Religion, nation or culture?

An imperfect attempt to address the fundamental issues about the collective identity of Jews

• GLENN C. ALTSCHLULER

'Judaism is not a religion,' proclaimed Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, a prominent proponent of what came to be known as Orthodox Judaism. Judaism, Hirsch insisted, comprises all of life, not a sliver of it. The "Divine idea," expressed through Jewish law, must govern behavior in the bedroom, the boardroom, and on the bima, for parents, children and citizens, "in enjoyment and privation."

And yet, Leora Batnitzky suggests, even Hirsch affirmed the notion that Judaism is not political and that the government could, legitimately, limit the power of the corporate Jewish community. In How Judaism Became A Religion, Batnitzky, a professor of religion at Princeton University, examines the emergence, beginning with Moses Mendelssohn in 18th century Germany, of this modern (manifestly Protestant) reconceptualization of Judaism. She then brings the narrative into the present with an analysis of lively but still unresolved debates about whether Jews are members of a religion, a nation, or a culture – and whether they must, or should, choose one of these categories.

Batnitzky is not a gifted writer and does not adequately set the context for what sometimes seems like a forced march from one Jewish intellectual to another to another. Nonetheless, her book addresses fundamental issues about the collective identity of Jews, with implications for our understanding of the separation of church and state and the place of faith in the public square.

It is no accident, Batnitzky points out, that modern concepts of religion (as the distinct and private experience of autonomous individuals) and the sovereign state appeared at about the same time. Indeed, the two notions were designed to complement and reinforce one another. Believers depended on the government to protect religious freedom. And the state expected accommodation to secular public authority. Batnitzky suggests, however, that there was a price to be paid. Religion (in this case Judaism) became separated from the "practices of citizenship" – and communal forms of life became subordinate to the inner lives of individuals.

A secular movement, designed for a poor and oppressed people who had neither a land of their own nor a national spoken language, Zionism, Batnitzky demonstrates, forced Jews around the world to ask "What is Jewish about a Jewish state?" Insisting that the movement had no connection to the coming of the Messiah, a few Zionists would have been willing to establish that state far from the lands of ancient Israel.

After World War II many Jews and most Zionists concluded that the Holocaust discredited the idea that Jews could be integrated as full citizens in modern nation-states. Emil Fackenheim, a native of Halle, Germany, who became a professor of philosophy at the Hebrew University, Batnitzky indicates, insisted that the State of Israel (a Jewish state and a state for Jews) derived its meaning and significance by resisting future threats to the Jewish people – and through its theological mission. Following a commandment to resist Auschwitz's "celebration of degradation and death" and deny Hitler a posthumous victory, Fackenheim wrote, Israel affirmed Jewish life "by an act of faith which defines comprehension." Israel's military victories, including the capture of Judea and Samaria in 1967, constituted "a will in touch with an absolute disproportion," overcoming "the religious-secular split with world-historical consequences as yet unknown."

Of course, a different calculus is at play for Jews in the Diaspora. Many of them, Batnitzky reminds us, define themselves as cultural Jews endowed with rich traditions. Even when they appear to be secular, these traditions, she suggests shrewdly, are "parasitic" on a religious and theological framework. And, I would add, many cultural Jews would be hard put to identify the irreducibly Jewish components of Jewish culture.

The starting point for religious Jews in the United States, according to Batnitzky, is an understanding, different from Mendelssohn's, that Judaism can thrive "in a democratic society in which politics is the site of legitimate disagreement." Consider, for example, the experience of 22,000 members of the Satmar Hasidic sect, whose adherents separate the sexes outside the home, make Yiddish their primary language and eschew television and radio. In the 1970s and '80s, these hassidim moved to rural Monroe, New York, formed a new village and convinced the state legislature to establish a separate public school district. Ultimately the Supreme Court declared the school legislation unconstitutional, but, Batnitzky emphasizes, the justices divided sharply over whether theological distinctiveness or cultural distinctiveness was the basis of the action by New York State.

These differences persist. Not even the ultra-Orthodox, Batnitzky observes, "have reclaimed a wholeness that other Jews have lost." After hundreds of years of conversation and debate, a consensus on the core elements of Jewish identity has yet to emerge. It makes one wonder, along with the author, whether the inability to settle this issue continues to make modern Jewish thought "more interesting and vibrant."

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By Leora Batnitzky

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