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## Spiritual Care of American "Jews of No Religion"

*Editor's Note: This is part 3 of a 3-part series.*

### Abstract

Culturally appropriate spiritual care of Jews who are not religious shares some characteristics with spiritual care of other nonreligious Americans, and differs significantly in other ways, due to Judaism's uniqueness as a tradition. Mapping a Jewish patient's location in the wide expanse of belief, behaviors that are based in Jewish values or ritual, and sense of belonging, is essential to providing appropriate spiritual care. Chaplains' awareness should include "Jews of No Religion" as a significant identifier within American Jewish pluralism. In addition, a chaplain needs spiritual assessment models sufficiently inclusive to guide their work with this subset of Jews, and a culturally appropriate toolkit of spiritual care interventions. Because professional chaplains are usually religiously socialized and seminary or rabbinical school trained, the spiritual care of "Jews of No Religion" requires intentional empathy and cultural humility. Given the historical abuses of Jews by Christians, professional chaplains affiliated with Christian denominations often face the additional challenge of establishing their credibility as trustworthy caregivers willing to support Jews on the patients' own terms.

**Keywords:** spiritual care, Jews of No Religion, Jews By Religion, secular Jews, chaplains

In 2007, the Pew Research Institute began a landmark study of the American religious landscape (Pew, 2007). By 2014, 22.8 percent of Americans surveyed by Pew were religiously unaffiliated, up from 16.1 percent seven years earlier (Pew, 2014). The unaffiliated were the fastest growing "religious" group in the U.S. Fifty-six million strong, they are now more numerous in America than either Catholics or mainline Protestants (Pew, 2014).

Still, there are very few resources tailored to the spiritual assessment and spiritual care of the nonreligious, and to the best of our knowledge, no published research about best practices when serving these individuals. Meanwhile, chaplains can expect to have significant and growing numbers of the nonreligious in their care.

This is the final of three articles. In the [first](#), we described this growing demographic and offered some ideas to guide chaplains in providing spiritual care to the nonreligious (Robinson, M. and Thiel, M., 2015a). In the [second](#), our focus was on teaching chaplains and chaplain interns to care for this group (Robinson, M. and Thiel, M., 2015b). This third article, with the additional authorship of Rabbi Chaplain Sara Paasche-Orlow, focuses on these themes as they pertain to serving a particular population,

contemporary American Jews. “Jews of No Religion” (JNR’s) have significantly different spiritual care needs than do the unaffiliated with Christian roots.

## Methods

Diverse resources inform this paper. The 2007 Pew study of “The American Religious Landscape,” and the 2013 drill-down into that data resulting in “A Portrait of Jewish Americans” were primary touchstones. We then reviewed responses to these studies by leading figures in American Judaism (Weiss, 2013; Edelman, 2013; Shapiro, 2013; Green, 2013a and 2013b; Price, 2013; Hirsh, 2013; Felsen, 2014; Wertheimer and Cohen, 2014). We also looked at slightly older data about American Jews gathered by the Jewish community itself and discussed in David Gordis and Zachary Heller’s 2012 book *Jewish Secularity: The Search for Roots and the Challenges of Relevant Meaning*. In addition, we talked with local Jewish chaplains who work primarily with Jewish patients and families to see if their experience was congruent with the national data.

Revs. Thiel and Robinson gathered much of the data for this article, and Rabbi Sara Paasche-Orlow, collaborated on the Discussion section.

## Results

The growing American trend of nonreligious identity, discussed in more detail in our first article, is indeed reflected within the Jewish community. In the American population as a whole, those of No Religion represent just over 14 percent (Pew, 2007). In contrast, almost 28 percent of American Jews say they have No Religion, double the rate of Americans as a whole (Pew, 2013).

Unlike nonreligious Americans at large, who sometimes self-identify as “Spiritual But Not Religious” (SBNR) (Pew, 2007), members of the Jewish community rarely uses the term “spiritual” in describing their identity. Pew’s “A Portrait of Jewish Americans” broadly categorizes Jews based on their self-descriptions, as either Jewish By Religion (JBR) or Jews of No Religion (JNR) (Pew, 2013). Pew does not use the word “spiritual” in describing its categories of Jews.

In contrast to the beliefs of the general American public, belief in God is less common among Jews. JBR’s believe in God less frequently than members of other major religious groups in the U.S. (Pew, 2013). JNR’s, in turn, are more skeptical of God’s existence than the religiously unaffiliated general American public (Pew, 2013).

The JBR self-identification within the Jewish community has decreased by generation, according to the Pew data (2013). Over 90 percent of Jews in the so-called “Greatest” generation (born 1914-1927) describe themselves as JBR. For the Silent Generation (born 1928-1945), the percentage of JBR’s drops to 86 percent. Continuing the decline, 81 percent of the so-called “Boomers” (born 1946-1964) considered themselves JBR’s, 74 percent of the Gen Xer’s (born 1965-1980), and 68 percent of the “Millennial” generation (born after 1980). Drawing on earlier studies done from within the Jewish community, Barry A. Kosmin reported that the numbers of JNR’s tripled between 1990 and 2001 (2012).

At the same time, the 2013 Pew study indicated that 75 percent of American Jews have a high sense of belonging to the Jewish people, and 94% report being proud to be Jewish. What then does being Jewish mean to an American Jew? For 62 percent, being Jewish is a function of ancestry and culture, and only 15 percent say it is a matter of religion. Only 19 percent tie their Jewish identity to observing *Halakha* (rabbinic law), and only 28 percent to being a participant in a Jewish group. Fully two-thirds of those surveyed (68 percent) believe it is not necessary to believe in God to be Jewish. So, while the sense of

belonging to an ancestry and culture is central to overall American Jewish identity, legal observance and belief in God are not nearly as prominent.

There is no simple, predictable pattern to differentiate JBR's from JNR's. Some 20 percent of JBR's do not believe in God, while 45 percent of JNR's do believe in God, and are, in fact, ritually observant (Pew, 2013). As Leonard Fein and Steven M. Cohen point out, "The self-ascribed definitions as religious, cultural and secular blend into one another.... In fact, about 40 percent of all American Jews call themselves both at least somewhat religious and at least somewhat cultural" (2015). A minority of Jews are religiously observant (with a wide range of observance), and the majority are not (Pew, 2013). Yet within all this variety, nearly all Jews in America have a strong sense of belonging to the Jewish people (Pew, 2013).

Of Jews 65 and older, more than half say that caring about Israel is essential to being Jewish, a higher rate than do younger Jews. Similarly, older Jews have a higher sense of the importance of remembering the Holocaust and working for justice than do younger Jews (Pew, 2013).

Because 58 percent of Jews who have married since 2005 have chosen non-Jewish spouses (Pew, 2013), the Jewish community increasingly includes religiously blended families, which makes religious identity even more complex.

Thus, the umbrella of "being Jewish" is very diverse indeed, sheltering those who are connected by culture, ancestry, religion, Jewish values, marriage, commitment to Israel, or any combination thereof.

## Discussion

### History of Secularism as a Feature of Jewish Life

A strand of secularism within mainstream Judaism is nothing new. The Hebrew Bible itself contains ancient elements. The book of Esther, as a simple example, makes no mention of God, and yet is included in the Jewish biblical canon. In addition, the biblical concept "*lo b'shamayim hee*" – "it is not in heaven" (Deuteronomy 30:12) – means that the Torah is here on earth – in people's minds and hearts -- and must be interpreted by people, not God, in an on-going and ever relevant way. Indeed, there is no requirement in Jewish religious life to declare one's faith. Thus, secularism – including freedom of thought, respect for the interplay between text and the contemporary world, and a focus on *people's* decisions and actions in this world -- is a foundational strand of Judaism.

Secularism also came into Judaism from exposure to surrounding cultures. Jews have lived among many peoples and in locations at the confluence of many cultures. Not surprisingly, Jewish cultures were influenced by the thoughts and practices of other cultures. This cultural syncretism has enabled Judaism to adapt and survive for thousands of years, often adding vibrancy and diversity to the tradition (Goldfinger, 2012).

The specific idea that God no longer intervenes actively in our world has a long history in Judaism, and has contributed its own secular voice to the tradition. Some prominent examples include the 12<sup>th</sup> century writings of Maimonides who in his book *Guide to the Perplexed* sought to engage secular Jews and bring them back to religious Judaism, showing a way for atheist Jews to participate in Jewish religious life. While Spinoza was excommunicated for his secular views in 1656, a secular perspective was becoming an influential movement within Jewish communities at the time (Schwartz, 2015). Jews played a significant role in the spread of enlightenment values in Europe, although certainly there were many people who embraced science and philosophy without rejecting religion. The *Haskalah* (Jewish Enlightenment) propagated secularism to the point that it became a recognizable feature of Jewish

public life, and served as the basis of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Society for the Culture and Science of the Jews. Later that century and early in the 20<sup>th</sup>, Ahad Ha'am -- founder of secular Zionism -- contributed significantly to the growth of a powerful secular stream within Judaism, as did the Jewish socialist Bund in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Poland (Mendes, 2013).

Once emigration brought thousands of Russian Jews escaping pogroms to the U.S., organizations such as the Workmen's Circle, promoting socialism, worker's rights, and Jewish values, became a feature of secular Jewish identity and culture in the new country. Some Jewish immigrants on New York's lower East Side created communist and socialist groups, and became leaders and active members of local trade unions as ways to better terrible living and work conditions for working class people. The Jewish theater at this time, the growth of Yiddish literature, and the emergence of leaders in science, medicine, and the humanities reflect the vitality and richness of secular Jewish culture. Between the two world wars the writing and leadership of Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan expanded concepts of religious thought, with his theology of God as "the highest values and aspirations of the Jewish People and our tradition" (Green, 2013a).

Then the Holocaust. Two thirds of the nine million Jews of Europe and Russia were murdered. For many, God died as well. The theology of a personal God who intervened in history with a special concern for Jews as God's chosen people was shaken if not shattered. American Jewish philosophers including Richard Rubenstein and Emil Fackenheim took on the challenge of the death of God. Jewish Federations, caring for Jews of all backgrounds and beliefs, became the central organizing feature of Jewish life in urban America, and are not based on religious faith but rather on communal belonging. Retaining God language, but shifting the focus from divine action to human experience, Martin Buber wrote in 1956, "Man cannot approach the divine by reaching beyond the human; he can approach Him through becoming human; to become human is what he, this individual man, has been created for."

Thus, Jewish humanism, agnosticism, and atheism are long standing secular *and also religious* components of contemporary American Judaism, resulting in the mixing of categories observed in the current data. In addition to JNR's populating a range of Jewish communal organizations, the Society for Humanistic Judaism ordains rabbis and publishes atheistic liturgies for life cycle events (Wine, 2003) and daily prayer (Kopitz, 1999). Many American cities have thriving Jewish Community Centers, and some also have a Workmen's Circle community, sometimes with a Yiddish chorus and a non-theistic Sunday School for children. All denominations of Judaism, including Orthodoxy, now have some atheist members (Pew, 2013). Yet even when God language might be problematic philosophically, some atheistic and agnostic Jews find theistic prayers and rituals meaningful, and many celebrate Jewish holidays and life cycle events (Springer, 2013).

Several newer historical strands of Jewish secularism have been added to the American mix as well. From the late 1980's on, Jews from the Former Soviet Union (FSU) have brought with them their own version of Jewish secularity, most of these immigrants not having had any opportunity for Jewish education or practice in the Former Soviet Union. The 1980's, and especially 1990's, also saw a significant immigration of secular Israeli Jews to the US. Our own city of Boston has a thriving secular Israeli/American culture.

### **Belonging as More Defining than Behavior or Belief**

Mordecai Kaplan's model of belief, behavior, and belonging (Kaplan, n.d.), discussed earlier in this series, ranks belonging as the most defining factor of American Jewry, followed by behavior (Jewish ritual or actions inspired by Jewish values or ethics), and belief as the least salient. Jewish history has made this quite understandable, and borne this out in the American context.

## Continuing Impact of Religious Trauma

Rabbi Shimon Schwab, a post-Holocaust Orthodox leader, wrote, “The lack of faith and observance due to the “total eclipse of Divine Providence” during the Holocaust [is] not to be considered a willful choice,” but rather, “a consequence of religious trauma...” (1988). Schwab considered the despairing and nihilistic members of his Orthodox flock as *tinok shenishbah* (Jewish children captured and raised by Gentiles, and who, thereby, were not responsible for their lack of Jewish knowledge and observance). Here, the Orthodox tradition honors the dimension of belonging even for those whose life circumstances have made it impossible to be Jewish by belief or behavior.

In the particular setting of Hebrew SeniorLife, for example, some residents are survivors of the Holocaust or lived through the Siege of Leningrad. A skillful chaplain might offer to listen to any potential experience of God’s absence, or God’s presence, throughout their life that they might like to explore. Many do not wish to share the detailed stories of their suffering, and this preference must be respected by chaplains so as to avoid retraumatization.

Severe religious trauma can, and often does, impact succeeding generations in a family. The goal-making decision between aggressive and palliative care in the context of life-limiting or serious illness is often complex for a family whose history includes Holocaust losses, pogroms, or other such traumatic suffering. The historical and cultural value of survival at all costs may result in choices for aggressive care in an elder, even when the likelihood of survival or therapeutic medical benefit is low.

This phenomenon is also encountered in the pediatric setting. The critical theme of a family’s trauma history, even if the original assaults came from two generations earlier, may impact that family’s choice for aggressive rather than palliative care for a dying child. If the chaplain learns this history in the course of routine assessment, and then interprets its impact to the medical team, tension can usually be resolved, or at least reduced, between the family and the medical team. This improves everyone’s experience of the child’s dying and death.

The history of Christian anti-Semitism, and the current impact of evangelical Christianity on Jews, are often active dynamics for Jewish patients, more so than for Christian chaplains. Many Jews, whether religious or not, may have difficulty welcoming chaplains affiliated with Christian denominations, and may be unable to see Christians as trustworthy caregivers willing to support them on the patients’ own terms. If a therapeutic alliance cannot be established with a non-Jewish chaplain, it is entirely appropriate to ask if the patient and family would prefer to work with a Jewish chaplain. Chaplaincy departments must take hospital demographics into account when they hire chaplains, so that religiously and culturally appropriate referrals can be made in service to patients and families.

## The Importance of Narrative

Hospitality to a patient’s narrative is critically important in spiritual assessment of all populations, but particularly so for the Jewish patient. Surprises often arise when a narrative approach is used skillfully and patiently. Elderly residents from the FSU – some of whom were literally schooled in atheism, and for whom religious observance was illegal – have occasionally asked their Jewish chaplain to lead groups about classical Russian poetry – an example of secular spiritual care. Some, in contrast, ask the chaplain for religious spiritual care: to hold classes about religious Judaism, and to lead religious services for them in Russian (for which we provide *Siddurim* (prayer books) in Russian).

Women who did not have gender access or time for Jewish learning earlier in their lives and who may never have thought of themselves as religious, frequently study in the rabbi’s Torah class. Still secular in worldview, they delight in text study – not so much to find religious answers as to explore the profound

questions the texts raise (see also Bennison, 2013). Some women's narratives move them towards greater ritual observance, joyfully becoming *B'nai Mitzvah* in their eighties and nineties. Occasionally some men reclaim their religious upbringing, celebrating their second *Bar Mitzvah* at the traditional age of 83. Flexibility is essential in spiritual care, in order to meet such diverse spiritual needs.

### **To Pray or Not to Pray**

“Prayer can often be healing quite apart from any theory of how god works in the world” (Springer, 2013; “god” not capitalized in original). Many Jewish patients and family members discover the value of prayer in the midst of dire circumstances. A chaplain at the bedside of a dying Jew who has lived a secular life might ask gently and with curiosity, “Would you like me to offer a prayer for you?” The response may be “Yes” more frequently than some chaplains expect. The sense of coming home to Jewish ritual – even if they cannot understand the Hebrew -- can bring comfort in deep ways, since, as we have seen, the secular and religious are often not distinct columns in the Jewish heart (Fein and Cohen, 2013). The chaplain may include both Hebrew and English in the prayer, responding to the yearning for meaning that is both ancestral and contemporary.

Oliver Sacks provided a beautiful example of how the JBR and JNR categories can, at times, intertwine. Dying of cancer, Sacks – a self-described “old Jewish atheist” (Ivry, 2015) – reached back to language of Jewish belonging and behavior to discuss his beliefs about dying:

“And now, weak, short of breath, my once-firm muscles melted away by cancer, I find my thoughts, increasingly, not on the supernatural or spiritual, but on what is meant by living a good and worthwhile life – achieving a sense of peace within oneself. I find my thoughts drifting to the Sabbath, the day of rest, the seventh day of the week, and perhaps the seventh day of one's life as well, when one can feel that one's work is done, and one may, in good conscience, rest” (Sacks, 2015).

Sacks' language of ultimate meaning came from his Jewish tradition. He was both and neither JBR and JNR.

### **Some Cautions for Chaplaincy as a Discipline**

Chaplaincy today is increasingly focused “on the spiritual nature of all people, those within and those outside of faith groups” (Driedger, 2009). As we have seen, “spiritual” is not a word widely used across the American Jewish spectrum, and may indeed put some Jewish patients off from accepting a chaplain's invitation to support them. “Religious” as a word may be similarly fraught for some American Jews hearing it from a chaplain entering their hospital room, as, in their minds, it may evoke expectations of being an observant, or Orthodox Jew, which most are not. In fact, even a Jewish chaplain, if they are a rabbi, may need to overcome the patient's assumption that the rabbi will be judgmental of their level of observance. Knowing how to explain our chaplaincy role and what we can offer, using inclusive secular language congruent with Jewish culture, is essential to spiritual care with American Jews (Springer, 2013). The first article in this series offers an abundance of secular ways a chaplain may help a patient identify and draw on their own strengths in times of crisis (Thiel and Robinson, 2015a).

The increasing number of intermarriages between Jews and non-Jews also presents its own challenges for chaplains. Intermarriage has traditionally been discouraged by Jewish tradition as a risk to the community's long-term survival, but is now a growing phenomenon in the U.S. A chaplain of a patient listed as Jewish on the hospital census should not assume that all members of the family or kinship network are Jewish. Interreligious secular parenthood becomes a particular challenge in the pediatric setting when a child is critically ill. Each parent, and sometimes both sets of grandparents, may wish to provide their own religion of origin's rituals for the child's well-being. The typical rituals to welcome a

Christian or Jewish baby, however, confer religious identity on the child, and it may be premature or inappropriate for a young blended couple to have to choose amidst crisis the tradition in which they want to raise their child. In a situation like this, the Jewish and non-Jewish chaplains may wish to collaborate in supporting the family. They may offer to create a blessing for the child which includes values shared by both traditions: love, care, and concern for the child's well-being. Boston Children's Hospital has a template for such liturgy available to chaplains for emergency use.

When we have taught our Spiritual But Not Religious materials (Robinson and Thiel, 2015b), we have found that chaplains who primarily care for Jews agree that working with patients with no belief in God is a common experience, unthreatening to them as religious professionals or as persons. Chaplains who work primarily with Christian patients find caring for patients with no belief in God a less common experience, and more challenging professionally and personally. Christian chaplains, who tend to think of belief as *the* primary indicator of religiousness, will do well to become familiar with the overarching importance of belonging, rather than belief, in the Jewish community.

### **Geography Matters**

We live in Boston, the third least religious city in America. A full third of Boston's residents report having no religion (Lipka, 2015). At the same time, Boston ranks as the second largest city in America in terms of the portion of its population that is Jewish (slightly less than 6%), according to the Public Religion Research Institute (Berger, 2015). One of Boston's prestigious teaching hospitals has a certified chaplain endorsed by The Ethical Culture Society ("a religion centered on ethics, not theology"), with roots in secular Judaism (New York Society for Ethical Culture, 2015). Even Harvard University, founded by Puritans specifically to educate clergy, has a Jewish humanist rabbi amongst its chaplains (Humanist Chaplaincies, 2015). The spiritual assessment models used in the Boston hospitals we represent are created to be equally appropriate to religious and nonreligious persons and to reflect a commitment to spiritual care of all persons. We know that Boston's demographics and openness to the nonreligious are not shared equally across the country. It is important for all chaplains to understand deeply the unique cultural contexts in which they serve, and to contextualize their spiritual care accordingly.

In conclusion, chaplains providing spiritual care to American Jews need to be conversant with

- The multiple expressions of Jewish belonging,
- Secular Judaism,
- The multigenerational impact of historical trauma on medical decision-making,
- The occasional presence of atheism in the context of Jewish religious observance, and
- The occasional desire of secular Jews for religious care.

### **Conversation**

We invite chaplains and chaplain educators, Jewish and of other traditions, to engage in conversation with us about this topic. *Correspondence related to this article should be addressed to Rev. Mary Martha Thiel, Spiritual Care Department, Hebrew SeniorLife, 1200 Centre Street, Boston, Massachusetts, 02131. Email: [marymarthathiel@hsl.harvard.edu](mailto:marymarthathiel@hsl.harvard.edu)*



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disciplines, and expanding religious and cultural competency in spiritual care. Mary Martha has been a certified chaplain and CPE Supervisor for over 20 years, and is the author of many articles. She wishes to acknowledge grant support from the Louisville Institute.



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