

How are we doing?

How is Judaism doing these days? That is, how are we doing in the three areas that I regard as critical: as a movement for ethics in all aspects of life, as a spiritual pursuit, and as a social group?

Many Jews who are actively involved in synagogues have told me that they are quite satisfied with the way things stand, and some even see signs of resurgence. Similarly, those who have chosen Jewish welfare, Israel, or other causes for their active support are often pleased with the current state of affairs in their areas of interest. After all, there are many big congregations and beautiful synagogues, an abundance of social and welfare organizations, and we even have a Jewish homeland. Don't all of these indicate that Judaism is flourishing at the beginning of the twenty-first century?

In my thinking, Judaism isn't doing well at all. There are many signs that we are hurting in the three critical areas I have mentioned above. Even with all the activity and buildings, the future looks grim, because these are getting emptier by the year and the losses are staggering with each passing generation. In this introductory article I merely want to state my general concerns. The specifics, both causes and proposed solutions, will be discussed in later articles.

As a movement for ethics in all aspects of life, Jews are neither being taught nor do they accept this as the special mission for which they were chosen. Many do not regard the setting of a good example as their foremost religious responsibility. They may mistakenly believe that worship is the essence of Judaism. It is not. Many people in the world are ethically inclined, but for Jews the modeling of ethical behavior is their reason for being. A people without identifying characteristics, or a mission that makes it unique, cannot last. It gradually blends into the surrounding culture and then disappears in the not too distant future.

In the spiritual dimension, the various Jewish denominations are only meeting the spiritual needs of a small, though visible, minority (see upcoming article, "The Often-heard: Spiritual but Not Religious"). Synagogue attendance is mostly by an older group and is dismal in terms of numbers. High holidays are drawing fewer worshippers each year and the major seasonal holy days (Pesah, Shevuot, Sukot) are barely celebrated. Many of the young and middle-aged either see spiritual matters as irrelevant for their lives or are seeking outlets outside of their religion. Synagogues seem inattentive to these needs and their worship services, as currently structured, seem inflexible and consume all available time and energy (see article, "Prayers and Religious Services").

As a distinct social or ethnic group, Judaism is crumbling and cannot sustain itself for many more generations, especially outside Israel. The high rate of intermarriage is only one alarming phenomenon (see upcoming article, "Intermarriage"). The more basic questions Judaism needs to answer very soon, it's going to manage this trend, are as follows. Why should a Jew associate with other Jews socially, romantically, emotionally, intellectually, or in any other way? Certainly we share a past, but what is to keep us together in the present or future? Do Jews have a self image or a mission in common with other Jews? Do we have a unique outlook as Jews that is worth preserving through association?

There is the danger that in the next few decades Jews will consider themselves as having had a quaint past, one that left them with pieces of literature, music, food, and some cute vocabulary. This is not that different than the way most Americans or westerners see their ethnic inheritance. In my case, I have no desire to continue the culture of, or social contacts with, my former home country. I am an American now and the locale of my recent generations has little relevance for my current life. I feel very differently about Judaism and I hope to convince others that this aspect of their background is of real value.

Judaism is not doing well and most of it will disappear within a few generations unless the three critical areas I have mentioned are seriously addressed, starting today. The ethical nature of our chosenness must be taught, discussed, and embraced. The spiritual dimension must be restored, and the social interactions must find a deeper rationale.

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