not seek to

discipline others. Surely, Amber would not try to silence others if her beliefs were deep and authentic. Hence is the worldview she represents unsustainable, Koppel argues, because “[e]ach of us must believe in the viability of the culture of which we are a part.”

If your culture happens to be Judaism, Koppel concludes, you’ve hit the jackpot. That is because Jewish tradition has proved its viability over millennia, guarantying Jewish survival against all odds, and making an unmatched contribution to civilization. As Mark Twain (quoted by Koppel) wrote: “All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains.”

Heidi’s mistake consisted of assuming that abandoning beliefs and virtues would lead to a life of rationality and clear-eyed reason. That might work for the first generation of quitters, but not for the second. The likes of Amber have abandoned reason and adopted beliefs that, unlike those of their grandparents, were not born out of the hard-earned wisdom of the ages and were not tested by time.

Even though Koppel convincingly and cleverly demonstrates the superiority of Shimen’s worldview and lifestyle over Heidi’s, he does not evade the fact that his case might be moot, since Shimon’s world was annihilated by the Nazis. The Jewish people thankfully survived the Holocaust, and it has thrived both in Israel and across the free world. But did Shimen’s authentic, intuitive and balanced Judaism survive?

Hardly, Koppel admits. Precisely because Shimen’s Judaism was commonsensical and not dogmatic, it belonged neither to the *haredi* nor to the modern-Orthodox categories that emerged from U.S. post-war yeshivas. Observant American Jews either become more segregated or more assimilated. “I fear” Koppel concludes, “that nothing approximating Shimen’s Yiddishkeit is likely to survive for long in America or anywhere else outside of Israel.”

Only in Israel can Shimen’s Judaism come back to life and flourish, Koppel contends. At first sight, this claim seems counterintuitive, since Israel’s founding fathers were secular if not anti-religious. Moreover, the rejection of Zionism by Israel’s *haredi* leaders was perceived by Shimen as both disingenuous (why vilify a state that funds your yeshivas?) and doctrinaire (why reject Jewish power, especially after the Holocaust?).

Shimen did not feel at home either with religious Zionists. A quintessential cynic, he rolled his eyes at Rabbi Kook’s Hegelian theories. And yet, only in Israel can Shimen’s “balanced Judaism” be reborn and flourish, one “with the requisite knowledge and moral intuition, humility and confidence, and rootedness in the past and trust in the future.”

Since Israel’s independence in 1948, Judaism in Israel and in the United States (home to the world’s largest Jewish Diaspora) have taken different trajectories. U.S. Jews have many choices of practice and affiliation in theory, but in practice most of them either assimilate or retreat to a secluded and strict form of observance.

In Israel, by contrast, a local version of Shimen’s “balanced Judaism” is emerging. Call it Israel’s religious melting pot. Koppel reverts to his comparison between *Halacha* and language to conclude his book with an optimistic note: In Israel, Judaism is becoming a first language again. It is remindful of Shimen’s balanced Judaism, but with one difference: In Israel, this first language is spoken by a confident, dynamic and colorful youth, not by a wandering, cranky and traumatized Polish Jew.

Koppel has written a compelling, learned and witty answer to Heidi’s Princeton sermon. As for Yossel, his grandchildren can now come back to Israel, unburdened by the

dilemma that tore their grandfather back in 1947. They don't have to choose between abandoning Judaism and reverting to its 18th-century Polish version. They, like the rest of us in Israel, are finally blessed with being able to say (quoting Koppel one last time): "You know what, here we are, free Jews living in a Jewish country, building it and sustaining it, studying the Torah and more or less living by its commandments, raising proud and non-neurotic Jewish kids. Free at last. Free at last. Thank God Almighty, we are free at last."

Shimen would likely have been skeptical about the existence of non-neurotic Jews, but he would still have heartedly said "amen" to that.

Beinart cannot say that he is free at last, because he has put his fate into the hands of Israel's enemies, who, unlike him, do not make the difference between Jews and Zionists. Beinart's dissociation from Israel will never be good enough for anti-Semites. Hence has Beinart joined the call to end the existence of a Jewish nation-state, hoping that this will do. It won't. Precisely because Beinart's Judaism lacks the realism, the common sense and the balance displayed by Shimen, and precisely because it has become detached from Israel, it has no future.

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