

Change and our Jewish World

Rabbi Amy Small

Raise your hand if you have purchased anything online in the past 3 months.

Keep your hands raised if you have purchased anything on Amazon this year. How about this month? How about this week? Amazon has changed our world, both shaping and reflecting a societal trend toward *personalization and individual choice*.

Among the many individual choices we make in our daily lives, the way we shop is shifting.

How many of you have intentionally gone out of your way to make a purchase at a local store when you could have ordered online? Why did you make that choice? How did you choose where to shop?

In a counter-trend response to Amazon and internet shopping, some of us are reordering our choices embracing the value of support for community by shopping locally.

It seems almost silly to state the obvious: we are living through a time of dramatic, rapid change and -- Change is hard!

This is a time to reflect on *change* and examine ourselves, our families and our community:

Who are we? Where are we going? Who knows?

What we *do* know is that disruptive changes are impacting more than our consumer choices. This is affecting our daily choices, our life choices and who we are.

What then, are the *constants*?

What are our core values? Have our values changed or shifted in emphasis along with these cultural changes?

Let's examine *Amazon* and the consumer revolution to mine it for insights into these questions.

A recent NY Times¹ column illuminated changes in the marketplace, "Malls are being hollowed out. Shops are closing by the thousands. Retailers are going bankrupt. But it may be too early to declare the death of retail."

In fact, it turns out that "Americans have started shopping more — in stores." In fact, some old-school retailers are experiencing some of their best sales growth in years...The boom also reflects a broad reordering, with fewer retailers capturing more of the gains. Stores that have learned how to match

¹ Michael Corkery, "*Hard Lessons (Thanks, Amazon) Breathe New Life Into Retail Stores*," New York Times, September 3, 2018

the ease and instant gratification of e-commerce shopping are flourishing, while those that have failed to evolve are in bankruptcy or on the brink.”

Jeff Bezos of Amazon understood that most people want to spend less time shopping, not more. He pioneered the idea of one-click shopping. “The retailers that get it recognize that Amazon has forever changed consumer behavior.² Many successful stores are now a cross between a fast-food drive-through and a hotel concierge.”

So, what does this have to do with today’s spiritual questions: Who are we? Where are we going? What are our core values and what has changed?

In many ways, our interests and choices and in some ways, even our *values* are shifting. Jewish life is dramatically different from what it was just a short time ago - 10 years ago, 20 years ago, 50 years ago and a century ago. These changes can be challenging and confusing. *Who are we and where are we going?*

What can we learn from the Amazon effect to understand the roles and functions of Jewish communities and what it means for our spiritual lives?

In retail, some observers had predicted that online shopping would eventually render brick and mortar stores obsolete. But, unlike the scores of stores forced to close, *Target* is an example of a retailer that has survived by redesigning their business. Pursuing young urbanites, they are opening about 30 *smaller* stores in cities and near college campuses. New stores aim to be “all things to all shoppers — an “omni-channel” experience.” In a nod to personalization and individualism, *individuals are uniquely served.*

And what of synagogues?

Jane Eisner, editor of the newspaper *The Forward*, recently wrote about dramatic shifts in Jewish life in a provocatively titled column, “*So--Called ‘Jews Of No Religion’ Are the Impetus for A Jewish Revolution.*” Recalling the Pew Center’s *Portrait of Jewish Americans*, published five years ago, she opined³ that “The real dismaying headline...was that young Jews were increasingly saying that they have no religion at all — despite identifying themselves as Jews — often proudly.” These younger “Jews of no religion” are reshaping what it means to be Jewish in our world. They are more likely to intermarry, less likely to raise Jewish children, to give to Jewish charities, to belong to Jewish organizations, to connect with the organized Jewish community or to care about Israel.

² Barbara Kahn, a marketing professor and former director of the retailing center at the Wharton School.

³ Jane Eisner, “So-Called ‘Jews Of No Religion’ Are The Impetus For A Jewish Revolution,” *The Forward*, September 3, 2018

In fact, it isn't just a *Jewish trend*. In the national religious landscape, 22.8% of Americans now say they are religiously unaffiliated.

With all this, what is it that makes these young Jews, *Jewish*? The Pew survey found that 94% of the respondents were very or somewhat *proud* of being Jewish. But what exactly are they proud of?

While this portrait of Jewish life is concerning to some, Jane Eisner is one Jewish leader who is feeling optimistic. I agree with her assertion that “we are not witnessing the twilight of modern American Judaism, but rather its transformation.” It may even be the case that the Jewish community is uniquely positioned to lead a trend of reconnection with “a culture and faith tradition without actually being bound to its past definitions of belonging.”

Some of self-defined “*Jews of No Religion*” identify culturally or ethnically, some are secular, while others say they believe in God, or even belong to a synagogue. All are Jews.

This gets us to the point: We Jews have an adaptive power that has given us strength and resiliency for centuries. That is because we identify both as a religion and a people, a faith and a tribe. With few exceptions, our core beliefs have not necessarily been a required marker of attachment. With a few notable exceptions {like Rambam's 13 principles of faith, sung as *Yigdal* on holidays, and that we recite Sh'ma thrice daily, and before we die} we don't have a litmus tests for belief. As Jews, we are judged by what we *do*. Many of us are spiritual seekers—with varying definitions of God, like the sages of our tradition who debated these very issues. In fact, many who identify as “*Jews by religion*” define their Jewishness by traditions, family ties and Jewish ethical and moral values.

Jews who disconnect from Jewish community rarely convert to another faith, they just become “*Jewish*.”

Many leaders of Jewish organizations and synagogues are worried about the impact of these changes on Jewish affiliation and commitments. Legacy organizations of the Jewish world are threatened by declining participation and dollars. They wonder: “Who will take care of our poor and needy? Who will support our schools and synagogues, our museums and community centers? Who will keep alive our rituals and traditions other than an Orthodox segment that often defines Judaism in narrow, rigid and anti-feminist terms? Who will support Israel?”⁴

Should we be concerned about the long-term implications for Jewish life? How will we preserve opportunities for each of us to “find personal meaning and communal attachment in an increasingly lonely and atomized 21st century?”⁵ *Who are we? Where are we going?*

Jane Eisner had been worried about declining attachments to Jewish institutions. But then she discovered that there is more to the story. Her excitement and optimism for the Jewish future was renewed, first by a healing dip in a mikveh after an illness, complete with a powerful contemporary healing ritual.

⁴ Jane Eisner, “So-Called ‘Jews Of No Religion’ Are The Impetus For A Jewish Revolution,” *The Forward*, September 3, 2018

⁵ *ibid*

Eisner found this experience through ImmerseNYC, an Upper West Side Mikveh initiative. Similar to Mayyim Hayyim, its groundbreaking forerunner in Boston, it had been a successful Jewish startup. When the Manhattan JCC saw the potential and adopted ImmerseNYC, it quickly attracted all sorts of people to the mikveh experience for many non-traditional life moments, like job transitions; special birthdays; loss of spouses and partners; after an abortion or miscarriage; to celebrate sobriety; coming out; and breaking up. Here at OZ we have also begun to use mikveh as a spiritual tool for healing and renewal. We are lucky to have beautiful Lake Champlain –a kosher mikveh, albeit only usable in the summer. In addition to individual immersions I have led with members in need, we have had two absolutely beautiful pre-Rosh Hashanah mikveh experiences for women. BTW, I am still waiting for one of the men to step up to lead a men’s mikveh, and I happily offer my guidance. The mikveh offers uniquely Jewish spiritual solace.

When people share with me their hesitation about synagogue participation by saying, “I don’t believe in God.” I answer, “Which God is it that you don’t believe in?” Most of the time it is the “old man” of childhood stories, to which I reply, “Join the club!” Being Jewish is so much more than that.

Today’s powerful question is “***What does a spiritual life look like for Jews who do not consider themselves religious?***” There is so much richness in the Jewish toolkit--rituals, texts and timeless wisdom. We have the opportunity to re-create and re-enliven our tradition.

Still, change can be very difficult, especially change in religious community, which can touch us in the deepest part of our selves. But the changes the Jewish community are wrestling over are not about taking our traditions away; this is about revitalizing our traditions in ways that work in our contemporary world amidst societal trends toward *personalization* and individual choice. Sometimes, that can feel like loss when the traditions of the past feel like home and their emphasis or form shifts. At other times it can feel like an exciting opportunity for spiritual renewal, as with new mikveh rituals.

Remember the Amazon effect -- the ease of finding everything you need, with one-click shopping? It didn’t erase consumer desire to shop in stores, as evidenced by the current shopping renewal. The broad reordering, with *fewer retailers capturing more of the gains*, is similar to the phenomenon across the Jewish world. Just as stores that have learned to offer the ease and instant gratification of e-commerce are flourishing, synagogues and Jewish organization that evolve to respond to the needs of today’s diverse Jewish community will ultimately thrive.

This involves *reimagining*. Rather than being afraid of what we might lose, we can hold tight to the essential core of Judaism, linking change to tradition. The tag line of USCJ, to which our community is affiliated, is “*seeking meaning together.*” It advocates for an “authentic and dynamic Judaism, thriving in the tension of old and new.”

This is not the first time that our people have evolved in response to changes in culture and circumstance – Jewish history is dotted with several examples of major changes in the way we “do Jewish.” When Judaism has become “calcified, there have been periods of revolutionary

reimagination. The bar mitzvah isn't in the Talmud. And the bat mitzvah didn't exist a century ago. And equality in roles of men and women...that is still a work in progress!"⁶

Yet we know that revolutionary transformation can be unsettling and even painful for some people. Change is hard! In fact, one of our Ohavi Zedek members, Steve Metz, gave me permission to share a recent message he sent to me, reflecting this theme. He wrote after a recent Shabbat discussion about Israel's Nation State law, during which Steve questioned me about his perception that Israelis have largely rejected Judaism. Later, he wrote:

Dear Rabbi Amy - In one quick, succinct answer, you managed to summarize much of my on-going conflict with my "Jewishness" in today's world & with Ohavi Zedek's steady progress toward - - modernizing ?? the way a Conservative synagogue seeks to become ever more inclusive.

I asked you if it were not true that some Israelis have rejected the concept of a *Jewish* state. You answered, "NO, they have just rejected the ways of the *shtetl*."

And that, Rabbi, is precisely the position in which I find myself. I cannot cast aside the beauty and the depth of worship and observance of the *shtetl* - the teachings of my grandfather, the sound of the Hazzan sobbing as he prayed for the congregation and for himself, and the family gathered around the seder table.

Are these things all to disappear in favor of Yoga services and folk songs ?

Respectfully - Steve Metz

I sympathize with Steve's conundrum. I love many old-world traditions of our grandparents, as I know many of you do too. But I also know that the style of the old-world traditions is unappealing to an increasing number of Jews. This is what the "Jews with No Religion" category described. As times change, style, culture and taste shifts, impacting what we bring along with us on our Jewish journeys. Once upon a time, the melodies and prayer style of the *shtetl* were innovations, new and different from what had previously been the practice— all the while holding Torah and the wisdom of our sages close.

Who we are? Where we are going? Surely the late first century sage Rabbi Akiva didn't daven in way of our grandparents in the *shtetl*. He prayed in *his* language, with the *nusach* of *his* culture, more like today's *Mizrachi* Jews (Middle Eastern) today.

There is an inspiring legend about another Talmudic sage, Rabban Yochanan Ben Zakkai,⁷ that is illustrative of disruptive innovation in the Jewish past. During the Roman siege of Jerusalem in the year 70, with the impending destruction of the Temple and the holy city by the Romans, all could have been lost. With loss of independence and access to sacred worship, the future of Judaism was at stake.

Yochanan Ben Zakkai believed the Jewish rebellion against Rome would lead to destruction; he urged the rebels to cease fighting. When he did not convince them to stop, he concocted a plan. He instructed his students to smuggle him out of Jerusalem in a coffin. The Roman guards wouldn't

⁶ Jane Eisner, "So-Called 'Jews Of No Religion' Are The Impetus For A Jewish Revolution," The Forward, September 3, 2018

⁷ Reuven Hammer, "Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai," Jerusalem Post, August 3, 2006

inspect inside the coffin; they believed the students claim that they were taking the dead sage to burial. Once outside the city, ben Zakkai was taken to meet the Roman general Vespasian. Yochanan ben Zakkai greeted Vespasian, calling him *emperor* – a gutsy and clever move. He had the general's ear! He asked Vespasian to spare the city of *Yavneh* as a home for scholars. It worked.

This assured the survival of Judaism. The sages of Yavneh and beyond revitalized Judaism, transforming it from a religion of Temple-centered sacrifices with priests, to synagogue-centered worship and study, with rabbis leading and teaching. It was disruptive innovation at its most creative!

A story is told that Rabban Yochanan Ben Zakkai and Rabbi Joshua were walking by the ruins of the Temple. Rabbi Joshua said, "Woe to us that the place where the atonement for the sins of Israel was made has been destroyed!" But Ben Zakkai replied, "Do you not know that we have a means of making atonement that is as good as this? And what is it? *Gemilut chasadim* - acts of loving-kindness.⁸ This creative interpretation helped to redefine Judaism, so it worked for our exiled people. We are indebted to Ben Zakkai and his colleagues.

Who are we? Where are we going?

Jane Eisner observed that, "American Jews, as a *religion and a people*, are uniquely positioned to experiment with new forms of religious identity that may defy the doomsday predictions certain data suggest. Human beings will always crave meaning and community. It's up to those of us who find both in Judaism to prove its worth to others."

"It may be too early to declare the death of retail" and it is equally unrealistic to declare the death of Jewish tradition. But it is also true that just as retail now has "fewer retailers capturing more of the gains," synagogues that do not evolve along with the needs of a changing Jewish community will shrink and close. Do we want to be like *Sears* or *Target*?

Still, there is no one magic formula here – different groups need different points of connection and expression. As successful stores have become "a cross between a fast-food drive-through and a hotel concierge,"⁹ we need to appreciate the power of the *individual* in Jewish community. The Target store redesign is instructive – evolved synagogues are not "your father's Buick." Oh yea, they redesigned too! The point is that the strength of legacy institutions, like our synagogue, uniquely positions us to seize the future. We have the resources, the historical memory and collective talents to experiment and adapt. Just like the Manhattan JCC adopted ImmerseNYC, updating and renewing their vision, our knowledge, capacity and creativity enables us to hold onto to tradition as we embrace meaningful new approaches.

How do we decide what to transform, what to revitalize and reintroduce, and perhaps what to change or de-emphasize? **Strategic planning**. Our relationship with Professor Dave Hohenschau from UVM is rich with opportunity. Dave's students took us on as their project last year, with interesting

⁸ Rabbi Louis Jacobs, "Yochanan Ben Zakkai," <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/jochanan-ben-zakkai/>, quote from (Hosea 6:6). Avot d'Rabbi Natan 4:21.

⁹ NYTimes article, above

results. Now we move into the next phase, drilling down on critical questions about funding and priorities.

As we do this, let's keep our eyes on the prize -- a Jewish community that helps each of us to find personal meaning and communal attachment in today's increasingly lonely and atomized world. Together, we are appreciating and re-imagining a community where we *seek meaning together* with an *authentic and dynamic Judaism*, thriving in the tension of *old and new*. I am so grateful and privileged to be with you on this journey and I look forward to hearing your views.

Leshanah Tovah Tikateivu!