Article

Beyond the Secular-Religion Divide: Judaism and the New Secularity

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Abstract: In his 2018 survey of twenty-first-century American Judaism entitled *The New American Judaism: How Jews Practice their Judaism Today*, Jack Wertheimer references a 2015 Pew Research study that presupposes the secular-religion binary as the analytical metric for its determination that both the American public and American Jews are becoming less religious. Nonetheless, Wertheimer's use of this analytical frame prohibits him from making sense of many details of the twenty-first-century American Jewish life that he seeks to describe. Indeed, any survey of the contemporary American Jewish scene is remiss if it does not discuss the rise of orthodox Jewish feminism, current trends towards substantial denominational change, and/or the emergence of a "post-ethnic" Judaism. Even so, recent historical-ethnographic accounts have outpaced analytical challenges to the secular-religion binary. Contemporary historians and ethnographers find themselves forced to choose between an analytically deficient model and a default rejection of analytical tools altogether. Arguably, the roots of the current impasse are derived from the influence of what scholars refer to as the secularization thesis. Therefore, to overcome this impasse, ethnographers and historians of American Judaism need access to a more refined categorical lens. In this essay, I argue that they may find the analytical support they need by turning away from the secularization thesis and turning toward far more complex accounts of the relationship between Judaism and modernity provided by the canon of modern Jewish thought. Such a turn yields an analytical category we may refer to as the "new secularity" which, when applied to studies in Jewish life in America (and potentially elsewhere) sheds light on communal realities that the secular-religious account misses.

Keywords: secularization; secularity; orthodox feminism; denominationalism; fact-value

1. Introduction

On a summer evening in July of 1883, Hebrew Union College held a banquet to celebrate the ordination of its first class of Reform rabbis. As Jewish thinker Neil Gillman describes it, the banquet was "the climax of a glorious day in the history of the [Reform] movement . . ." (Gillman 1993, p. 26). Attendees were served from a menu of the finest foods, including an appetizer of "Little Neck Clams (half shell) . . . and a main entrée of either "Soft Shell Crabs or Salade of Shrimp" (Gillman 1993, p. 26). In a later discussion of nineteenth-century American Judaism, Gillman juxtaposes this description of the "Trefah banquet" with a profile of the late nineteenth-century wave of Eastern European Jewish immigrants who he says were, "inclined to be much more traditionalist in belief and practice than their German cousins . . . [and] unfamiliar with the culture of modernity . . ." (Gillman 1993, p. 38). As the well-regarded scholar Hasia Diner explains, Gillman's account is characteristic of a long line of American Jewish historians who think, "in terms of a 'German' and an 'eastern European' immigration . . . [and have] accepted [the] historical narrative [that] the first group quickly assimilated to American standards of behavior [whereas] the latter group . . . [remained] . . . more Jewish and more resistant to change" (Diner 2006, p. 79).

American Jewish history has long been narrated through the lens of the antagonism between secularity and religiosity. Students learn that the first Jews came for economic

opportunity and to a place lacking all provisions for religious life. They are told that German Jews were less religious than Eastern European Jews, that America Zionism was strictly secular, and that the suburban Jews of the 1950s were less religious than the Orthodox Jews who arrived on the shores of America in the wake of the Holocaust.

More recently, American Jewish historian Jack Wertheimer frames his 2018 survey of twenty-first-century American Judaism entitled *The New American Judaism: How Jews Practice their Judaism Today* by referencing a 2015 Pew Research study that presupposes the secular-religion binary as the analytical metric for its determination that both the American public and American Jews are becoming less religious. No doubt, Wertheimer's analytical appeal to the secular-religion divide echoes the approach used by respected historians like Diner. Nonetheless, Wertheimer's use of this analytical frame prohibits him from making sense of many details of the twenty-first-century American Jewish life he seeks to describe. For example, what can Wertheimer say about a twenty-first-century community of Reform Jews who take on new mitzvoth, but whose eighteenth and nineteenth-century ideological foundations celebrate "universal, human ethical principles"? Are they "religious" or "secular"? Similarly, what analytical tools can Wertheimer use to explain contemporary Orthodox Jews who, as he says, "live externally as fully engaged [religious Jews] . . . but privately have lost their faith?" (Wertheimer 2018, p. 97). Wertheimer knows he needs to add to his explanatory toolbox, but he does not know how and resigns himself to presenting a semi-journalistic, and often confusing, description of twenty-first-century American Judaism.

Wertheimer's description of contemporary American Jewish practices that belie the secular-religion characterization are just the tip of the iceberg. Any survey of the contemporary American Jewish scene is remiss if it does not discuss the rise of orthodox Jewish feminism, current trends towards substantial denominational change, and/or the emergence of a "post-ethnic" Judaism. Even so, recent historical-ethnographic accounts have outpaced analytical challenges to the secular-religion binary. Contemporary historians and ethnographers find themselves forced to choose between an analytically deficient model and a default rejection of analytical tools altogether. Contemporary Jewish studies pay a heavy price for this distorted situation. Not only does it obstruct research into the current state of American Jewish life, but it also forecloses the possibility of related analyses that emerge from a more thorough account of the landscape of contemporary American Judaism, such as the changing character of church-state relations in America, the relationship between Judaism in America and in Israel, and comparisons between Judaism and Islam in the west and elsewhere.

Arguably, the roots of the current impasse derive from the influence of what scholars refer to as the secularization thesis. By the secularization thesis, I mean the idea first coined by Max Weber and later described by Peter Berger in his 1967 work, *The Sacred Canopy*, that "religion" and "modernity" are antagonistically related since modernity introduces rationalization processes implicit in the work of natural science, industrialization, and the modern state that undermine the ontological foundations of religious world-views and their appeal to sacred, non-human forces. As Berger explains, secularization is the idea that as a result of modernity's account of "reality [as] amenable to the systematic, rational penetration, both in thought and activity, which we associate with modern science and technology . . . [most individuals] no longer live . . . in a world ongoingly penetrated by sacred beings and forces . . ." (Berger 1967, pp. 111–12). Thus, in Berger's view, the decline of religion in the modern west is a symptom of its essential irrationality and its inability to come to terms with the knowledge of the world made possible by rational science.

Therefore, to overcome this impasse, ethnographers and historians of American Judaism need access to a more refined categorical lens. Below, I argue that they may find the analytical support they need by turning away from the secularization thesis and turning toward *far more complex* accounts of the relationship between Judaism and modernity provided by the canon of modern Jewish thought. As I discuss, such a turn yields an analytical category we may refer to as the "new secularity" which, when applied to studies in Jewish

life in America (and potentially elsewhere), sheds light on communal realities that the secular-religious account misses.

Generally speaking, modern Jewish thought is identified with the canon of work produced by Jewish philosophers who analyze the relationship between Jewish law, norms, and practices and the intellectual and material conditions presented by western modernity. As I discuss in more detail below, when taken as a whole, the canon of modern Jewish thought (approximately 1650–present), which includes the work of thinkers like Moses Mendelssohn, Franz Rosenzweig, Hermann Cohen, Gillian Rose, Rachel Adler, and others, demonstrates common patterns of response to the encounter between Judaism and western modernity. The key to unlocking these common patterns is (contra Berger) to recognize them as a set of complex responses to what intellectual historians, such as Jonathan Israel, refer to as the crisis of the enlightenment (see Israel 2002) or the notion that the promise of the new science associated with the enlightenment went hand in hand with a crisis concerning the truth and validity of non-scientific areas of knowledge such as ethics, religion, and politics. Frequently, this account of the exclusive truth and validity of scientific claims is referred to as the fact-value divide.

Contrary to the secularization thesis that pits science and reason against religion, an investigation into the common patterns shared by modern Jewish thinkers in response to the crisis of the enlightenment illuminates how modern Jewish thinkers *both* deeply respected the newly discovered methods and knowledge of natural science and yet were, at the same time, anxious about and ultimately critical of the threat it posed to the logical validity of Judaism and its laws, norms, and practices. In sum, an examination of how modern Jewish thinkers responded to the enlightenment gives credence to the fact that the relationship between Judaism and modern reason was and is both more favorable *and* more critical than secularization theorists suggest.

As I discuss, modern Jewish thinkers display three primary patterns of response to the fact-value divide or the crisis of the enlightenment that I list in the order of their *increasing discomfort* with it: (1) acceptance and the willingness to reduce Jewish norms and claims to "scientific" terms, (2) acceptance together with an account of the essence of Judaism as an irreducible "more", and (3) an external critique that challenges the exclusive veracity of fact claims and asserts the unique validity of claims regarding revelation, but only flips the goal posts of exclusive logical validity away from "science" to theology but does not provide an account of the logical validity of these claims. For better or worse, the signature feature of a religious thinker's appropriation of the fact-value divide is what I refer to as arbitrary anchoring or the inability to articulate the standards of intelligibility or logical validity of one's claims. Thus, there are two key elements constitutive of the complexity of the modern Jewish thought responses to the crisis of the enlightenment or fact-value divide: (a) general acceptance of the fact-value divide in the form of an inability to arrive at an account of the logical validity or intelligibility of Jewish claims and (b) an increasing discomfort with the fact-value paradigm and its denigration of the intelligibility of Jewish claims that gives rise to a slow process of philosophical investigation into the fact-value paradigm's own validity.

Not surprisingly, and more importantly for our purposes here, over time, these philosophical reactions to the crisis of the enlightenment result in an overarching skepticism concerning any and all attempts to posit self-evident rational grounds of *either* facts or values. Jewish thinkers dismayed with the status of the intelligibility of Jewish discourse in the wake of varying forms of acceptance of the fact-value divide begin to chip away at its self-evidence and the self-evidence of subsequent and related attempts to replace it with other grounds of rational self-evidence. This skepticism leaves Jewish thinkers and community members with a forced option to either accept the skeptic's verdict that there is no single standard of the rational validity of claims or recognize that, within a post-enlightenment context, we cannot identify a *single ground or standard* for the validity of Jewish theopolitical claims, *and* the determination of the validity of these claims requires a (transcendental) investigation into them by those for whom they sustain or once sustained

intelligibility, as these individuals and communities deploy these claims within changing conditions of the world within which they live. No doubt, the rational promise of such a process presupposes that there are Jewish communities and thinkers for whom Jewish laws and claims are intelligible or hold logical meaning.

I refer to this philosophical position as a "new secularity" since it sustains: (1) an appreciation for scientific knowledge, (2) a skepticism concerning its philosophical hegemony, i.e., a realization that scientific knowledge is a knowledge generated by and for human persons and communities, and (3) an appreciation of the fact that the rational validity of Judaism and its laws and beliefs is a pragmatic product of the relationship between the communities that live by them and the worldly constraints within which they do or do not achieve meaning. Thus, the central argument of this essay is that this philosophical position or "new secularity" aptly describes the current philosophical situation of Jews in America and can be used as a valuable analytic for gaining a deeper appreciation of the particular ethnographic realities of lived Jewish experiences that remain neglected and misunderstood by the secular-religion divide approach which itself takes for granted an unreflected-upon appropriation of the fact-value divide.

2. Secularization and the Crisis of the Enlightenment in Modern Jewish Thought

Frequently, intellectual historians describe the history of modern Jewish thought as a two-part tale that mimics the narrative presented by secularization theorists. This account typically begins with seventeenth- and eighteenth-century liberal attempts to accommodate the standards of modern rationality and reject fundamental elements of the Jewish tradition, and then it moves to describe the post-WWI neo-orthodox reaction against this liberal assault that was eager to restore non-rational categories of the Jewish tradition, such as miracle and revelation (for an example of this narrative, see Lazier 2008). Not surprisingly, this narrative fails to adequately convey the more complex character of the relationship between Judaism and modernity expressed by the canon of modern Jewish thought, a character which I discuss elsewhere (see Rashkover 2020). I suggest this is a result of the impact of the crisis of the enlightenment upon modern Jewish thinkers.

I am not the first scholar to consider the impact of the crisis of the enlightenment upon modern Jewish thought. In his 1935 volume, *Philosophy and Law*, the twentieth-century theopolitical philosopher Leo Strauss challenged the assumptions of the secular-religion binary applied to the modern Jewish thought canon and offered a valuable starting point for the analysis presented here. There are four key points of difference between the analysis of modern Jewish thought presented by Strauss in *Philosophy and Law* and the liberal-post-liberal narrative that bears the marks of the secularization thesis: (1) According to Strauss, there is no categorical divide between so-called "liberal" Jewish thinkers like Mendelssohn and Cohen, who were apparently sympathetic to the secular enlightenment world-view, and so-called post-liberal or "traditional" Jewish thinkers like Rosenzweig, who apparently rejected modern reason in their efforts to preserve the discourse of Judaism. In his view, both liberal and post-liberal Jewish thinkers alike were impressed with modern reason and used it as the primary standard for judging the veracity of Jewish law, norms, and practices (for Strauss discussion, see Strauss 1995, pp. 26–28). (2) In Strauss' view, this appropriation of modern reason by liberal and post-liberal thinkers alike made it *impossible* for them to secure the rational legitimization of Judaism since Judaism is a legal discourse whose rationality is rooted in the highest good of a revelatory authority called into question by the epistemological standards of modern reason and natural science (Strauss 1995, pp. 26–28). (3) The very modern reason that modern Jewish thinkers appropriated is itself philosophically questionable since it presupposes the exclusive truth or self-evidence of natural scientific knowledge, which it does not itself defend (Strauss 1995, p. 32). (4) Contemporary Jewish thought should and does challenge the commitment to modernity and should and does focus attention on the intelligibility and/or logical validity of the law that operates within an account of revelatory authority and not outside of it. Clearly, Strauss' position challenges Berger's insistence upon the antagonism between Judaism and

reason and calls attention to a form of Jewish legal rationality invisible to secularization theorists in general and proponents of the liberal/post-liberal divide within modern Jewish thought in particular.

3. The "New Secularity"

Like Strauss, the analysis here recognizes the impact of the crisis of the enlightenment upon modern Jewish thought. If it is the case that Jewish thinkers have been favorably disposed to the gains in knowledge afforded by the rise of natural science, then it is also true that these same thinkers show concern with the enlightenment's strict identification of truth and rational validity with natural science and the corresponding delegitimization of Jewish laws and ideas that stand outside this body of knowledge. When viewed historically, it becomes clear that, despite continued respect for scientific knowledge, Jewish thinkers have become increasingly too concerned to salvage the rational intelligibility of Jewish discourse (for an extensive analysis of the slow process by which modern, western Jewish, and Christian thinkers evaluated the tension between their commitment to natural science and their commitment to normative claims, see Rashkover 2020).

In particular, and as mentioned briefly above, there are three distinct ways that Jewish thinkers mediated between their respect for science and their concern for the rational validity of Jewish laws and practices. They acted in one of the following ways: (1) like Spinoza, they accepted natural science as the philosophical standard of truth and validity and reduced Jewish claims to these terms, thereby dismissing all other Jewish laws and practices as irrational or outside of the perimeters of truth and logical validity (as Spinoza argues, "reason demands nothing contrary to Nature." (Spinoza 2006, p. 4)); (2) like Franz Rosenzweig or Martin Buber, they accepted natural scientific claims as logically valid but, concerned with the reduction of claims to a naturalist explanation, maintained that Jewish claims are irreducible to naturalistic explanation and refer to a sacred reality more than or beyond the natural world, even if the appeal to this sacred more does not restore the rational validity of Jewish discourse since it is beyond the bounds of human knowledge (Martin Buber's *I and Thou* offers a good example of this position; for a discussion of Franz Rosenzweig's account of the relationship between scientific knowledge and theology, see Rashkover 2020, pp. 6–17); or (3) like Strauss, they accepted the value of natural science but challenged its *philosophical* hegemony through an external critique from the vantage point of a revelatory rooted, communally self-sufficient, and internally coherent standard of Jewish legal rationality, which he nonetheless took as self-evident and which, therefore, remained vulnerable to the arbitrary anchoring that constitutes the telltale sign of the appropriation of the fact-value divide. No doubt, Strauss challenged the logical superiority and self-evidence of scientific discourse. However, he also challenged the self-evidence of revelatory discourse. Both, he claimed, are intelligible discourses, but both are inevitably rooted in decisionist determinations of what constitutes the higher form of life. In such a view, mutual skepticism constitutes the highest philosophical achievement, and each guarantees the logical siloization of the other. Jewish discourse achieves intelligibility but only within the context of a decisionist determination and not by virtue of a positive articulation of the transcendental conditions of the possibility of the logical validity of its claims (for a clear presentation of Strauss' account of the relationship between theology and philosophy, see Strauss 2006).

Ultimately, in our current philosophical climate, none of the three responses provides an account of how to recognize the intelligibility of Jewish discourse. Despite the increasing philosophical challenge to the fact-value paradigm, as most robustly illustrated by Strauss, all three responses lead Jewish thinkers into a forced option to either (a) accept the skeptic's challenge to the rational validity of Jewish discourse or (b) engage in what I call an immanent critique of the fact-value paradigm or what is an awareness of a thinker's own tendency to appropriate it together with an awareness of its inadequacy. Philosophically speaking, however, an awareness of the inadequacy of the fact-value paradigm need not result in skepticism, since it may also give rise to a transcendental investigation into what can

or could be the conditions of the possibility of the logical validity of Jewish claims. Stated otherwise, when accompanied by a living confidence in the value of Jewish discourse, an immanent critique of the fact-value paradigm invites those who engage in this discourse to replace the search for an absolute ground for the logical validity of their claims with a task or an activity or *ongoing* (transcendental) investigation into the conditions of the possibility of these claims or discourse.

Jewish thinkers and communities who embody this stage of response to modernity recognize the philosophical limits of both the enlightenment and the post-enlightenment accounts of reason and, by default, come face to face with the sobering and yet philosophically promising conclusion that, in the current moment, there is no single standard of rationality which can be used to legitimize any discourse, scientific, theological, or otherwise. Rather, under current circumstances, knowledge claims achieve rationality by virtue of their function for the communities who deploy them within the material and ideational conditions within which they live. Consequently, this chapter in the history of the Jewish response to modernity, apparent in the thought of Jewish thinkers like Menachem Fisch (see Fisch 2008) and in communal trends towards denominational innovation and post-ethnicity, appropriates the modern anxiety over the rational legitimacy of theopolitical discourse and/or recognizes the vulnerability of key elements of the Jewish tradition to the challenge of skepticism. Nonetheless, this response does not subject Jewish claims to the criteria of enlightenment reason but attempts to rehabilitate those laws and norms whose meaning is called into question by current environmental conditions by discerning if and when there is a way to situate them into the web of other functional knowledge claims. Ideas or practices that can be rehabituated achieve rational validity or, in John Dewey's language, warranted assertability. Claims or laws that do not are temporarily dismissed or stored, even if they are not in current use since over time inferential, ideational, and material conditions may change such that they can be successfully rehabituated into the web of working knowledge claims of a given Jewish community at some unknown time in the future.

I refer to this stage as the "new secularity" because, like its modern enlightenment ancestor, it presupposes that rationality is a product of a community's knowledge of the *world*. Even so, it is a "new" kind of secularity since, unlike its modern predecessor, it takes for granted that rational validity is determined by the pragmatic interests of living Jewish communities and the interface between the claims, laws, and norms that have achieved warranted assertability and the worldly constraints that can pose a challenge to the meaning or ongoing intelligibility of any one of these claims at any time.

Moreover, and more importantly, for our purposes here, appreciation for the "new secularity" as a stage in the Jewish thought response to modernity enables ethnographers and historians to appreciate developments in American Jewish life that remain unintelligible to researchers limited by the secular-religion binary. There is no doubt that contemporary forms of American Judaism, like other forms of religious life, benefit from the work of ethnographers and historians. Still, this work is arguably enriched by the recognition of the philosophical orientations of living communities. Indeed, it was sociologist Peter Berger himself who recognized the significance of rational conditions for the assessment of sociological alterations in religious life. What Berger did not appreciate is the extent to which the rational conditions of those of us who have inherited enlightenment standards have undergone dramatic philosophical reflection and response by the living communities deeply affected them. In what follows, I offer the following three examples from contemporary American Jewish life that benefit from the analytical lens of the new secularity: (1) the rise of orthodox feminism; (2) the trend towards denominational changes; and (3) the emergence of a post-ethnic Jewish self-consciousness.

In 2014, a communal debate ensued among the members of the modern orthodox Riverdale Jewish community in New York when a group of young high school women decided to take up the traditionally male practice of wrapping tefillin at their orthodox yeshiva (Borschel-Dan 2014). According to traditional interpretations of Jewish law, only

men are commanded to daily bind their upper arm and head with a black leather strap connected to a box that contains a text from Deuteronomy.

At the time of the debate, the rabbi of the young women's school supported their initiative. However, a leading rabbi of the Riverdale Jewish community named Rabbi Rosenblatt did not and insisted the following: (a) the school the young women attended was an "orthodox" school and its reputation as such would be questioned if the young women donned tefillin in it and (b) while it was undoubtedly true, he argued that there are "some" conditions that justify halakhic (Jewish legal change) (these conditions were not present in this instance even if the women's position was supported by ample textual evidence).

In response, the Riverdale women argued that rabbinic refusal to allow women to don tefillin constituted an unintelligible position (Borschel-Dan 2014). As women who participated in a particular society at a particular historical moment, the value of equal and fair treatment of women and/or the inclusion of women in key devotional experiences constituted knowledge claims they recognized as logically valid. This, coupled with the fact that there was ample textual support from within the tradition to ground their view, emboldened the young women to challenge Rosenblatt's conclusion.

Below, I offer a brief analysis of what I take to be the rational status of Rabbi Rosenblatt's position. Suffice it to say here that there is good reason to argue that Rosenblatt's position waxes irrational in comparison to the young women's position insofar as Rosenblatt's position works hard to deny what I would maintain are his own modern orthodox community's shared standards of intelligibility or what, in this instance, is the importance and equal value of women's devotional experience. By categorically determining that communal concern for women's devotional experience simply did not rise to the level of a communal justification for halakhic change, Rosenblatt suppressed hermeneutical responses to worldly conditions and, in the process, secured the unintelligibility of his own position. In her own work on feminist halakhic reasoning, Ronit Irshai amplifies this point and argues that modern orthodox halakhic arguments that attempt to ignore the large pool of knowledge claims and commitments confided by most community members, as they live in a pluralist society, do so at the risk of advancing unintelligible legal interpretations that will either fade away against the test of time or be sustained through ideological techniques of hermeneutical coercion. In her assessment, it is critical for modern orthodox Jews to, "confront the basic premises that they are unwittingly buying into, premises at odds with their shared values [such as the premise that it is fine for women to operate as second class citizens in orthodox communities], which as a practical matter, they most likely reject in most areas of their lives [and to concede that] there is no divide in the values, and that the distinction between how they are applied in [their] religious and secular dimensions of life is an artificial one . . .." (Irshai 2010, p. 76).

Regardless of this assessment of the rationality of Rosenblatt's position, it is clear that a Bergerian account of the secular-religion divide fails to provide an adequate explanation of the young women's position. From a Bergerian perspective, the Riverdale women must be either orthodox and irrational or rational and secular. However, it is clear that the Riverdale women are halakhically observant and, if anything, seek to become more observant. As well, the women present what they take to be a rational position, albeit a position whose rationality, like the "new secularity", derives from the relationship between the claims they live with and the often-changing worldly constraints within which they sustain these claims. Falling into neither the strictly observant or secular category, the Riverdale women ground the rationality of their legal claims in their commensurability with other knowledge claims they hold and, therefore, whose intelligibility they take for granted, including but not limited to other halakhic claims, claims of natural science, and even meta-halakhic principles, such as the fair and equal treatment of women.

In addition to the rise of feminist orthodoxy, we can point to the following two other examples from twenty-first-century American Jewish life (although there are many) that achieve greater intelligibility when viewed through the lens of the new secularity:

(1) the trend towards denominational change and (2) the emergence of a post-ethnic Jewish self-consciousness.

In *The New American Judaism*, Jack Wertheimer discusses the contemporary state of Reform Judaism. To frame the analytical dimension of this discussion, Wertheimer invokes a recent PEW research study that takes for granted the secular-religion binary and apparently documents the current decline of the Reform movement. According to the study, "just over one-third of Reform Jews who affiliate with a synagogue claim to attend services once a month or more ..." (Wertheimer 2018, p. 114). With this, and in keeping with the secularization thesis, Wertheimer prognosticates that, "the dramatic decline of liberal Protestant denominations may truly serve as a warning of what lies ahead for Reform Judaism" (Wertheimer 2018, p. 114).

Certainly, it is surprising that, when in contradiction to this account, Wertheimer describes how, liberated from its nineteenth-century ideological commitments, twenty-first century Reform Judaism displays a new denominational (indeed more "orthodox") vitality. In recent decades, he notes, Reform Jewish communities have experimented with appropriating traditional liturgical practices once dismissed as old-world by the patriarchs of classical Reform. In its twenty-first century incarnation, by contrast, "the shofar [has once again] replaced trumpet blasts ... head coverings and prayer shawls [have] made a comeback ..." (Wertheimer 2018, p. 107). Frequently Wertheimer continues, Reform Jews have retrieved non-liturgical elements of the halakhic system as well, most notably the laws of kashrut and marital practices, including rituals associated with the mikvah, an ancient rabbinic institution linked to formerly considered unintelligible purity laws deriving from the book of Leviticus. Taken together, these (denominational) innovations point to a time of unrivaled growth for the movement.

Clearly, Wertheimer's account of Reform Judaism's recent success conflicts with his earlier diagnosis of its decline. This I argue is because his analysis of its decline is predicated upon a definition of religion associated with the secular-religion binary. From this perspective, religion amounts to a subjective set of beliefs about a sacred (irrational) "more" unrelated to the knowledge we have about the everyday world in which we live. Accordingly, "religion" is something that takes place in houses of worship only, separate from voting booths, dinner tables, bedrooms, political marches, and scientific laboratories. Consequently, evidence for or against the presence of religion is delimited to synagogue membership and attendance statistics. This means that Wertheimer's project is inevitably stymied by the failure of the analytic he uses to capture and be informed by the data he finds.

By contrast, when viewed through the lens of the "new secularity" described above, Wertheimer's data acquire analytical meaning. Like its feminist orthodox and post-ethnic cousins, twenty-first century Reform Judaism constitutes a hybrid expression of the deep skepticism concerning the contemporary meaning of key elements of the Jewish tradition (e.g., traditional notions of divine command, miracles, along with a skepticism of classical ideas of nineteenth century Reform Judaism) together with a willingness to reinterpret some of these elements in relation to other knowledge claims held by the communities involved. So understood, Reform Judaism's exercises in innovation do not signal a nostalgic desire for a lost religious world, but rather they are the anxious expressions of communities who display a willingness and ability to preserve the best and most functional aspects of the world-views they love.

A third example of the contemporary American Jewish landscape illuminated by the new secularity is what American Jewish scholar Shaul Magid refers to as post-ethnic Judaism in his book, *American Post-Judaism: Identity and Renewal in a Post-Ethnic Society*. By post-ethnic Judaism, Magid refers to the emergence of Jewish communities that do not anchor their Judaism in ethnic identification or what, drawing from Max Weber's definition of ethnicity, he describes as, "a subjective belief in their common descent because of physical type or customs" (Magid 2013, p. 18) In the second half of the twentieth century, American Jewish communities entered a period of unwavering ethnic commitment, shaken as they

were by the Holocaust and motivated to support the preservation of the Jewish people through the newly established State of Israel. Nonetheless, as Magid maintains, recent data indicate the rise of American Jewish communities that are post-halakhic, global, and multi-ethnic and are "founded on voluntary and socially constructed affiliations" (Magid 2013, p. 23). Unlike their denominationally or ethnically oriented predecessors, post-ethnic Jewish communities demonstrate an unprecedented hermeneutical freedom and drive for symbolic and ritual rehabituation.

In his book, Magid discusses the example of the Jewish Renewal Movement established by Rabbi Zalman Schachter Shalomi in the early 1970s. Founded neither on Zionism nor the Holocaust, Schachter's Renewal, as Magid explains, seeks to "move beyond its parochial interests and demonstrate that Jews can contribute to global civilization as Jews" (Magid 2013, p. 23). Driven by a concern for the contemporary crisis of meaning overshadowing traditional Jewish concepts, Renewal communities actively experiment with hermeneutical reinterpretations that comport with the social, political, and ecological concerns that currently affect American Jewish life. For example, members maintain that the contemporary geopolitical environment casts suspicion over parochial implications of the traditional notion of biblical monotheism, and they often turn to kabbalistic ideas of divine emanation through multiple attributes or sephirot as a way to lend new meaning to Jewish theological claims. Similarly, Jewish renewal communities respond to the contemporary loss of meaning around the notion of halakhic obligation and recast Jewish practice as ritual or post-halakhic.

According to Magid, post-ethnic exercises in hermeneutical freedom exemplify "George Simmel's notion that when cultural forms become spiritually empty and no longer embody the life of the society, they cease to serve the members of the society in question . . ." (Magid 2013, p. 20) and, for our purposes, illustrate the key elements of the "new secularity". Like Strauss, post-ethnic Jewish communities view the late twentieth-century Jewish focus on the Holocaust and Zionism as an inadequate attempt to resolve the larger problem of Judaism's encounter with modernity and its accompanying standard of reason. However, parallel to the work of feminist orthodox halakhic reflection, post-ethnic communities accept the challenge posed to the intelligibility of Jewish communal concepts and engage in the pragmatic rehabituation of them.

As these examples suggest, recognition of the "new secularity" creates space for comparative analyses between what are often considered unrelated developments in American Jewish communal life, such as feminist orthodoxy, Reform Jewish traditionalism, post-ethnic Jewish Renewal, and rising rates of Orthodox Jewish agnosticism. However, before concluding, it is important to underscore the explanatory benefits of this categorical development. While the study of religion requires a dialectical interface between the "understanding" and "explanation", it is also the case as we have seen that, in the wake of the failure of the secular-religion binary, Jewish scholars have found it difficult to identify working categories that support the explanatory arm of their religious studies work. This was the primary argument advanced by J.Z. Smith, who defended the explanatory function of analytical categories in religious studies while recognizing the pragmatic limits of these categories in the face of changing data (see Smith 1998). Above, I attempted to show how the category of the new secularity offers one such pragmatically useful explanatory concept for research in American Judaism. Not only does it facilitate comparative analyses in American Jewish Studies, but it also opens up new areas of research, including but not limited to the following: (1) Judaism and race in America since it offers an analytical framework to understand how, as Eric Goldstein described (this analysis appears in Goldstein 2006), Jewish ideas about race have been and arguably still are expressions of Jewish communities' attempts to rehabituate their communal identity to make sense of their position in American society; (2) analytical comparisons between Judaism in America and in Israel insofar as it is unclear if and how the category of the new secularity applies to the data of Jewish life in Israel; and (3) legal religious pluralism and/or church-state relations in the U.S. insofar as, within the scope of the new secularity's account, religious law acquires justificatory

validity, while the intelligibility of halakha or alternatively Islamic law remains situated within the constitutional constraints of American society.

Additionally, the category of the "new secularity" has predictive value since, as discussed above, it arises under unique conditions that, if no longer present, signal the end of this stage of the Jewish encounter with modernity and the communal challenges and possibilities it affords. As we have seen, the following two conditions stand out: (1) the "new secularity" presupposes a crisis of intelligibility regarding key elements of Jewish life or philosophical skepticism and (2) the "new secularity" presupposes the willingness and ability of Jewish communities to salvage or preserve their own discourses in the face of this crisis. Admittedly, given the impact of modernity on religious beliefs, it is difficult to imagine any serious alteration to condition #1 in the foreseeable future. This is not the case with respect to the second condition or what is the ability and willingness of communities to engage in hermeneutical acts of self-preservation.

For example, as Joseph Winter's *Hope Draped in Black* makes clear, hermeneutical rehabituation is a luxury afforded to communities whose physical survival is not under threat. Of course, the willingness and ability of Jewish communities to engage in hermeneutical efforts of self-preservation can also be threatened if Jews lose interest in preserving their ideas, norms, and practices altogether. As cultural studies theorist Zygmunt Bauman suggests, we live in a time when the steering mechanisms of market and power are so dominant that they can drain the life-force out of cultural development altogether and/or the development of forms of Judaism in particular (see Bauman 2012).

Stated otherwise, to say that Jewish communal life constitutes an active site of rationality is not to say that Jewish communities are always and/or inevitably sites of rational activity. In fact, collective reasoning practices are more likely to operate under certain conditions and are easily threatened in the absence of those conditions. Thus, an account of the conditions of the possibility of the "new secularity" can provide a criterion by means of which we can determine if and when a Jewish community is functioning rationally or not and can offer an analytic lens to predict the likelihood of a community's future as rational (i.e., healthy and self-preservationist) or ideological (unhealthy and ultimately unable to meet the challenges of changing conditions over time) when, by ideological, I mean the position of being committed to a fixed web of ideas that apparently follow with the force of logic, but which represent the interests of a particular group who robustly deny all potential contradictions or challenges to the logical validity of these claims (in Karen Ng's terms, ideologies are "at once social practices and forms of rationality that destroy the relation between life and self-consciousness . . . [As such, ideologies are fixed constellations of ideas that are] locked within their own abstract space, as divorced from reality as a psychotic." (Ng 2015).

More specifically, a community operates as a site of rational activity when the following occur: (a) its ways of life or norms and practices are deemed intelligible by the community members that live by them; (b) the community permits challenges to or reviews of its norms and ideas by individuals or groups who perceive a conflict between "x" norm and their own account of worldly constraints; and (c) the community is willing to reinterpret its norms or practices and, under extreme conditions, even decide to reject or disregard them. As such, and unlike a secular-religion approach, a "new secularity" account of rationality does not privilege more typically "liberal" communities over more "traditional" ones. Rationality is not hereby linked to certain ideas and/or certain ways of living but only to how a community holds its ideas and norms and adjudicates internal challenges to their intelligibility in view of changing material and ideational constraints. Indeed, it may be the case that traditional or haredi orthodox communities are more likely to rationally preserve themselves than modern orthodox or other liberal Jewish communities since (a) they are more insular and less exposed to changing worldly constraints and (b) they work hard to develop mechanisms such as educational institutions and family and community practices that demonstrate and reinforce the value of the community's way of life. However, the key to any community's rational vitality is the extent to which it remains rationally self-

determinative and does not permit the determination of the intelligibility of its norms and ideas to be usurped by those who seek singular control over this process.

Consequently, the chances that a community will remain rational are greatly increased in times when there is widespread acceptance of the intelligibility of the large majority of the community's norms and ideas and greatly reduced when there is skepticism regarding the intelligibility of a critical number of communal norms or ideas. It is important to keep in mind that what it takes for one community to undergo an intelligibility crisis may not be the same as what it takes for another community to experience such a crisis. For example, occasional and somewhat limited expressions of skepticism in a haredi community may activate authority figures to *suppress* internal rational activity and assert their own exclusive right to normative interpretation, while a more modern orthodox community may be more open to regular bouts of re-evaluation or practical rehabituation and reach a crisis point only when there is a complete loss of social coordination.

Regardless of the threshold, a community's experience of an intelligibility crisis in its lifeworld will at one and the same time create the opportunity for the community to exercise its highest level of philosophical self-review *and* render the community vulnerable to ideological forces ready and waiting to relieve the community of this high-level, effortful, and often disorienting rational work. Clearly, the greater the philosophical challenge, the easier it is for a community to succumb to ideological escapes from it (Rashkover 2021). Consequently, in times of crisis, it is not surprising that communities find it difficult to sustain the level of rational activity they need to guarantee their long-term self-preservation. Communal rational self-determination takes time and effort. Under such circumstances, communities often find it easier to accept the interpretive determinations of their practices presented to them by individuals or groups who seek to assert their own accounts of the meaning of the community's tradition, but they do so by bypassing the communal practices of justification necessary to sustain the long-term health of the community. This, I believe, offers a plausible explanation of Rabbi Rosenblatt's non-rational or ideological position and the apparent willingness of at least some in the Riverdale community to accept his unilateral determination of what constitutes "orthodoxy" and/or his suppression of the community's hermeneutically reflective activity. Stated otherwise, the persistent threat of ideology constitutes the greatest ongoing challenge to the rational self-preservation of Jewish (and arguably non-Jewish) communities in a post-enlightenment environment. As such, any deployment of the category of the "new secularity" inevitably yields results regarding community health and well-being that derive from specific case-by-case analyses of the ongoing dynamic between hermeneutical rehabituation and ideological usurpation of this activity in any particular community.

A fully developed account of the dynamic between communal rational activity and ideology as the two poles of the new secularity is beyond the scope of this analysis. Suffice it to say that an analytical awareness of this dynamic between communal rational activity and ideology as constitutive of the "new secularity" provides a far more generative lens with which to understand developments in Jewish communal and theopolitical life than the secular-religion binary and can arguably be of great service to comparative work in religious studies. Of course, such an analytic is useful only if it serves the data. No doubt, it is high time for ethnographers and historians of Judaism to let go of the secular-religion binary. However, the failure of this explanatory model only reminds scholars of the ongoing challenge to develop categories that enhance explanatory work in Jewish studies and Religious studies more broadly.

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