

[Is there a Jewish mainline?](#)

This post by Rabbi Aaron Spiegel

Yesterday's *USA Today* included an article entitled, "[Some Protestant churches feeling 'mainline' again.](#)" contending that it's not just conservative, evangelical churches that are thriving but that many mainline Protestant congregations are alive and well. The "mainline" here refers to the Episcopal, Presbyterian, Disciples of Christ, United Church of Christ, United Methodist, and Lutheran denominations. Most of the press around these denominations has predicted the slow demise of the mainline from the religious landscape of American Christianity.

Not so, says Diana Butler-Bass in her new book, [Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church is Transforming the Faith](#). Along with her two previous books, [The Practicing Congregation: Imagining a New Old Church](#) and [From Nomads to Pilgrims: Stories from Practicing Congregations](#), her research found that there are mainline churches that are doing well, and many are thriving and growing.

So, what does this have to do with American Judaism? We could learn a lot from Diana's research. Bass makes a distinction between programs and practices. The congregations she studied are able to identify those things they do that were irrelevant or lost their meaning. Instead of throwing these away, Bass talks of "retraditionalizing" these practices. I'm reminded of Larry Hoffman's distinction between ritual and ritualization in *The Art of Public Prayer*. Bass's research found that mainline churchgoers crave ritual and ancient practice. But, they also want these presented in ways that are relevant and meaningful to their contemporary lives. So while one Episcopal church chants Gregorian melodies, they also offer Café St. Mark – a free breakfast buffet for all, member and visitor, as a way of offering hospitality and forming community.

One Lutheran official stated of mainline Protestantism, "We got lazy..." Sociologist of religion Barry Kosmin says, "The mainline is never going to be the dominant cultural group again."

Where is American "mainline" Judaism in comparison? There is already talk that Judaism is in a post denomination/movement period. Steven M. Cohen's forthcoming *S3K Report* for the S3K Synagogue Studies Institute on movement affiliation may say otherwise. Larry Hoffman says that "post-denominationalism is a 'myth' and that denominations are still very important." I would contend that the movements are not important themselves; it's the identity that synagogues derive from their affiliation. However, I think we're in the midst of our "lazy period." If synagogues (and the movements) don't start the process of retraditionalizing, we will have our own version of mainline decline.

Bass says of these practicing, revitalized churches, they "have a beautiful world where they are enacting service, doing justice, learning to pray and caring for one another." Isn't it interesting how this parallels the edict in *Pirke Avoth*, "The world rests on three

foundations: study, service, and benevolence”? Judaism offers the prescription for vital synagogue communities. Maybe it’s time for us to borrow it back from our Christian brothers and sisters?!