

The New Jew

Jonathan Steinberg and Marion Kant

Adam Goodman

In the 2006 spring semester, Professors Jonathan Steinberg and Marion Kant jointly taught a seminar course on secular Judaism at the University of Pennsylvania. Their goal was to explore the questions raised by secular Judaism and, though they offered no definitive answers, to begin to understand what it has meant to be a secular Jew throughout history and what it means to be a secular Jew today. The course was met with rave reviews from the students who enrolled and will be offered again in the coming years.

Jonathan Steinberg, the Walter H. Annenberg Professor of Modern European History, arrived at Penn in 2000 after teaching for more than 30 years at Cambridge University.

Steinberg's teaching covers modern Europe since 1789, specializing in the German and Austrian Empires, Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy and modern Jewish history.

Marion Kant is presently employed at the University of Pennsylvania in the Theatre Department. She earned her Ph.D. in musicology at Humboldt University in Berlin. Her main research and subsequent publications focus on the rise of Nazi ideology, problems of exile, and music and dance history in the 19th and 20th centuries. Together with musicians Marshall Taylor and Samuel Hsu she has organized and presented a series of concerts commemorating *Entartete Musik*, music forbidden by the Nazis.

Kedma: I'd like to start by defining our terms. Can you define secular Judaism? What does it mean to be a Jew without an affiliation to a religious institution?

JS: The course started out without a formal definition of secular Judaism; that was part of the charm, to see what people thought secular Judaism was. We found that there was a huge amount of confusion in the Jewish community about what secular might mean. The great majority of people think that if you go to synagogue and you're not sure if you believe in God, then you're secular. We don't think so. We think that secular really does mean that one does not take part in religious ceremonies. A secular Jew is probably either agnostic or atheistic, but one nevertheless maintains that one has a Jewish identity. So, traditionally for example, Jewish communists, socialists, Yiddish nationalists—none of whom had anything to do with the religion—nevertheless called themselves Jews.

MK: But there is of course a contradiction in terms. How can you call yourself a Jew if being Jewish

is fundamentally defined through religious affiliation? And how can you call yourself secular at the same time? And that's the problem we tried to look at. If you look at definitions in encyclopedias you also find that there is a very wide range of answers. The very short answer is that secular is the opposite of religious. But when we looked at our ideal types, that is, the figures we studied in the course, we found that many of them modified that relationship between religious and secular. Our working structure throughout the course was that we were looking at religion and non-religion as a constantly changing relationship.

Kedma: But if you divorce secular Judaism from any kind of religious practice within Judaism, what really is secular Judaism? Can it be called a culture?

JS: I think it's a negative more than anything else. It's like a friend of ours who calls himself a Catholic atheist, which is not a contradiction in terms. What it means is that your formation, your mentality, your heritage, your

fate, as it were, is tied up with the Jewish people but you don't believe in any of the things that Jews insist are important to the Jewish religion and you don't practice. It seems to me, in that sense, one is a secular Jew.

MK: Yes, and the question then becomes, are there other characteristics that make a Jew? Is it only religion? Can it be history? Is it a shared history that, say, has to do with the Holocaust?

Kedma: But if you are going to say "I'm an atheist, I reject Judaism in terms of its religious teachings," why not just rid yourself of the whole identity? Why still use these terms of being Jewish? What value would it have to you?

JS: That's a very good question. And I think the answer is that there is a common history and common heritage which one cannot escape. And there's the fact that, as far as anti-Semites are concerned, they're not very interested whether you go to synagogue or not. As the Nazis taught us, you are a Jew because other people think of you as a Jew. Before 1933 it was possible for very, very large numbers of assimilated

Jews to say they were no longer Jewish and that they had become Lutherans or Catholics or whatever else they chose. This was true not just in Europe, it was also very true in America. There was a wide range of assimilated Jews who basically said we're no longer Jewish.

Kedma: Was the formation of the State of Israel in 1948 a mistake?

JS: [Laughs] I don't think so, because all my life I've been a Zionist. No, I don't think it was a mistake. Where were the displaced persons and all these other people to go? Jews need Israel. I don't know if Marion agrees with that as much as I do. But I think Jews need Israel. I think we are a very peculiar people. And we are a peculiar people for a whole variety of reasons which I think need to be thought about and very rarely are. I have a list of six of them, six characteristics which really separate Jews from other nationalities or ethnicities. They're shared with other groups, but only the Jews have all six. One of them is that we are the people of the Old Testament. Unlike Lithuanians, or Latvians, or Slovaks, we're tied up with the whole Christian

eschatology; we can't escape that. The Old Testament is the pre-condition to the New Testament. If there were no Old Testament there wouldn't be a new one, and therefore, the Jews are a problem for the Christians. We're also a problem for Muslims. So, we can't get away from the fact that we're not like other nationalities. No other nationality is the people of the Old Testament.

Kedma: What are some of the other characteristics which define Jews?

JS: Another characteristic is the covenant—and this is really interesting, because in my view the covenant is absolutely fundamental to religious Judaism, and attempts by Reconstructionism to wipe it out of the siddur are crazy.

MK: But it poses a problem for Western democracy because it contradicts some of the basic tenets of democratic equality, egalitarianism, equal opportunity, fairness etc.

JS: Totally. I mean, if God did not choose the Jews, what are we doing here? We went to a reform service not so long ago and I was actually much

amused to see “*asher bachar banu mi'kol ha'amim*” (English translation: “Who selected us from all the nations”) appeared in every conceivable kind of prayer. They've cut out a lot of the other prayers in reform services, but the one thing which is really there is the election. Now people don't think about it—the consequences of the idea of election—but it seems fundamental to me. That's what the whole Halakhah is based on. The 613 mitzvot are all based on the idea that God chose the Jews.

Kedma: There was a 2003 Harris poll in which 16% of self-identified Jews said they went to synagogue on some kind of regular basis—in other words 84% said they didn't. Also, 94% of Protestants and 79% of Catholics said they believed in God, but only 48% of Jews claimed to. How do you react to these findings?

JS: I think there's a reason for that. If the people have been chosen, it's actually not a question of whether you personally believe in the election or not. The whole people has been chosen, and that collectivity is uniquely Jewish.

The whole people has been chosen to go to the gas chambers too. I've done a lot of research on Nazi documents and they are full of references to the chosen people. Ironic. But they were conscious that they were exterminating not just Russians, or Ukrainians, or Latvians, or all the other kinds of people they exterminated, but they were exterminating the people of God. And even bureaucrats like Eichmann would use these terms. So faith for the individual Jew is probably less a necessary part of identity. If you think about American rabbis, how many of them actually preach or talk about the nature of God or theology? Theology is not a big Jewish subject, is it?

MK: But we also discussed in the course the practice in the United States that emerged with Kaplan's theology, which is community-based. Kaplan strengthened this identity within a community which did not need to believe anything, without a theological basis; it becomes what he described as a kind of sociological structure in which you operate, and that communal identity, in turn, becomes your personal identity. It was

a stroke of genius, in my opinion, for Kaplan to have recognized and put into practice that idea of a Durkheimian rule-and-ritual-based religion.

Kedma: There seems to have been a move to the right in terms of religious practice within Judaism in the last three or four decades. Why would you say this has been the case?

MK: You call it a "move to the right." I'm a bit reluctant to use the label. It's certainly a move towards extreme external structures super-imposed on people who accept them.

And it is interesting, that in our time such an attitude should become so desirable and fascinating for people, that, in fact, there should form substantial movements around these fundamentalist attitudes.

JS: But I don't think that's surprising. One of the features that most strikes me about contemporary life is its fundamental vacuousness, the consumption of goods, the consumption of the schlock that passes for public entertainment, the absence of meaning in most things. This is something we have talked about: the

need for meaning.

MK: That's true, but it's puzzling to me that modern people would want to accept proscribed views instead of exploring. The desire to submit one's self to extremely rigorous prohibitions puzzles me on one level.

JS: But I think what Orthodoxy offers people is a sanctification of daily life. That is its great charm. Every action during the course of the day from rising up and going to bed is sanctified and filled with meaning.

MK: Well, I would contradict you on that. It is sanctified and it gives an external structure, but meaning? It does not give meaning, or only a very superficial, shallow meaning which could be dismantled at any time. Many of the religious or quasi-religious practices and services I have observed are extremely shallow and empty—they have to be because if they were not they would make a life that is just as empty and characterized by functioning in a greedy and selfish society impossible. Religion provides the veneer of justice and justification. Life and religion complement each other.

JS: No, I profoundly disagree with you.

MK: Well, we have our disagreements.

JS: Well, that's because you haven't experienced it and I have.

MK: I don't believe in experience as the most important ingredient of life. You know that. I believe that reasoning, thinking and understanding are just as vital as experiencing.

JS: I think that's what Orthodoxy actually does, through the fulfilling of commandments, sanctifies all the acts of daily life. It's like being in a monastery; it's like becoming a monk. It turns the whole of the Jewish community into God's servant by carrying out the law in the most menial things.

MK: Well, that is the theory but then I wonder why Americans in particular are so quick to change religions, to go from one to another. Because, they function on that shallow level: experience is enough and they can exchange any one experience for any other. If one experience does not provide the quick fixes that are needed to avoid solving problems

then—swiftly—people move to the next promise, i.e. religious promise. The more orthodox the better, the less you have to think for yourself.

JS: I agree with that, but I think that when people join the Orthodox community or for that matter become members of the Assemblies of the Church of God, they are giving up that purely experiential aspect. There is a lot of that, and there has been a huge growth in religious practice.

MK: And of course the largest growth is with the evangelical branches of Protestantism.

JS: But then of course those are very experiential and you have to experience Christ in your life.

MK: On the other hand, one finds religions that make the process of defining identity only possible within tightly set structural boundaries of traditional service practices. In most branches of fundamentalist churches, on the other hand, you define yourself through the experience and not the structures—because there anything counts. That's great, isn't it? [Laughs]

Kedma: Are you concerned at all about the survival of secular Judaism? What I mean is that, due to intermarriage and just a general disaffection from Judaism, there has to be some kind of inevitable generational weakening within secular Judaism.

JS: That's true, except that I don't know what the figures are, but anecdotally I'm surprised at how many of these mixed marriages result in the non-Jewish spouse becoming in some sense Jewish. Jewish identity is a very strong identity. Being Jewish is a strong identity in a day and age when identity is what people seek.

MK: What will be interesting—and we can't say yet what's going to happen—is whether what happened before World War II and the Holocaust will happen again, whether religious practices will become cultural practices devoid of their merely religious content. Christmas in European countries is a state holiday. Of course, it is fundamentally Christian, but it's more than that. Perhaps, and I'm just speculating, Passover could become such a merely cultural practice as well.

Kedma: Do you think Passover already is for many Jews?

MK: Probably, I could imagine some fundamentally religious practices becoming wider cultural practices and losing at least some of their strictly religious connotations.

JS: We haven't answered your question. Do I care about the survival of the Jewish people? I don't quite know whether caring is the right word. I'm responsible for thinking. I don't think I'm responsible for the survival of the Jewish people, to which I have two answers: if it is God's plan, the Jewish people survive because God wants them to and if it isn't God's plan and there is no election, then Jews survive because they want to. And it seems to me, on the whole, that Jews do want to survive. That's one of the bizarre things about secular Judaism - that even those who don't practice and don't associate themselves with Jewish organizations will, on the whole, answer questions like the Harris poll by identifying themselves as Jewish.

Kedma: Last question: I wasn't intending on asking this question,

but our discussion has taken us here and it's what I'm really wondering. Is secular Judaism intrinsically valuable or is it more of a structural, historical fact?

MK: What do you mean by valuable?

Kedma: We have been talking about how someone who wants to be a secular Jew doesn't really have a choice in that non-Jews will define him as a Jew regardless. By definition then, when a Jew rejects the religion, he or she automatically becomes a secular Jew rather than simply an atheist. Is that valuable or would it be preferable to have a system in which when someone rejects Judaism, he can just say "I am not Jewish anymore" if he chooses to? Right now, that doesn't seem like an option.

JS: One part of me says that people should have the choice. Another part of me says that there isn't really a choice. I suppose the choice only exists now if you can cover up the tracks—if you change your name and disassociate yourself, pass for a white man. We've discovered, for example, that that's what people like Madeline Albright did

all her life. Or that awful senator from Virginia, George Allen, who it turns out is halakhically Jewish. My god, so much for the idea that Jews are smart.

So the question is, is free personal choice fathomable? Should people be characterized by others? I think the answer to that must be no.

MK: Yes, but may I just point out that if you have a society with people who only care about defining themselves through themselves you end up with a highly narcissistic, disconnected, disengaged society. Self-identification is not enough. I think you always need the awareness of the historical, sociological context of who you are, where you are and how you have become what you are. You cannot only look at yourself through your own feelings.

JS: So how would you answer the question? Is there value in maintaining the secular Jew?

MK: I don't think I can answer the question that way.

Kedma: Are you saying it is simply a fact of life that must be dealt with and understood?

MK: Yes, and perhaps the better it's understood the better and more tolerantly we can live with it.

Adam Goodman is a sophomore in the College majoring in International Relations and Jewish Studies.