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Finding the Balance:

The Practices and Beliefs of Secular and Unaffiliated American Jews in the 21st Century

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Abstract: The latest PEW report of Jewish America found that over one-quarter of Jews in the United States identify as Jewish by ethnicity, culture, and family versus identifying as Jewish by religion. By not identifying as Jewish by religion, these individuals prefer to define themselves as atheist, agnostic or nothing in particular. This number increases to four-in-ten for American Jewish adults under 30 thus revealing that an increasing number of Jews are secular, unaffiliated or categorize themselves as Jews with no religion. Nonetheless, these populations identify as Jewish! What do these groups of Jews do that they consider to be Jewish and how do they practice Judaism?

This case study of an unaffiliated congregation in Cincinnati, Ohio attempts to understand what Jewish practice looks like for secular, atheist and Humanistic Jews, and what they believe theologically, if anything at all. As Jewish America becomes increasingly diverse and the needs of the Jewish community fluctuate, Jewish institutions like synagogues, temples and congregations ought to reflect the liturgical and praxis-based needs of assimilated Jews who seek to reconcile the tensions between their tradition and modernity.

As evidenced through this case study, secular Jews value Jewish practice and have theological opinions that they don't often find reflected in popular Jewish liturgy. Since they see themselves as part of the continuum of Jewish history, those who join congregations are modifying tradition to continue practicing Judaism by redefining Jewish practice in ways that feel authentic to their worldviews.

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Why am I interested in studying current Jewish practice?

I graduated college during the Great Recession with a Bachelor of Arts from Miami University. As someone who always knew she wanted to be a rabbi, I majored in Comparative Religion and minored in Anthropology because I was always intrigued by how a community ethos develops around shared belief, especially religion. In the climate of Spring 2010, I assumed I would have to immediately go to grad school to do anything remotely related to my interests. I was wrong.

My first job in the real world was with The Mayerson Foundation (TMF) in Cincinnati, Ohio which was founded by Manny Mayerson. Mr. Mayerson had encountered great success in the real estate world and generously created a foundation with some of his wealth. Among many sectors, he invested in the local and global Jewish community., There was an entire division of the Foundation devoted to funding Jewish programs. In addition to distributing funding to outside agencies, TMF ran its own programs. When I first began, I was the Program Manager for Access, the division devoted to creating and implementing functions for loosely affiliated young Jewish professionals between the ages of 21-35. By the time I departed in 2013, I managed the PR and Communications for the whole department which included Shalom Family (a program for otherwise unaffiliated young Jewish families) and Fusion Family (interfaith families that otherwise felt excluded and ostracized from synagogues).

It was the perfect fit given what I had studied. My team and I worked to build Jewish community among otherwise unaffiliated young Jewish professionals, young Jewish families and/or Interfaith families. As my supervisor Pam Saeks would often say, "The success of our work came from asking our target audiences what they wanted, hearing what they said, and giving them what they asked for.

Now, one might argue that the philanthropic nature of the Foundation created a sense of privilege in the caliber of the programs we offered (simply put: we had a lot of money and resources so we could give people what they asked for), but from this experience building community merely as a Jewish professional and not as a Rabbi, I began noticing the behaviors, practices and rituals of the masses separate and apart from the synagogue and the top-down, "*this is how Judaism is practiced*" approaches to which I was accustomed. We had schmoozing opportunities in trendy bars and restaurants for both Jewish and interfaith couples, and if they wanted to learn how to bake *challah* or cook other Jewish recipes, they could attend Jewish cooking classes. We had parties for the 21-35 crowd, where dare I say- there was no strict, measurable Jewish activity happening at all - other than the simple socialization happening between one Jew and another. Contrary to Dr. Jack Wertheimer's belief that social functions merely provide superficial levels of engagement that aren't enough for deeper connection to Jewish tradition,[1] I saw connections happen through consistent social gatherings that provided natural opportunities for people to congregate, socialize, and discover common ground. And if this web of community and commonality isn't a component of Jewish tradition, I don't know what is. In addition to the fun, there were also Purim carnivals, Shabbat dinners, and scrambled egg breakfasts made for Cincinnati's less fortunate on Easter Sunday. We had book clubs where Jews discussed books written about Jewish topics, books written by other Jews, or just discussed books with other Jews.

In our tradition's greatest love story, the Song of Songs, a book that Rabbi Akiba once referred to as the "holiest of holies" of all of the writings of Jewish scripture, we learn of two lovers who go down to a garden to consummate their love. Among other literary tools, the lovers and their relationship are described in magnificent, flowing garden imagery. The love that brings them together is also what they

[1] Jack Wertheimer, "The Challenges Facing US." Tablet Magazine, January 11, 2022.

are composed of. Their relationship has been interpreted as the relationship between Israel and God,[2] and later commentators understood the love to be about the relationship between either the individual and the intellect, or the individual and the soul.[3] Over the centuries, new levels of interpretation emerged attempting to understand the symbolism underlying who the lovers represented and the places in which they went. But what of the garden? Where is this attractive, rich, and self-sustaining place that sustains lovers with the same elements that they are composed of? This garden is a metaphor for the Jewish community, an entity that, when cared for, nourishes the intersection between historical Jewish tradition and present ways of practicing. The same love and richness that enables each lover to be sustained is also the place where they mingle. So too should our communities become places of nourishment for the intersection of love for Judaism and the desire to keep it going. Historically, this juncture between the past and present of Judaism took place in the synagogue, but as the data indicate, the Jewish people's relationship with synagogues is changing. Like any garden that adapts to transforming environments, so too our communities must innovate to support the shifting needs of our people as they wrestle with how to maintain the relevance of tradition in the diaspora, where people are holding onto the aspects of their Jewishness that bring them meaning while simultaneously assimilating.

How do we adapt our gardens? First, we must look at the data gathered through local Jewish community studies and national polls like PEW's 2013 and 2020 Portraits of Jewish Americans. Yet even these will only show quantitative data, that which is measurable through numbers. For example, PEW's 2020 survey of Jewish America collected responses from 4,718 U.S. adults who identified as Jewish which included 3,836 people who considered themselves Jewish by religion and 882 who described themselves

[2] Michael Fishbane, *Song of Songs: Shir Ha-Shirim: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation*, xx.
[3] Michael Fishbane, *Song of Songs,* xxxvii.

as Jews of no religion.[4] These numbers only reveal overarching trends; they don't tell the stories of the people and the meaning behind the rituals that are held onto and the reasoning behind the rituals of which they've let go.

This is why I set out to complete this case study and interview congregants of a non-denominational community: I wanted to gather qualitative data to understand the motivations of those who see themselves as cultural Jews, secular Jews, unaffiliated Jews, and "Jews of No Religion" and decipher the meaning and place of Judaism in their lives that data gathered through quantitative measures will not show. Those who don't identify as "Jewish by Religion" are still very much connected to their Jewishness and while they struggle with the tensions between historical ritual, tradition and modernity, there is still a desire to promulgate the elements that are meaningful to them.

The data will tell you that Jewish behavior is changing – we ought to listen to it, and also encourage the telling of the stories behind these numbers to better understand why these changes are occuring. Then, Jewish leaders, institutions and communities can better serve the needs of these changing demographics. Rabbis and community leader sought to be realistic about the priorities of our congregants and our power to shape those priorities so we can meet our people where they are to deepen their levels of engagement. As the findings of this study indicate, some examples of places and projects where the community is gesturing for a meeting are the ongoing pursuit to reconcile traditional historical Jewish narratives with reason, science and elements of modernity by writing liturgy that more straightforwardly illustrates the assimilation of these seeming opposing tensions and becoming more accepting of the adjusted practices that change as a result.

[4] Pew Research Center, May 11, 2021, "Jewish Americans in 2020", 2.

When Dr. Egon Mayer wrote that interfaith marriage appears “like an invisible sword of Damocles over Jewish families whose elders fear that the Jewish line will be cut off because the children are marching toward matrimony in the open society, where the claims of the heart outweigh the claims of tradition or parental authority in the selection of a mate,” he was specifically talking about the rising number of exogamous marriages that occurs between one Jewish partner and one non-Jewish partner. Yet, I think the general anxiety about change that characterizes his comment pervades many Jewish organizations. If instead of angst we found ways to churn and translate tradition to meet the demands of this present situation that reflected changing Jewish priorities, then Jewish leaders, synagogues and organizations could be adaptable like the garden described in the Song of Songs. A place where the yearning for the intersection of historical Jewish tradition and present ways of practicing will produce things that are fruitful and also lifegiving.

Research Methods

I drew upon qualitative methods for this study. Due to the unpredictable nature of the pandemic, I thought it best to utilize the non-denominational congregation where I was the Rabbinic Intern from 2021-2022.The congregation is unique in that it is not only non-denominational, but it utilizes a human-centered approach to Judaism where it doesn't include traditional theocentric liturgy. Therefore, this congregation provided a way to think about what might otherwise be considered "peripheral" Jews in that it is a Jewish space for people who might otherwise be happily unaffiliated and don't join traditional synagogues. Due to my interactions with the community, geographic proximity to the majority of the congregants, as well as the possibility to engage with members of all age groups through the programming I was already participating in, which primarily occurred in the Sunday School, I thought the congregation would be a fitting setting for this project.

I understand the complications that arise from choosing to use the same community where I was interning as the setting for this project. There are pros and cons to having an insider status while being a researcher. While my internship began at the same time my research started, I also knew and had previous relationships with some of the congregants and families and used this to my benefit. I developed a vested interest in the continuation of the community, and I used my insider status to make use of the insider terminology used by the congregation. I also had to remain impartial as congregants spoke about their practices, beliefs, and relationships with past and current rabbis. In my role as a researcher, I was there to simply listen to their descriptions of their beliefs, theologies, and Jewish practice, but had I been having those conversations as a rabbinic intern, I would have pushed them to use more definitive language and understand what, for some respondents, were paradoxes in their descriptions of their beliefs and the beliefs what was actually described.

Regarding the people interviewed and the location: all individuals have been anonymized and the name of the congregation has been changed to B'li Elohim. Partiality aside, B'li Elohim provided an interesting community to study because it is a non-denominational community with a human-centered approach to Judaism that maintained humanistic elements of their liturgy despite having formally separated from the Society for Humanistic Judaism in 1989. An abridged history of the congregation will be described later.

Situated within the Jewish landscape of Cincinnati, B'li Elohim's establishment in 1980 provided an alternative space for Jewish and Interfaith families with a variety of beliefs in God and approaches to Jewish practice. Some congregants were raised at some of Cincinnati's longstanding Reform Temples, others had been members of those Temples for a short time, while a handful of congregants maintained memberships at both classically Reform congregations and B'li Elohim. As described by congregants in this study, B'li Elohim's unique liturgical approach married science with integral aspects of Jewish tradition that make it possible for congregants to pray, bless and observe tradition in a way that honestly reflects their approaches to science and Jewish history. This unique approach within Cincinnati's Jewish landscape allows congregants to honestly talk about their Judaism without using terminology, prayers, metaphors and ideas that they feel contradict their philosophies about humanity and understandings of the world.

The method chosen for this study utilized one-on-one sixty to eighty minute interviews that were conducted via Zoom with self-selecting congregants who contacted me after congregational emails were sent about this project. On one occasion, I interviewed a couple who chose to interview together, but when sorting my data, I separated their accounts as two entries. In addition to reading other Synagogue

and religious ethnographies, books about taking field notes, local community studies, PEW studies and articles about trends in the Jewish community, I also utilized a thesis written in 2007 by Rabbi Asher Knight. This provided a way to gain a deeper understanding of the history of B'li Elohim, the motivations of the families who founded the congregation, and the congregation's attempt to become part of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC), which is now the Union for Reform Judaism (URJ).

The participant observations gave me insight into collective religious practices, interpersonal interactions, and other behaviors of the B'li Elohim population. As much as it can, this case study will attempt to describe respondents' Jewish practices, philosophical approaches to Jewish ritual and obligation, their theologies, and their relationships with and to the current and past rabbis. The interviews accrued over the course of this case study facilitated my ability to detail congregants' religious rituals and practices, such as what happens in their homes for Jewish holidays, how they celebrate with the community, what values they prioritize, the role of prayer, the role of God (if God has a role), the role of the rabbi, and of course - the role of Judaism.

The PEW Research study of 2020 informed my research greatly. Not only did it influence the topic I wanted to explore, but it also informed the background and context from which congregants described their experiences as Jews in the 21st century, their experiences in other Jewish spaces, and their paths to discovering B'li Elohim. My goal is to use the qualitative data gathered through this study and these interviews to extrapolate trends in the greater Jewish community so Jewish leaders can be better equipped to address both the changing needs and trends among secular, unaffiliated people who gather in non-denominational spaces.

In addition, there are the concerns of rabbis, historians and sociologists about increased trends toward interfaith marriage. As the data will show, 36% of respondents at B'li Elohim are in multi-faith/heritage households. I was curious how B'li Elohim's approach toward Judaism creates an environment that is conducive to interfaith relationships and families. One of the behaviors I noticed was B'li Elohim sees both parents, regardless of background, as people who can contribute to the community's well-being, the shaping of the household and the leadership of the congregational community. One respondent talked about being able to learn alongside her children in Sunday school and sitting on the Board and these aspects of B'li Elohim's approach make it an inviting, low barrier community where diverse families not only feel comfortable learning and practicing, but they are seen as a value-add. This makes it more likely for them to participate in congregational programs which encourages more learning and support of the inclusion of Judaism in their homes.

Research Status

As described previously, I was aware of my status as an insider in the sense that I was B'li Elohim's Rabbinic Intern. In that capacity, I met congregants at coffee talks, occasionally led services, taught in the Sunday School and taught an occasional class for adults. This insider status "provided me with considerable access in the space. I observed how congregants interacted with the Senior Rabbi, Rabbi Klein, and how families worked with the Assistant Rabbi, Rabbi Fine, who was also the director of the Sunday school. I also saw congregants during services and I taught them in class. I had to negotiate between my identity as a rabbinical intern and a researcher. When interviewing, I asked questions as a researcher and had to hold back from following up as a rabbinical student. I didn't want to ask leading questions, but I did want to encourage respondents to think critically about their belief, prayer, and practice.

Regarding this insider status, I think there are many benefits afforded to researchers who straddle the dual nature of being a congregant and a researcher (even though I was the rabbinic intern). I established relationships with congregants in hopes that they would feel comfortable sharing with me for the purposes of research, and I was able to elicit answers that might have been perceived as taboo had they been asked by someone not in my position. Before I ever began my research, I first asked for permission from Rabbi Fine, my internship supervisor, as well as Rabbi Kline. . I also offered to share my findings with the congregation once my synthesis of the data was complete. The congregation communicated the nature of this project to congregants through e-newsletters and . all of those who participated did so voluntarily and responded to one of the multiple emails that was sent regarding this project.

I think the Covid 19 pandemic and the reliance on Zoom made it much easier to acquire data in the sense that I was able to conduct interviews entirely separate from congregation activities. There was

also a level of comfort and ease with using Zoom which made interviews much smoother. All interviews were recorded and transcribed using Otter.ai (artificial intelligence software) so I could remain present during interviews without having to hastily write quotes and notes. When I did see congregants "in the hallways" during the few times we were in person, it felt a little strange to bridge the gap between our virtual understanding of one another and meeting in person.

All in all, I conducted seventeen interviews, one of which was with a married couple who were subdivided into their own data points bringing the total number of individual data points to eighteen. Interviews were conducted over a four-month period in 2021, during surges and plateaus of the Covid 19 pandemic. This detail is relevant because many people sought engagement during the isolating times, and this might have inspired some congregants to initially respond to the emails that were distributed about my project. The Interview Guide was developed in partnership with my advisor, Dr. Bruce Philips, and was amended over the course of the interviews because some conversations inspired more questions that were asked during interviews with other respondents. Therefore, some respondents were asked questions that other respondents were not asked, but the majority of questions were asked to all individuals. The final version of the Interview Guide became a Google form which is included in the appendix. Interviews were conducted with people from a variety of backgrounds: some respondents are only members of B'li Elohim while others hold dual memberships to Cincinnati congregations, or congregations in other cities where they reside. Some respondents came to B'li Elohim after their children became members, or after enrolling their children in the Sunday school. Other respondents were raised in the congregation, and either currently attend college, or have moved elsewhere but still consider themselves members because B'li Elohim's virtual component enables people to engage from afar. Interviewees were from all over the age spectrum, with the youngest born in 2000 and the oldest born in 1939. At the end of the study, I accrued about 25 hours of interviews and 484 pages of interview

transcripts, which were analyzed by hand. After reading the transcripts, I coded the data by inputting data points into the Google Form to efficiently tally and organize data points and to graph key trends.

History of B'li Elohim

B'li Elohim formed in 1979 and was formally established in 1980. In 1979, four families came together to discuss the creation of a "unique community that [integrated] Jewish tradition and humanistic principles."[5] These principles "[affirmed] a moral commitment to human dignity and ethical behavior as well as the encouragement of each member to explore their Jewish heritage with an open mind and a willingness to take personal responsibility in determining their life course."[6] In the Summer of 1980, the congregation legally became incorporated and by the end of 1980, there were 166 members with 89 children in the school, which had launched in the fall of that same year. All congregational gatherings took place in the homes of its congregants. Despite its congregants being members of the SHJ, in 1989, after the SHJ transitioned to a new business model and updated its guiding principles, B'li Elohim moved away from the SHJ and toward its application to become part of the UAHC, the Reform Movement's congregational union.

Today, B'li Elohim is not formally affiliated with either the Reform or Humanistic movements of Judaism, but many congregants identify as either Humanistic or secular. B'li Elohim's first and only rabbi was heavily influenced by the teachings of Rabbi Sherwin Wine who founded the Society for Humanistic Judaism (SHJ) in 1969 and he two worked together, studied together and became close friends before Rabbi Klein began his studies at HUC. In fact, Rabbi Wine wrote Rabbi Klein's Letter of Recommendation when he applied to HUC-JIR and during Rabbi Klein's tenure as a student, he worked at the SHJ. While B'li Elohim may no longer be part of the Humanistic movement, Rabbi Klein and congregation B'li Elohim

[5] https://www.bethadam.org/mission-vision-and-values.html
[6] https://www.bethadam.org/about-us

were significantly influenced by Wine's teachings, Humanistic philosophy, and the friendship that Wine built with Rabbi Klein.[7]

A brief description of the split is described below. I understand that there is a lot of nuance in this division, but for the purposes of this project, I think it is necessary to describe B'li Elohim's points of division especially because congregants, throughout their interviews, describe their own philosophies in relation to what they often described as B'li Elohim's Humanistic approach to Judaism even though 10 years after B'li Elohim's founding, the congregation separated from the SHJ. Despite this history, most congregants understand B'li Elohim's approach to be humanistic and most of their personal philosophies align with tenets of Humanistic Judaism.

B'li Elohim did not agree with the following changes made by the SHJ which encouraged its decision to unaffiliate:

- The SHJs modified their dues model and changed from being an organization made up of individuals to an organization made up of congregations and individuals. This would have required a new financial obligation on the part of the congregations.
- Even though all of the founding and participating rabbis affiliated with the movement were HUC ordinees, the SHJ wanted to create their own seminary to train Humanistic rabbis. The school formed in 1985 and came to be known as the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism.

[7] Asher Knight, "Drawing Boundaries and Limiting Elasticity: What did the Reform Movement Learn from B'li Elohim's Membership Application to the UAHC?", 30.

- SHJ began joining other secular organizations and congregants were worried that the SHJ was "leaving behind humanistic Judaism for secularism."[8]

Rabbi Klein and the Board of B'li Elohim valued the organization's relationship with HUC (Rabbi Klein was an HUC ordained rabbi and some HUC professors supported B'li Elohim's approach to Judaism) and thought the creation of an SHJ-specific rabbinical program would have jeopardized B'li Elohim's relationship with HUC. According to one of the founders of B'li Elohim, Rabbi Klein also opposed the creation of an SHJ rabbinical school because he didn't think that Rabbi Sherwin Wine had the "authority" to ordain Rabbis.[9]

More will be said about unique aspects of B'li Elohim's philosophy and approach to Judaism, but for now, there is an important distinction to be made between religionists and secularists within Humanistic Judaism. B'li Elohim was considered Religionist in this dichotomy and as the SHJ broadened its tent to also include secular organizations, B'li Elohim situated itself on the Religionist end of that spectrum because they utilized Jewish ritual to formulate a Humanistic Jewish practice that was consistent with their theological beliefs."[10] . In contrast, Secularists refrained from using Jewish ritual and abandoned Jewish practice altogether."[11]

According to B'li Elohim's bylaws: "the purpose of B'li Elohim [is]to affirm the values, ideals and philosophy of Humanistic Judaism."[12] It promised to provide education and services for all members and their children, "in accordance with [their] religious values" and, "in pursuit of one's religious values and

[8] Asher Knight, "Drawing Boundaries and Limiting Elasticity, 80.
[9] Knight, 82.
[10] Knight, 80.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Knight, 39.

ideals, individuals are encouraged to employ free and critical inquiry; a belief in the ability to control and be responsible for one's own destiny; and, to apply the valid insights of [their] Jewish and Humanistic traditions to the solution of personal and social problem." B'li Elohim affirmed "the unique value of each individual member and sincerely worked to fulfill the member's profound religious aspirations."[13]

When talking to members of the Cincinnati Jewish community, B'li Elohim is regarded by many as the "Atheist congregation" where there is no mention of God, and this belief is a broad generalization of the beliefs amongst B'li Elohim's community. As opposed to being a Godless congregation, B'li Elohim attempts to fulfill the mission set out in its bylaws to "employ free and critical inquiry"[14] as congregants form their own relationships with Jewish tradition. Through the course of my research, the importance of critical thinking skills alongside Jewish tradition became evident in congregants' perceptions of themselves, their community, and their Jewish practice.

To conclude this brief section detailing the history of B'li Elohim, I'd like to add that over the course of about a 42-year period, the congregation went from four families in a living room to a stand-a-lone building with a membership of about 280 individuals (this doesn't include the children enrolled in the Sunday School). Despite this growth, many congregants spoke about the fact that B'li Elohim still retains the *hamishness* from the living room where it began.

An abridged timeline of events is included below:

- 1979- A group of families discuss creating a congregation
- 1980 - first service takes place in one of the family's home for the holiday of Purim

[13] ibid
[14] ibid

- 1980- the group plans to develop a synagogue
- Summer 1980- B'li Elohim incorporates
- October 5, 1980- Sunday school launches
- End of 1980- 166 members with 89 school children
- 1987- Rabbi Klein is elected president of the Cincinnati Board of Rabbis
- Dec 1989- B'li Elohim splits from the SHJ and applies to the UAHC
- Early 1990- Board begins process to apply to become members of the UAHC, the Reform movement's congregational union. Application is eventually denied.
- 2001 - B'li Elohim completes its building and moves in

Description of the Key Informants

Respondents were either born in Ohio or New York. Currently, these individuals live in Cincinnati, Ohio; Middleburg, Florida; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Scottsdale, Arizona and Athens, Ohio. The virtual component of B'li Elohim is known as Our Jewish Community (OJC) and was founded in 2009. OJC enables congregants to stream High Holidays and Shabbat services. While a virtual component to services is a given nowadays, OJC's existence for the past 13 years has allowed congregants from rural Florida to Virginia to gather and stream not only when it is convenient for them, but from the comfort of their couches. The virtual community is made up of either adults who once lived in Cincinnati, but later moved away, people who grew up in the congregation and moved away, or people who have never been to Cincinnati and discovered B'li Elohim through basic internet searches for virtual High Holiday services.

Twenty-nine percent of respondents were men and seventy-one percent were women. Most skewed older and the majority of respondents were born between 1939 and 1960. Three were born in 1988, 1996 and 2000. Sixty-one percent were married and of the ones who were married, 64% had Jewish partners. The partners of the other 36% identified as Atheist or some form of Christian. Of the respondents, one individual was not Jewish, but was active in the community. Seventy-one percent of people had two Jewish parents. Sixty-seven percent of those surveyed had children and seven of those children were raised at B'li Elohim, having their B'nai Mitzvah ceremonies there. Being married and having children appear to be large factors in a family's decision to join B'li Elohim; this follows a larger trend about motivations behind a family's choice to join a congregation. While some families have been members since the congregation's inception, others became members later in life, either after their children became members, or after hearing positive things about the rabbis. Some joined B'li Elohim

because they were in interfaith relationships and Rabbi Klein was one of the few rabbis who would officiate at their wedding. As one respondent explained, “I couldn't attend services in a place where I felt shunned by the rabbi because I was in a relationship with a non-Jew.”[15]

One of the most common things I heard from congregants was that they felt that B’li Elohim was "evolved" and/or "relevant" because the congregation formed a liturgy committee which, since the inception of the congregation, had been writing unique liturgy that relied on Jewish frameworks.[16] According to the website, this liturgy is meant to “create an atmosphere that allows for individual expression of deeply held religious beliefs” and uses a “language that [they] view as expansive, inclusive… and allows each individual to draw spiritual comfort and meaning, while respecting his or her own understanding of God and the nature of the universe."[17] While a more detailed analysis of this liturgy and some of B’li Elohim’s services will be discussed later, many respondents cited this evolved approach to liturgy as something that excited them about the congregation and allowed them to feel like they could talk about Judaism in a way that was authentic to the ways they thought about and understood the world. Other people I spoke to described themselves as a "seekers" who had experimented with Buddhism and other Eastern traditions and B’li Elohim was a stop on their tour of traditions and provided an in-person community that wasn’t available when studying other faiths.

The liturgy was talked about often and was described by many as the piece that really didn’t sit well with them when they were in other prayer spaces. This cognitive dissonance made them feel hypocritical because they felt compelled to say things in services like the words of *Avinu Malkeinu*, the *V’ahavta,* or responsive readings describing an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent God that were out of

[15] Thirteen, interview with the author, September 21, 2021.
[16] https://www.bethadam.org/our-liturgy.html
[17] ibid

alignment with what they believed about God and/or the world. While many spoke about their appreciation of a liturgy that reconciled their approaches to tradition with their worldviews, other respondents spoke about a yearning for more of a balance between the traditional parts that had been removed and their pursuit of logic and reason within Judaism because, while they appreciated the endeavor to intellectualize Judaism, they longed for key traditional pieces reminiscent of the Judaism they knew from when they were younger.

At B'li Elohim there is a culture of questioning and interrogating tradition which attracts intellectuals and is the reason why the founding families wanted an adult discussion group to run simultaneously with the kids' Sunday School. "They believed that in order to teach, they had to learn,"[18] which is why, to this day, parents and other adults learn upstairs while the kids learn downstairs on Sundays. While this culture of learning and questioning what has been cemented as tradition attracts a certain type of person and makes people feel welcome because they're not expected to believe a certain way, it also has the tendency to alienate intellectuals who value tradition and still draw meaning from other aspects of Judaism and Jewish prayer and don't need to know how every word of a prayer translates for those words to resonate. As one respondent explained, "I don't feel it's necessary to abandon everything that represents the traditional and I want more of a "balance" with the traditional aspects of Judaism that I miss from my childhood."[19]

Thirty-six percent of the people in relationships were in interfaith relationships, 18% of the people in relationships converted after meeting their Jewish partner, and 29% of those who were not married, converted to Judaism on their own and independent of a partner. Only one person interviewed was

[18] Asher Knight, "Drawing Boundaries and Limiting Elasticity, 37.
[19] Two, interview with the author, September 21, 2021.

married to a practicing Christian, all other non-Jewish partners with either atheist or agnostic. B'li Elohim doesn't track the number of interfaith families in their community because, as Rabbi Klein explained, faith background doesn't affect the way they interact with their congregants. Based upon the people with whom I spoke, this approach inculcates an environment that helps non-Jewish partners feel less ostracized. In some ways, this lack of ostracism comes from the congregation not counting who is Jewish and who is not and in others way, it is due to a transformation and evolution of the particularities that make Judaism a unique tradition. This evolved Judaism makes the congregation an attractive space for interfaith families who have households that celebrate multiple traditions. In addition, B'li Elohim is low-barrier in that a person doesn't need to be 100% Jewish literate or speak Jewish shop-talk to access Jewish tradition. An analysis of the specific aspects of B'li Elohim's community that make it inviting for couples and families of multiple traditions will be described later.

Whether it is through B'li Elohim's unique liturgy, or their Sunday Adult Studies classes, congregants sought ways to practice and connect to Judaism without feeling enslaved to ritual. For this reason, I found the rituals and holidays with which high percentages of congregants *do* engage to be noteworthy: 100% observed the High Holidays, 100% hosted or attended a Passover *seder*, and 100% lit *hannukiyot* during Hannukah. Eighty-nine percent had *mezzuzot* somewhere in or on their homes, or would install them if it weren't for limitations regarding where they lived and/or rules about what they are permitted to install on their doors. Another characteristic of respondents and the congregation is that they compare the Torah to mythology, which follows a pattern tracked by the 2020 PEW survey of Jewish Americans that found that only twenty-six percent of Jews believe in God as described in the Bible.[20] By understanding Tanakh as myth, congregants are better able to reconcile their modern, rational

[20] PEW Research Center. "Jewish Identity and Belief." PEW Research Center, May 11, 2011. https://www.pewforum.org/2021/05/11/jewish-identity-and-belief/.

understandings of the world with Jewish tradition. Several times I heard people explain that just because they see written Torah as myth, doesn't mean it they don’t retain value in it. Perhaps what sets B’li Elohim apart is that the congregation and its leadership legitimize this position while maintaining a sense of respect for tradition even though the tradition is not impervious to change.

Characteristics of the Community: Why do people belong?

A huge reason why many affiliate with B'li Elohim has to do with philosophical and theological alignment of what is found during services, in the liturgy, and said by the rabbi as well as what each congregant believes. Several interviewees who came to B'li Elohim later in life described a misalignment between what they believed about the world and what was said in Jewish prayer liturgy, or the translation provided in prayerbooks used in traditional Reform spaces. Some who were members of Reform synagogues prior to B'li Elohim, said that their Reform congregations became either too religious, political, or relied too heavily on Hebrew and tradition. This is surprising given the frequency of English once found in Reform Judaism. One respondent noticed when her former Reform Temple transitioned from *Gates of Prayer*, the prayer book used on weekdays and on Shabbat, and *Gates of Repentence*, the prayer book used on High Holidays, to *Mishkan T'filah*, the new Reform prayer book for weekdays and Shabbat and *Mishkan haNefesh*, the new Reform High Holiday *machzor,* she felt uneasy. As the Reform prayerbook became more tradition-centered, she felt alienated by increased use of language that described prostrating in front of the altar which signified to her that things had become "more religious" and made her uncomfortable. So she switched to something "lighter."[21]

One couple, a husband who was born Jewish and his wife who converted after they were married, visited Rockdale Temple (a traditional Reform space) for Yom Kippur, and when they left the service, the wife turned to her husband and said, "if you want our children to be raised Jewish, you're gonna have to do it by yourself because I don't believe anything I heard in there."[22] She was referring specifically to the descriptions of God found in Gates of Repentence. This couple went on to co-found B'li Elohim.

[21] Seven, interview with the author, August 23, 2021.
[22] Sixteen, interview with the author, October 5, 2021.

Most informants said they came to B'li Elohim because they could not reconcile some of the language and descriptions of God that they heard in Reform spaces with what they believed or didn't believe in their hearts. Hannah spoke about growing up with the Union Prayer Book and knowing it so well, that she could attend services without ever needing to pay attention to what was said. "I could go on walks in my head, plan parties, and write my grocery lists,"[23] but when her Reform congregation switched to *Mishkan T'filah*, her rote understanding of tradition was inconveniently shaken. "Suddenly I was confronted with all of the things I didn't believe, and I realized how sexist the language was! Not only could I not stand it, but I wanted to lead B'li Elohim's liturgy committee because it was important for me to read prayers in services that sounded more in line with how I understood the world."[24] Another factor that attracted her to B'li Elohim? She liked that the congregation only had 65 people and you had to participate if you were a congregant. "People could have a role-- every person was critical."[25]

Another congregant spoke about something similar. Arriving to B'li Elohim later in life, he explained that when he read the congregation's unique liturgy, "for the first time in my life as a Jew what I read meant something to me, rather than just reading words!"[26] Growing up in a Reform temple, he knew the Union Prayer Book "like the back of his hand" and "had the black one pretty well memorized,"[27] but when he said the words of the prayers, it made him feel hypocritical. Something about B'li Elohim's liturgy had enough of a balance of Judaism and modernism to make him feel ok about saying it. Another congregant, when talking about what he would want to replicate about B'li Elohim, cited the liturgy because he loves that it doesn't talk about an "interventionist" God and thinks that modernized liturgy

[23] Seven, interview with the author, August 23, 2021.
[24] Ibid
[25] Ibid
[26] Thirteen, interview with the author, September 21, 2021.
[27] Ibid

could keep the PEW's category of "Nones", or people who aren't religious, connected before discarding religion altogether.[28] As he said, "They might be more likely to affiliate if Jewish liturgy spoke more to their worldviews."[29]

As described in the examples above, many people came to B'li Elohim after having bad experiences or epiphanies while in other Jewish spaces. Catherine was a member of one of Cincinnati's largest temples but left because it felt "impersonal," and she didn't want to "indoctrinate" her kids with things even she didn't believe.[30] Congregants seemed to have some sort of lightbulb moment where they were unable to withstand the cognitive dissonance between what Jewish tradition said and what they knew scientifically about the creation of the world and history. So, they found a Jewish space that spoke to what they believed.

The question of what one believes is an important one. For respondents and congregants, it seems as though B'li Elohim's congregants have a lower threshold for the cognitive dissonance formed when science and Jewish history are reconciled. Many interviewees talked about loving the "intellectual" component of B'li Elohim and the freedom to arrive at their own conclusions and merge what they knew about the world with what they understood from Jewish texts. Congregants have a low threshold for cognitive dissonance because their curiosities motivate them to seek spaces that support their propensity to challenge the status quo. Therefore, it makes sense why an Adult Studies class has always been a pillar of the congregation, occurring simultaneously with the children's Sunday School. For someone like Erin, who was raised at B'li Elohim and had her *bat mitzvah* there too, the "intellectual" aspect of the congregation and of the Sunday school was integral in the forming of her Jewish identity. "I

[28] Three, interview with the author, August 31, 2021.
[29] Ibid
[30] Four, interview with the author, August 24, 2021.

always loved that questions were encouraged and I never felt like I was being talked to or treated like a child." She explained that "everyone was there to learn."[31] For many of the older congregants who had more traditional Jewish upbringings, the inquisitive questions they asked in the Jewish spaces in which they were raised weren't always tolerated. At B'li Elohim, the community is composed of people who ask similar questions and have similar low thresholds for cognitive dissonance because there is a sense of kinship that forms around the types of questions people are prompted to ask as they challenge status quo tradition.

Several respondents spoke about tradition in a negative sense because the questions they would ask in other Jewish spaces were often met with, "well that's just tradition." To these respondents, tradition is something that should be changed because it can be frustrating for a group to do things rote simply because "that's the way we've always done it," or because "that's what my parents and grandparents did." Yet, respondents acknowledged the tension between charting new paths with promulgating a Judaism that is widely recognized, understood and something in which multiple generations can participate. One person spoke about wanting to use B'li Elohim's unique *haggadah* during Passover *seders* with her family and the Maxwell House *Haggadah* they insisted on using despite cutting out large portions of it to save time. "My mom was adamant about using it because it was 'tradition' and I would say, 'but you're cutting half of it out and the words you *do* say don't mean anything to you!"[32] Yet her "well-thumbed" B'li Elohim *Haggadah* hadn't been around long enough to be deemed legitimate or traditional enough so she only used it at the *seders* she hosted because "the meaning of Passover has little to do with the legend that's behind it and more to do with freedom for people and equality."[33] For her, those were the themes that were worth celebrating – not rote ritual for ritual's sake.

[31] Fifteen, interview with the author, October 5, 2021.
[32] Five, interview with the author, August 24, 2021.
[33] Ibid

Regarding tradition, another respondent questioned, "who was I to break the chain?"[34] People yearned for something meaningful and specific to their experiences but couldn't tolerate performing tradition and passing it on simply because that's "what had always been done." If the respondent had children, they spoke about wanting their children to practice a Judaism that they recognized and in which they would be willing to partake. Two respondents who were raised in traditional homes where Yiddish was spoken talked about their questions and inquisitive attitudes being disregarded when they were young. "Prior to meeting the Hillel rabbi in college and having my understanding of Judaism flipped for the better, my traditional Jewish upbringing was simply rote. My parents would drop me off at religious school and say the equivalent of 'Jew him' like it was a transitive verb. I was not expected to question, I was not given reasons. There was no context except 'you're Jewish and this is what you need to know.'"[35] This put a bad taste in his mouth until he went to college and with the help of a positive Jewish role model, he was able to rebuild his connection to Judaism. One person who grew up in the congregation explains that what she loved the most was B'lei Elohim's "willingness to separate from traditions that no longer felt valuable or were done simply to go through the motions."[36] This approach requires a certain amount of presumption with regard to what to discard. I wondered about a phrase that was used by Hannah when discussing the same topic during her interview: "throwing out the baby with the bathwater."[37] How does a congregation decide what about Judaism is obsolete and what is still relevant? This question will be addressed in further detail later.

[34] Four, interview with the author, August 24, 2021.
[35] Seventeen, interview with the author, October 5, 2021.
[36] Fourteen, interview with the author, October 4, 2021.
[37] Seven, interview with the author, September 20, 2021.

Another characteristic of community members is that they are willing to chart their own paths. One respondent who grew up in what she described as a traditional Conservative family in Brooklyn who spoke Yiddish in the home. Marjorie talked about her decision to go out on her own and take on different traditions and practices than those set by her family of origin. Even when she went to Hebrew school as a young girl and nurtured her curiosities about Judaism, she didn't feel her questions mattered. She couldn't have a Bat Mitzvah so what was the point of learning Hebrew? Plus, if she went home to share with her family the Hebrew she was learning, they didn't understand it. Since she noticed disparities between what they knew and what she was learning, she felt empowered to create her own version of Judaism.

Anita appreciates the way B'li Elohim has taken initiative to change tradition. "I just don't relate to how my parents practiced; my father and my grandfather would say what we should do, but they didn't [do what they said]. My dad would point to the prayer book and say, 'Read! Read!' and I'd ask, 'why?' It never resonated.'"[38] Performing tradition for tradition's sake turned Anita off more than it set her on the course of practicing and promulgating what had been modeled for her. Anita went on to explain, "too many communities are so tied to tradition that they can't figure out how to evolve. If you stand still when the universe shifts, you're gonna fall! if you can shuck and jive and be flexible, you'll be able to move with it."[39] For her, B'li Elohim has found a way to move with the tide. She gave an example: "When I go to a doctor and they use technology, it makes me feel good because it tells me they're willing to change and move with the universe. I like Rabbi Klein because he's willing to remain ahead of the curve; he sees where we need to be and how to get there so we stay relevant, and this ensures that we're always learning."[40]

[38] Five, interview with the author, August 24, 2021.
[39] Five, interview with the author, August 24, 2021.
[40] Ibid

Oren, who had converted after meeting his wife, explained that "B'li Elohim has provided a place for him to have a relationship with Judaism because he had so much trouble getting behind what the Bible said,"[41] and now, he gets excited to share with other people what he learns from the rabbis at B'li Elohim or during Adult Studies classes on Sundays because he has found a way to appreciate Judaism without having to swallow the things that don't sit right with him. His wife cheered on in the background and yelled, "I don't have to believe the world was created in six days!"[42] B'li Elohim has not only given the two of them the language to describe their beliefs, but leadership in the congregation has also legitimized views like these from the pulpit.

Another aspect of respondents' philosophies is that people are more interested in the universal values that tie them to the rest of humanity than they are toward particular aspects of Jewish history, culture, religion, and literature. They don't always want to highlight their "chosenness" or what makes them unique. As Valerie explained, "I dont need to advertise that I'm one of the chosen people. Why do we have to talk about it?"[43] In terms of what nurtures these congregants, Jewish culture and peoplehood take precedence over religion and especially Judaism's particularities, which, while they exist within the food pyramids of their Judaism, they do not occupy foundational positions within.

Regarding beliefs about God, many respondents referenced "Spinoza's God" and ideas of a Prime Mover, or energy that created the universe and then stepped away. One respondent explained, "My God is Spinoza's God, I don't believe in a God that intervenes in human affairs and this is why I don't

[41] Eleven, interview with the author, September 23, 2021.
[42] Ibid
[43] Eight, interview with the author, September 21, 2021.

pray."[44] He likes B'li Elohim's liturgy because it doesn't "pretend" by asking for God's mercy, justice and forgiveness, or thanking God for what's good, and praying to prevent what's bad because to him, no amount of petitioning will make a difference. The general feeling among respondents was that if you wanted something to happen, you made it happen. This sense of agency is strong at B'li Elohim and the community feels very strongly that if they want to make something they happen, they choose action over traditional prayer because they see traditional prayer as empty requests toward a void. A more elaborate discussion of prayer and its role for the congregation will occur in later.

The relatively young age of the community is also a factor in congregants' decisions to become members. In the landscape of Cincinnati, B'li Elohim is a newer congregation, even if it is over 40 years old. I think respondents feel a lot of pride in seeing how B'li Elohim started and having a role in shaping the community in its early days. Many congregants spoke about seeing B'li Elohim in its various iterations: they reminisced about gathering in someone's living room during its formative years, the rented spaces where the community held High Holidays, and the years when Rabbi Klein would answer the phone himself. Since the congregation is still relatively small (there are currently about 280 individual members), people enjoy the tight knit community and accessibility of the rabbi. They saw where they could lend a hand during B'li Elohim's early, younger years, and stepped in to have a measurable impact on the community, like joining the Ritual and Lifecycle Committee to write liturgy. One congregant who remembered the first time he called to find out more information about B'li Elohim reminisced about Rabbi Klein picking up the phone. When he arrived for their meeting, he noticed the prayer "book" was a stapled Xerox copy and offered his skills as a graphic designer to beautify it. This same congregant also spoke about being "happily unaffiliated" after feeling shunned by the community where he was raised because he married a non-Jew. When his daughter asked him to speak to her

[44] Three, interview with the author, August 31, 2021.

elementary classroom about Hanukah, he was prompted to develop a sense of belonging with some Jewish institution in Cincinnati so he flipped open the yellow pages and found Rabbi Klein and B'li Elohim, a community where he ended up not only feeling a sense of kinship, but could also contribute. There are also respondents who belonged to multiple synagogues both in Cincinnati and in other cities where they have homes. One congregant raised his kids at Rockdale, but when he met Rabbi Klein in the lead up to his son's wedding to a woman who grew up at B'li Elohim, he appreciated the liberties Rabbi Klein took to evolve Judaism and eventually became a congregant. Congregants feel a sense of pride in being part of the "original crew" because they came in on the ground floor and helped to grow the Congregation.

Meredith, who was raised with a strong Jewish upbringing in an interfaith family talked about her first High Holiday experience at B'li Elohim. "I wanted to stand up multiple times and say, 'I totally agree!' I was so overwhelmed with how resonant the sermons were, how connected I felt to the liturgy, which clearly felt different because they wrote it. I also like the way that B'li Elohim acknowledges Torah, Tanakh and stories as legends and does it in a respectful way. B'li Elohim was the first place I went where Yom Kippur was treated like a celebration, like we *get* to have this opportunity of self-reflection every year. it's not about hating yourself and thinking about how terrible you are, but let's instead think about the ways we can hold our aspirations. I remember Rabbi Klein saying, 'this is a happy moment' and that really stuck with me. Plus, my non-Jewish partner feels comfortable there and that's important."

Preston, whose kids both had their *bar mitzvah* ceremonies at B'li Elohim, explained that the congregation helped him understand where he fit in the community, especially "the greater community

of the world."[45] As he said, “B’li Elohim offers me opportunities for introspection and the freedom to develop my own philosophy within the philosophy of the congregation; my perception of other religious institutions, is you don't have that freedom."[46] Like another congregant, Preston grew up with Conservative parents who were Jewish but not religious. Yet, they believed it was important for him and his siblings to know Jewish culture and history. Despite not growing up feeling connected to a synagogue, he has held several leadership positions at B’li Elohim over the past 12 years including Past President and Treasurer. "I still don’t think I have a concrete picture of what it means to be Jewish. I am who I am. I'm Jewish because my mother was Jewish and, by definition, that makes me Jewish. But I don't consider myself religiously Jewish because prayers in Hebrew dont mean anything to me; none of the traditional prayers have any kind of resonance with me. Even my concept of the State of Israel is… I don't feel that. I feel more of a spiritual connection to the community, through the shared beliefs that are baked into humanistic ideas. My Judaism is more community and less religion."[47] This respondent doesn't pray yet he's active in his community, and he would tell you that his human values, not his Jewish values, are what motivate him to be involved. He also believes in matrilineal descent, sometimes attends Friday night services, always lights a *Hanukiah* and has been very active on the Board; by his own agency, he has distilled Judaism into the parts that are most useful, meaningful, and relevant to him.

When he says that B’li Elohim gives him the space to develop his own philosophy and approach to Judaism, I wonder if everyone is there to work out the kinks of their beliefs and approaches, or if, to some extent, the congregation’s philosophies, while *avant garde*, are adopted as rote by some who don’t always want to wrestle and interrogate tradition? The questioning and inquisitive approach of

[45] Twelve, interview with the author, August 24, 2021.
[46] Ibid
[47] Ibid

congregants form the ethos for community members and have become part of the common space that attracts and encourages likeminded people. As Anita said, "we talk about stuff that nobody else would talk about and challenge things that no one else challenges publicly," and because the cognitive dissonance is brought into the public domain, people like Anita are able to connect more easily to the "spiritual parts of their life."[48] As has been described, respondents and congregants prefer an active thinking relationship with Judaism, as opposed to going through the motions and performing ritual in a rote way. Meredith spoke passionately about this topic. "Judaism should absolutely be something that makes me think and challenges me; I dont want to just read words in a book that I dont understand - that wouldn't be meaningful!"[49] For these congregants, active learning is more fruitful than prayer because they find value in approaching Torah and tradition with inquisitive and discerning eyes.

[48] Five, interview with the author, August 24, 2021.
[49] Six, interview with the author, August 30, 2021.

Jewish Practice: What do you do that's Jewish?

"What makes me Jewish? My craving for lox, bagels and brisket. My choice to listen to Klezmer music. That's Jewishness. What's Jewish about me is that I am not a member of any other religious group."

-Jack

Conversations around Jewish practice were revealing. It was common for people to begin their responses to this section of questions with a "trigger warning" of "I'm *not* (the word was usually religious) but I *do/am* _____." Even though the conversation functioned as an exercise in defining what Jewish practice looked like for them, they felt the need to begin their explanations with an apologetic. It was as if they were utilizing someone else's definition of Jewish practice and needed to explain what they did not do before describing what they *did* do. When people who were born Jewish described their current Jewish practice, it was often sandwiched between descriptions of what they did growing up or the way their parents practiced, and descriptions of practices or liturgy associated with Jewish movements. Statements were often substantiated or given caveats. Whereas people who had converted to Judaism described their Jewish practice without attached caveats.

The most recent PEW found that 27% of Jews identify as Jews of no religion, or secular.[50] In the question, "how would you say you are Jewish?", where the possible responses included: religious, cultural, ethnic, spiritual, humanistic, reform, or some combination, most respondents identified as "cultural." Do people select this response because it is indicative of how they actually feel, or because it is the best response among the options provided? Is there a lack of language for defining the place

[50] Pew Research Center, May 11, 2021, "Jewish Americans in 2020,"9.

people occupy on the spectrum of religiosity that leaves "spiritual" and “Jews of no religion” to be the only option? As this study will show, even unaffiliated Jews and Jews of “no religion” practice Jewish ritual. Also noteworthy is that almost everyone who was born Jewish said being Jewish is a "cultural" experience. For the four respondents who converted, this question was more difficult to answer. Since B’li Elohim divorces itself from the more religious and traditional aspects of Judaism, the way Jews-by-choice connect with tradition is largely through learning and the way Jews who inherited their Judaism connect is largely through peoplehood and culture. The two groups are not mutually exclusive which is to say that people who were brought up Jewish also connect with the intellectual component and people who converted to Judaism aren't disconnected from Jewish culture.

For Meredith Judaism is an intersection of "the spiritual, cultural, familial, genetic, just all of those things! But, of them all, the most compelling piece is for sure cultural. And a set of values and set of beliefs. Judaism is about the relationship between humans and between humans and nature, and also the relationship between nature and nature."[51] While Meredith appreciates the multivalent aspects of Judaism and how it reminds her of her spiritual and cultural connections she has with others and her connections with nature, others have a more univalent approach to Judaism. Oren explained that he appreciates the intellectual aspects of it. "Religion in general is an intellectual thing. There's no doubt about it, because what you end up believing or following relies on accepting or not accepting what everybody else is saying."[52] For someone like Oren who had a Presbyterian mother, a father who wasn't religious and describes himself as growing up without much religion, he felt he had to adopt Judaism in order to support his Jewish wife and her Jewish practice.

[51] Six, interview with the author, August 30, 2021.
[52] Eleven, interview with the author, September 23, 2021.

With regard to these categories of intellectual, spiritual, and cultural classifications of one's Jewish identity, Hannah spoke about the distinction between cultural and spiritual. "I'd definitely say I'm culturally Jewish. Spiritually? That's semantics. I feel like 'spiritually' doesn't mean I have to have a God image, but I still can have what is holy, what is valuable and what is important."[53] For some, identifying as a "Spiritual" Jew connotes an appreciation for Jewish culture and what is holy without referencing God. God and theology will be discussed in another section.

For Erin, there are parts of Judaism that are extremely meaningful in the spiritual, cultural, and religious categories. "Growing up, I wouldn't have considered myself to be religious. A lot of the beauty of B'li Elohim is that it gave me the freedom to be religious in whatever way I wanted to be. Because of that, I'm actually a lot more religious and spiritual now than I would have been if I went to a different congregation. I think when people grow up in other synagogues, they have an adverse experience to religion because of the confines they've experienced, but not me."

Sixty- two percent of respondents who were raised Jewish also grew up in Reform households, and fifteen percent came from Conservative backgrounds. It's important to note that one can't distill meaning and practice simply from a label of Conservative, Reform or Humanistic and that Jewish identity is malleable, changing over time as people change. For respondents, these categories are fluid in that just because someone was raised Conservative with parents who were Conservative doesn't mean that, ideologically, they were Conservative, or are Conservative today. For some, these labels could be helpful in determining and describing the way a person practices Judaism and for others, these labels merely reveal how a person was raised. Preston's parents were raised Conservative, but didn't really practice. He described himself as growing up in a "culturally Jewish household that did culturally

[53] Seven, interview with the author, September 20, 2021.

Jewish things."[54] His parents had two sets of dishes, but that was only for his grandparents and his parents didn't differentiate between meat dishes and milk dishes when his grandparents weren't around. In fact, when the grandparents weren't eating with them, the family ate bacon and only differentiated the dishes on the nights when the grandparents came for meals. Suffice it to say that qualitative questions and opportunities for storytelling are necessary to truly appreciate and understand what Jewish practice and identity actually mean; information that is not captured through quantitative surveys like PEW.

Fifty-four percent of people attended Jewish camp, one hundred percent of those raised Jewish attended some form of religious school, and fifty-seven percent of respondents had a *bar/bat mitzvah* as a child or as an adult. Jack was raised Jewish, did not have a *bar mitzvah* and does not consider the absence of it a void in his life. Many of the older women who participated spoke about wanting to have one when they were younger, but not being allowed to because they were women. Some respondents turned down the opportunity to have a *bar mitzvah* as kids because it was rote ritual and they determined it wasn't going to be meaningful, and others went through the motions and still saw it as a chore. Yet, all have some sort of Jewish identity that brought them to B'li Elohim as adults. One respondent had her *bat mitzvah* when she was 63, intentionally having it 50 years after she would've had one as a child and was more impactful because she had it on her own terms, as an adult.

With one hundred percent of respondents having attended some form of religious school, I wonder about the connection between the presence of a religious school background and the intellectual rigor of the congregation? Many of those who participated in this study also spoke fondly about attending the Adult Studies classes that have been offered every Sunday at B'li Elohim. Given the older demographic

[54] Twelve, interview with the author, August 24, 2021.

of the respondents, it makes sense that many of the women wouldn't have been permitted to have a *bat mitzvah* when they were young, but it's surprising that only one chose to become a *bat mitzvah* later in life after they became more widely accepted.

Fifty-four percent of respondents grew up in neighborhoods where there were a lot of Jews, fifty-eight percent had confirmations and thirty-eight percent were active with a Jewish youth group. Another important point of clarification is that for someone like Griffin, who was raised in a Jewish neighborhood, joining a youth group was not a priority because he already had Jewish friends. How much does the neighborhood in which someone was raised influence their connection to the Jewish community? Living in a neighborhood where there are not a lot of Jews can also be an impetus to join a congregation. One of the middle-aged respondents spoke about getting involved at B'li Elohim because she and her husband did not live in a neighborhood where there were a lot of Jews so it was important for them to expose their kids to Judaism by joining a Congregation.

The vast majority had Jewish friends in college. For some, this was motivated by the fact that they didn't grow up with a lot of Jewish friends and took the initiative in college to seek out Jews. Whereas for others who grew up without a lot of Jewish friends, seeking Jewish connections in college wasn't a priority because they continued their Jewish practice by virtually logging into Our Jewish Community. This could also explain the desire to affiliate with a Jewish community as adults—they already had strong social network connections with other Jews.

While college played a large role in some respondents' reconnecting to their Jewish identity, only forty-five percent were active with their local Hillel chapter. That's not to say that Hillel is the only medium for

connecting to Judaism on college campuses, but it was one of the most popular especially when these respondents were in college.

Regarding *kashrut*, not surprisingly, everyone emphatically said they didn't follow any sort of *kashrut* practice which follows the national trend which states that only six percent of unaffiliated Jews keep Kosher.[55] When pressed further, many explained that because it didn't make sense to them, they didn't see a reason to keep it. One couple who were both interviewed independently explained that they both need to have an understanding of something in order to commit to it and while they described *kashrut* as not falling into that, they also explained that there are certain foods like ham that they will not bring into their home. When attempting to define the reason behind this, I was told a story about the wife's Orthodox father who requested ham and Swiss sandwiches when he would visit their home. He wouldn't keep those foods where he lived, but would eat them when he went to his daughter's home. The arbitrary nature of the father's practice encouraged her and her husband to develop their own intentional practice. With the exception of one person, as generations moved further away from the 1st generation that emigrated, Jeiwsh observance decreased.

While one hundred percent of respondents observe High Holidays by either attending services at B'li Elohim, being with family or joining the congregation virtually/attending Adult Studies for High Holidays. Only thirty-one percent say that they fast for Yom Kippur which is more than the national average captured by PEW which found that 20% of secular Jews fast all or part of the day on Yom Kippur.[56] For this study, fasting was not defined as a strict fast, but rather as an intentional change in the way one ate

[55] Pew Research Center, May 11, 2021, "Jewish Americans in 2020," 78.
[56] Pew Research Center, May 11, 2021, "Jewish Americans in 2020," 71.

that day. Even for respondents like Preston who didn't grow up observant, the High Holidays are meaningful because they provide an "organized, structured, opportunity for introspection"[57] and because of this, he has attended High Holiday services every year since he has been a member. Another respondent makes the day meaningful by attending a queer Torah study with another group with which she is affiliated. This is something she sought out as a reflection of the intersection of her identities, and it provides another meaningful opportunity for observation and connection.

Many respondents said that fasting on Yom Kippur was not integral to their Jewish practice. In addition to it making them feel miserable, putting them in bad moods or giving them headaches, it also prevented them from being able to fully appreciate singing in the choir, enjoying the service and participating in the discussion/adult studies that they enjoyed attending. In an effort to determine which rituals and traditions to hold onto, fasting becomes an interesting one to look at. The difficult aspects of the ritual were seen as negative or uncomfortable and because of that, they were less valuable and couldn't compete against the positive aspects that people deemed more beneficial. While this approach around fasting was expected, what was surprising was that several people spoke about their strict fasts with a sense of pride attached. Two were siblings (so this could have to do with the way they were raised), two were partners (and this could have to do with their shared experience as spouses) and two were not connected. For one respondent, the reminder of the guilt she would feel from breaking it trumped her hunger and discomfort. For her, the forms of affliction associated with Yom Kippur (hunger and discomfort) were used as tools for determining fulfillment of the ritual.

For people living in in a remote area or for people who weren't able to attend High Holiday services in person, fasting also served as a mechanism for observing the holiday. Others spoke about using fasting

[57] Twelve, interview with the author, August 24, 2021.

as a "grounding technique"[58] meaning fasting was a reminder to be mindful of one's body and the way food affects it. Mollie, a younger congregant who grew up at B'li Elohim, spoke about being on the fence about fasting when she was younger because she didn't like that it felt like a form of punishment that Judaism expected from her. As an adult, she moved away from seeing it as a form of punishment and more as an opportunity for "self-observation." Now, fasting is a chance for her to "sit uncomfortably in [her] body, in [her] little corporal form."[59] She likes how fasting gives her a tangible version of the uncomfortable emotions she processes during [Yom Kippur]. "It really puts the observation in observance!"[60] For Mollie, observance and tradition are something she holds onto and values.

Other respondents, who were older, spoke about fasting when they were younger, but at a certain age, losing the will to continue. Aaron fasted up until a few years ago, but stopped when it was no longer clear why he was doing it. As he explained, " B'li Elohim has taught me that you should do things with intention and meaning, and I could no longer justify it." Keeping with the topic of intention: a handful of respondents spoke about "fasting" by eating differently on Yom Kippur; maybe it's by just having coffee or cutting out coffee, or only having a protein shake, People are still creating boundaries between what is profane and what is sacred using food and perhaps the terminology of "fasting" isn't fitting.

Anita admitted that when she was younger, she used fasting as a "badge of honor"[61] directed toward her parents whose traditional Jewish practice she "didn't relate to." Here, fasting was used as a tool for proving one can be "more Jewish" even when they have new traditions. Anita talked about using Yom Kippur as a symbolic reset for the new year. "I take the day off from work and turn off electronics. We

[58] Fourteen, interview with the author, October 4, 2021.
[59] Ibid
[60] Ibid
[61] Five, interview with the author, August 24, 2021.

do some work outside in the yard. I reflect every day of the year so that's why Yom Kippur is more of a reset [as opposed to a day of reflection]. I find that I naturally now fall into a pattern of reflection, and look at how I can improve and what my life looks like. But I like connecting with nature on Yom Kippur because it takes me out of my head and into the real world. Since I don't live in Cincinnati anymore, I don't 'do holiday stuff' as much because I am away from the B'li Elohim community. Without that community and those people that I would do that with… I just don't do that here in Arizona."[62] Anita hasn't found a congregation in her new city that satisfies what B'li Elohim once provided so for Rosh Hashanah in 2021, she attended services online and had a dinner with her sister and her husband. Then she streamed Kol Nidrei services and Yom Kippur services in the morning. She didn't fast, but she attended a breakfast. The role of community is crucial for her and in the digital world as Zoom becomes more and more utilized, one of the challenges will be to create a one-dimensional replication of the multidimensional sense of community created from in-person prayer, programs and partnership/personhood/community.

PEW asked whether people mark Shabbat in a way that is meaningful to them and among secular Jews, who PEW codes as Jews of no religion, nine percent mark *Shabbat* sometimes, three percent mark it often, and eighty-seven percent said they rarely or never mark *Shabbat*.[63] In this study, two questions related to *Shabbat* were asked. Do you light *Shabbat* candles and do you attend Friday night services? With regard to *Shabbat* candles: forty-one percent of respondents light sometimes, eleven percent light all of the time, forty-seven percent said they rarely or never light. As to whether people attend Friday night services: twenty percent always attend, sixty percent sometimes attend, and twenty percent said they never attend. Anita, who no longer lives in Cincinnati, reminisced about celebrating the High

[62] Ibid
[63] Pew Research Center, May 11, 2021, "Jewish Americans in 2020," 74.

Holidays with the congregation. While she will still stream services, she found it more meaningful to do it with a community, in person, and misses that element. Some congregants spoke similarly about Passover and explained that celebrating it alone, even when streaming, is less compelling for them. I wonder if something similar applies to the trends about Shabbat observance? The difference between the national secular population and the rate of observance at B'li Elohim is noticeable: by providing a congregation for secular Jews to gather and mark Shabbat, more secular Jews are engaging in the ritual than the average population which may or may not have to do with the availability of Jewish spaces where likeminded people can gather to observe traditions in the ways they prefer to observe them. As mentioned previously, one hundred percent of respondents light a *Hannukiah* during *Hannukah* even though for some it's "mostly for the grandkids."[64] This is on par with Marshall Sklare's three criteria for rituals most observed, which, in his 1967 publication, found that younger generations would have an increased emphasis on *Hannukah*, the Passover *seder,* and maintenance of or increased observance of some Sabbath ritual.[65]While the latest PEW Portrait of Jewish America didn't ask specifically about lighting a *Hannukiah*, they did ask about owning a *menorah* and found that fifty-seven percent of secular Jews had one in their households.[66] So, it is noteworthy that one hundred percent of B'li Elohim survey respondents observe *Hannukah* in some way because that number is higher than the national average. Same goes for owning a *seder* plate and a *mezuzah:* though PEW found that, respectively, only twenty-three percent and twenty-eight percent of secular Jews have these items,[67] eighty-eight percent of survey respondents always attend or host a Passover *seder,* twelve percent sometimes attend or host, and eighty-nine percent own a *mezuzah.* I believe that the higher rate of observance within this population has mostly to do with the presence of a likeminded community with whom congregants can

[64] Sixteen, interview with the author, October 5, 2021.
[65] Marshall Sklare and Joseph Greenblum. *Jewish Identity on the Suburban Frontier: A Study of Group Survival in the Open Society*, 55.
[66] Pew Research Center, May 11, 2021, "Jewish Americans in 2020," 79.
[67] Ibid

observe the rituals as well as specific B'li Elohim services that were written for these rituals which make accessing and observing them easier to do.

Regarding the way B'li Elohim specific liturgy and programs make Judaism accessible to the worldview of its members: several respondents spoke about their B'li Elohim *Haggadot* being "well thumbed" and "more enjoyable" than the *Haggadot* often used in traditional settings. As Anita explained earlier, she doesn't like the *Haggadah* her family uses- she prefers the one written by B'li Elohim. On top of that, the spirit of the holiday brings out the Jewish mother in her. "Let me take care of you and bring you into my home and make you feel welcomed and part of something that's important to me. That's what a *Seder* is: invite somebody in that doesn't have anywhere else to go."[68] In addition to the holiday motivating her to open her home and dining room table, the B'li Elohim *Haggadah* makes Passover a ritual she wants to share. For many respondents, Passover was their favorite holiday and for one Jew-by-choice, Passover was the reason she converted.

When asking people whether the phrase "Jewish values" resonated, many instead chose to talk about their "human values" or "*tikkun olam*" and I believe that this preference for "human values" is symbolic of a preference for a more universal approach toward Judaism. One respondent explained that what he understood as Jewish values actually weren't uniquely Jewish: to him, the concept of *tikkun olam*, of liberal thought, and dedication to education were humanistic values. As if to say, these values are common to people who care, and people who care aren't all Jewish. Another respondent explained that *tikkun olam* was synonymous for Jewish values: "it's caring for the world, caring for the less fortunate, wrestling with difficult questions and doing what's right. It's the opportunity to talk about the gray

[68] Five, interview with the author, September 20, 2021.

because things are rarely just black and white."[69] The idea of Jewish values help her to be a more open minded and understanding person and opposed to strictly following the rules and her human-centered approach to being Jewish applies to how she carries out those values.

Others understood Jewish values differently: Mollie explained that it was the way she does the work she does and the way she talks about it. "I wouldn't be the person I am if it weren't for Judaism: there are things that are inherently and exclusively Jewish in my mind, like the way I find humor in things."[70] For others, the phrase "Jewish values" was defined through a description of their Jewish identity. Mollie continued," I wouldn't be studying and doing what I am doing if it weren't for my Jewish upbringing and the influence of Judaism in my life and worldview."[71] For Mollie, Jewish values are a "general motivator" for how to live her life. "They mean so much to me, they're so integral to my identity that it's not until I start feeling not like myself and like I'm not on the right path that I become aware of the absence. In academia, they inform how I approach situations and comment in class, and I always give a disclaimer that's like, 'I'm coming from a Jewish perspective.'"[72]

For others, Jewish values were what motivated them to get involved in their Jewish community and their broader community. PEW found that sixteen percent of secular Jews and eighteen percent of unaffiliated Jews engaged in political activism as an expression of their Jewishness.[73] Although, in these instances *tikkun olam* was described as the motivator for helping people, or for not sitting idly by. Hannah gave an example of a time when her Jewish values motivated her to speak up. While enrolled in a real estate class at her local community college "the teacher was really out of line talking about who

[69] Eighteen, interview with the author, September 23, 2021.
[70] Fourteen, interview with the author, October 4, 2021.
[71] Ibid
[72] Ibid
[73] Pew Research Center, May 11, 2021, "Jewish Americans in 2020," 77.

you can and cannot discriminate against. And I just, you know, I spoke up and that was a big deal, because they could have failed me, but as a Jew I just couldn't sit there and be silent."

Oren explained that he tries to do good deeds and *mitzvot*, but that urge is motivated by his human values more than his Jewish values and have more to do with being human than being religious. Even though he cited human values as his motivation, he still used the Jewish term *mitzvot* to describe the how his human values manifest. The same thing happened with Preston who talked about his extensive involvement in the congregation which he owed to his human values more than his Jewish values. He didn't cite examples of his involvement in secular organizations, just roles at the congregation that he has occupied. One would think that involvement in a Jewish organization is directly correlated with Jewish values, but Preston's decisions were motivated by his human heart, not just his Jewish heart.

Others are better at putting the finger on the reasons for their involvement: Griffin intentionally involves himself in Jewish communal and peoplehood activities because those are part of his Jewish practice while Aaron explained that his "Jewishness" motivates him to give to Jewish organizations. Meredith summarized it well: "I believe that Jewish values are inherently liberal and inherently democratic and justice oriented," and that's why they're often also described as human values for her. "Absolutely, the causes that I advocate for are 100% rooted to my Jewish identity and values. They've shaped who I am and who I hope my kids become."

For Erin, the distinction between Jewish values and human values lies in the fact that Jewish values are actually discussed in Jewish communities. As she defined each category, I could see the wheels turning in her mind. "While I think a lot of Jewish values should be human values, I don't think that they necessarily are. Also, I know some Jewish people who hold values that I do not think are Jewish and I'm

surprised that they, as Jewish people, hold those values. How can a person be Jewish and racist? That's something that just kind of doesn't make sense to me. My Jewish values don't have any effect on what I eat, but if I see injustices happen to another group, it's hard for me to turn a blind eye. Being Jewish has not made me anymore empathetic to others' struggles because that's just the person I am, but I think being Jewish is my call to action."[74]

List of holidays, rituals and activities respondents observed frequently:

- Hosting or attend a Passover *seder*
- Lighting a *Hannukiah*
- Observing the High Holidays
- Attending Adult Studies classes
- Attended religious school as children
- Had Jewish friends when they were young
- Had Jewish friends in college
- Owned a *mezuzah*
- Didn't keep kosher

List of things respondents did infrequently (less than fifty percent) or weren't likely to be part of:

- Join the JCC (92.3% = no)
- Belonged to a Jewish youth group when they were young (62.5% = no)

[74] Fifteen, interview with the author, October 4, 2021.

A place for interfaith families, non-Jewish partners, and Jews by Choice

"They're very welcoming of couples like us… B'li Elohim has every kind of mix of every kind of couple or unmarried folks. I love that we can make our own path and set our own priorities and feel comfortable being included there; I am included and considered a member even though I'm not Jewish – I am a member! Here's the thing: If you want to be there and you're a member in good standing, you are 100% a member and nobody says 'well, your husband can come up to the bimah *and read, but you can't.' No, none of that. I want to be at a place where I'm actually wanted, and not just known as 'the non-Jewish spouse.' All of these factors play a role in retaining interfaith couples and families as well as attracting more."* – Marjorie

Nationally, the rate of intermarriage among unaffiliated Jews is sixty-eight percent[75] and among secular Jews, this increases to seventy-nine percent.[76] Excluding the Orthodox, seventy-two percent of all marriages since 2010 have been between a Jew and a non-Jew[77] and yet, Jews ages 18 to 49 who have one Jewish parent are more likely than those ages 50 and older to describe themselves as Jewish thus meaning that despite the increased rate of intermarriage, the children of intermarriage have become increasingly likely to identify as Jewish in adulthood.[78] Although it was not the purpose of the congregation when it was established in 1980, B'li Elohim turns out to be a particularly comfortable place for interfaith families, couples, converts and non-Jewish partners. Given the trends noted by PEW, I was curious to find out how B'li Elohim creates a supportive and welcoming environment for these growing demographics within our communities, and I think rabbis interested in doing outreach could learn a lot from this congregation.

[75] Pew Research Center, May 11, 2021, "Jewish Americans in 2020," 98.
[76] Pew Research Center, May 11, 2021, "Jewish Americans in 2020," 94.
[77] Pew Research Center, May 11, 2021, "Jewish Americans in 2020," 93.
[78] Ibid

Out of the total number of respondents in this study, seventy-two percent were either married or divorced. Of those who were married, thirty-one percent had partners that were not Jewish and twenty-three percent of the couples who were married had a partner who converted to Judaism. Two of the respondents who converted were not married or divorced and three of the respondents were children of interfaith marriages.

Interestingly, B'li Elohim does not measure the number of interfaith families or non-Jews at the congregation, which currently has about 280 individual members, the majority of whom are families or couples. As has previously been described, the congregation prides itself on the way it navigates the line between science and tradition and therefore wrote its own liturgy to reflect this negotiation. Liturgy, prayer practices and theology will be described in more detail later.

The liturgy is primarily written in a poetic English style that doesn't follow traditional Jewish prayer structures. It doesn't contain any descriptions of God, but it references nature, wonderment, and some tradition too. Respondents found the liberties that the Ritual and Lifecycle Committee took with the liturgy helped to create a canon of relatable poetry that guides them through lifecycle events and occasional holidays. Given these changes and the English utilized, interfaith couples, non-Jewish partners, and converts have a much stronger sense of what is going on during services and are therefore more likely to retain some value from the experience because it no longer purely relies on an emotional connection for people to have meaningful experiences; they now have agency because they know what's going on and, for the most part, they agree with what's being said. As Madelyn explained, "Everything is either done in English, or there are translations available and then I'm not just mouthing words I don't understand. I don't want to just mouth words from the transliteration, and not have an

idea what I'm saying. I want to know the meaning behind it and if I don't actually believe it, I really don't want to say it."[79]

The use of English was important for both Jewish partners and non-Jewish partners, one of whom, even felt empowered to submit liturgy when the Ritual and Lifecycle Committee wrote their liturgy. Another congregant who converted to Judaism independent of her partner switched from Rockdale to B'li Elohim because she needed more English and for her, Judaism and services were about learning, and she couldn't learn if she didn't know what was going on. In fact, she joined B'li Elohim because of its convenience and accessibility. As she says, "I got into humanistic Judaism because it was convenient, it was easy to access, and there weren't restrictions to be part of it."[80]

The desire to understand what is being said to make sure those words are in alignment with what a person believes was a theme that came up repeatedly. For many, because B'li Elohim is not "enslaved to ritual," they are deemed "evolved" and willing to "shuck and jive." As Anita said, "if you stand still when the universe shifts, you're gonna fall, but if you can shuck and jive and be flexible, you'll be able to move with it. It's not going to be easy, but you'll evolve and that's what B'li Elohim is doing- it provides a model for how we can be Jewish while keeping [Judaism] relevant."[81] Since what is deemed "relevant" is entirely subjective and depends on how one defines the word, it must be assumed that this congregation is also made up of people who have similar categorizations of what about Judaism is relevant, what needs to evolve, and what is worth putting on the backburner.

[79] Eighteen, interview with the author, September 23, 2021.
[80] Nine, interview with the author, September 28, 2021.
[81] Five, interview with the author, September 20, 2021.

In celebrating the more universal and humanistic aspects of Judaism, some of the particularities that make Judaism unique are either relegated to the sidelines, or "tossed out with the bathwater."[82] What remains are the aspects that more people are likely to understand and since more people understand what's going on, they are more likely to be involved. The congregation allows all people on the *bimah* for *b'nai mizvah* regardless of whether they're Jewish or not and the congregation also allows non-Jewish partners to be on the board, which makes them feel like their opinions matter to the congregation. In addition, the small size of the congregation and its relatively young history, creates an environment where people feel like they can have a role in shaping the community. Marjorie, who sits on the board, explained that it's important for her to be able to participate one hundred percent with anything going on with her family, even if she hasn't converted. Among the many things she appreciates about B'li Elohim is their prioritization of English because it helps her have a strong sense of what is going on. "I'm involved in the community and when I talk to people about B'li Elohim, I'll say, 'I belong to B'li Elohim, but I'm not Jewish,' and they'll look at me like, 'So what are you?' It's actually a question I've been asked several times. I wasn't really raised with any religion, even though my aunt would occasionally take me to church with her for Easter or Christmas. So today, even though I don't consider myself Jewish, I am comfortable saying, 'I'm a member of B'li Elohim because it's such a unique place, it's the majority of my Jewish education and I appreciate their humanistic values.'"[83]

Marjorie was a classroom helper in the Sunday School, is allowed to be on the *bima*, and was able to have an *aliyah* for her children's *b'nai mitzvah* ceremonies. "I think it's important for other communities to do the same. I liked being able to learn right along with my kids in class and it was beneficial to have opportunities for education for spouses who are like me, who come in and maybe feel like they aren't

[82] Seven, interview with the author, September 20, 2021.
[83] Eighteen, interview with the author, September 23, 2021.

quite sure what's going on for a while because it's all very new and foreign. Where else are we going to learn all of this?"

Rabbi Klein officiated at Marjorie's wedding after her mother-in-law, who was working for the congregation, recommended a rabbi who "married interfaith couples," which was not common in the 1980s. Ten years later, they joined the temple because they had children and wanted the kids to be raised Jewish, and be with other Jewish kids since their neighborhood didn't have a lot of Jews in it. "My husband was the first Jewish person I ever met so a lot of my knowledge about Judaism comes from B'li Elohim, and I feel like I'm included in the community and can get on board with what they say because the congregation has been a good compromise for my husband and I considering where I was coming from and his conservative upbringing. B'li Elohim has been the source of my Jewish knowledge."[84] She admits that going to more traditional environments for her niece's and nephew's *b'nai mitzvah* ceremonies or other lifecycle events can be a struggle because she doesn't know the traditional prayers and it makes her feel out of place. "If you're Jewish, you kind of feel like you should be able to go into any Temple and know what's going on. With B'li Elohim being my Jewish home and having not grown up with all those traditions... I have no idea what's going on when I'm at the conservative synagogue where my husband's family belongs."[85] In many ways, Marjorie feels part of the community despite having not converted (it's her "Jewish home"), but when she is outside the walls of the congregation, she is reminded of her non-Jewish status and all she does not know.

For respondents who grew up at B'li Elohim, the contrast between the traditional Jewish elements they were taught and the elements they weren't taught is a touchy subject. Mollie was raised in a house with

[84] Eighteen, interview with the author, September 23, 2021.
[85] Ibid

a Jewish mom and a father who wasn't Jewish, but also didn't associate with any other religions. She and her sister were raised one hundred percent Jewish, but celebrated Christmas, which, for the majority of her childhood, she thought was an American holiday, not a Christian one. Mollie had a positive experience growing up at B'li Elohim and explained that when she was in college, she would try out other Jewish spaces like Chabad and Hillel. The experience was difficult because she didn't know the *shema* and the majority of traditional liturgy. "I felt like an outsider, and I remember at certain points being a bit angry that B'li Elohim hadn't given me that. I was kind of like, 'Well, what the heck! I'm trying to enter another community now and I don't know what is going on and I didn't want someone to look at me and say, 'You're not Jewish because you don't know these things.'"[86] She didn't like feeling self-conscious about what she didn't know because she has always been very proud of her Judaism and her upbringing at B'li Elohim. In fact, today she is more religious than she was when she was younger, and she feels that's because B'li Elohim emphasized the "best parts of Judaism." She continued, "When I was growing up, I wouldn't have considered myself to be religious. The beauty of B'li Elohim is that it gives you the freedom to be religious in whatever way you want to be and because of that, I'm actually a lot more religious and spiritual now than I would have been if I were raised at a congregation where it was just assumed that everyone was religious."[87]

Regarding Jewish literacy, when she was in other Jewish spaces, she didn't like when tradition and customs were emphasized too much because, to her, it felt desperate. "They're desperately trying to keep Judaism alive through *Shabbat* and other rituals, and it creates kind of a rigidity that leaves out the spirit of Judaism, which is learning and engaging in meaningful ways."[88] Even for the kids who were raised at B'li Elohim, education trumps tradition.

[86] Fourteen, interview with the author, October 4, 2021.
[87] Ibid
[88] Fourteen, interview with the author, October 4, 2021.

Like Mollie, Erin also feels proud of the way she is Jewish, but self-conscious about her unique upbringing when in more traditional spaces. “I felt very uncomfortable at Chabad because to me, I feel very Jewish. I love being Jewish and I think I am a good Jew. When I met with that rabbi, it was very obvious that they didn't think I was doing enough to be Jewish, which is why I didn't want anything to do with them. Because I love my Judaism. I love the type of Jewish that I am and they kind of made me feel bad about it.”[89] On one hand, B’li Elohim’s approach creates an accessible form of Judaism that people of all backgrounds and families of all types can appreciate. On the other hand, the unique distillation makes people feel self-conscious about what they don’t know when they’re in other, more traditional Jewish spaces.

Meredith was also the child of an interfaith family but joined B’li Elohim after moving to Cincinnati. While her mother was Roman Catholic and her father was Jewish, it was her mom who was intent on making sure the kids had a firm Jewish upbringing. Meredith attended an Orthodox Jewish Day School, another school associated with the Chabad movement, and went to both Orthodox and Reform youth programs. As she grew up, she participated in more reform programs. Today, she is the Executive Director of a Jewish organization in Cincinnati. She and her non-Jewish husband are both members of B’li Elohim along with their two children. When describing her Jewish identity, she explained, “it’s a combination of spiritual, cultural, familial, genetic, but the most compelling pieces for me are for sure the culture, the values, and the set of beliefs. And I’ve only just become comfortable even using that language! I even had an icky reaction to ‘I’m not spiritual,’ but I totally am.”[90] Regarding the unique way B’li Elohim approaches the synthesis of both science, religion and humanism, Meredith appreciates that the congregation still has a little Hebrew in their music and their prayers because, to her, it reminds her

[89] Fifteen, interview with the author, October 5, 2021.
[90] Six, interview with the author, August 30, 2021.

of the traditional reform services she attended while growing up (this feedback was unique among congregants who grew up Jewish) and the English helps her non-Jewish husband feel welcome. They both like the way the congregation has an active learning approach toward Torah and feel that culturally and ethos-wise, they get along well with the other young families.

In addition to B'li Elohim's liberal distillation of Jewish tradition and their use of English, is the added elements of the rabbi, who many described as non-judgmental. The rabbis bring both knowledge and flexibility when it comes to their congregants' fluid Jewish observance and practices. Catherine explained, "Rabbi Klein doesn't care if I fast and there's comfort in that."[91] That mindset contributes to B'li Elohim being regarded as a welcoming space for people with a wide array of backgrounds, Jewish knowledge, or lack thereof, and practices.

Oren identified as Jewish even though he never formally converted because his wife, Marjorie, who was born Jewish, took it upon herself to be his teacher. She interjected during our interview and explained that when she found out what was involved in conversion, she did not want him to be more Jewish than she. "I know that sounds weird, but during the conversion process, you have to start believing in all the things I had already gone to Hebrew school and realized, 'No, don't believe in that part and I'll accept that part, but no, I don't believe in that part either.' I figured if he converted, it would cause more problems than if I simply taught him, so his 'conversion' wasn't formal."[92]

Oren and Marjorie have interesting perceptions of traditional Judaism because his wife was raised conservative in Brooklyn. Oren, who didn't grow up with much religion but had a Presbyterian mother

[91] Four, interview with the author, August 24, 2021.
[92] Eleven, interview with the author, September 23, 2021.

and a dad who wasn't religious, believes that his non-religious upbringing made it easier for him to 100% adopt Marjorie's traditions. "Everybody believes I'm Jewish because of how I look," Oren explained touching his long beard. "I believe I'm Jewish." While he has absorbed his Jewish knowledge through what has been shared and observed in their family, he also talks with pride about looking more Jewish than his wife and fasting more strictly than his in-laws. When they first got together, the couple faced a lot of difficulties from the wife's observant family, and it makes them feel good when things happen that point out the arbitrariness of the lines defining what is Jewish and what's not, especially as those lines blur in their family. Growing up, Marjorie had red hair and she always felt like people questioned her Jewishness because of it. Then, after marrying Oren and telling people she was in an interfaith relationship, "people, especially Jews, would assume that he was the Jewish one!"[93]

Aaron was another respondent who married a non-Jew, but had a unique way of celebrating holidays with his wife, who was raised Catholic but today identifies as Lutheran. "She celebrates all major Jewish holidays with me, and I go to church with her on Christmas Eve."[94] The majority of people in interfaith marriages, or children of interfaith marriages, talk about the non-Jewish partner not being religious to begin with and this makes the way that Aaron has negotiated these differences even more interesting. Judaism and Christianity may have conflicting theologies, but those are irrelevant to Aaron and his wife who find it more important to support each other's traditions by showing up so their partner doesn't have to attend things alone.

There is something about the environment at B'li Elohim that supports couples like these; as if to say, "your partner isn't Jewish? No problem! You go to Church with them for Christmas? No big deal, we

[93] Ten, interview with the author, August 26, 2021.
[94] Thirteen, interview with the author, September 21, 2021.

have others who might even do the same." This cross support doesn't just strengthen the foundation of the congregation in that it normalizes the tendency for small ethnic groups to intermarry,[95] but it also creates an environment where each partner can deepen their religious identity in a way that's not dependent on their partner converting to their religion. Although, the degree to which the non-Jewish partner is involved in Jewish life does indicate something about the place of Judaism in the Jewish partner's life, and subsequently the home and the family, if children are also involved. Though, this data was not measured over the course of this study.

Aaron's situation is interesting in that he grew up at Temple Sholom, a reform temple in Cincinnati, and where he went all the way through High School graduation. After Temple Sholom's rabbi declined to officiate at his wedding, Aaron sought a rabbi who would. Even though he found one from another Temple, he remained "happily unaffiliated" until stumbling across B'li Elohim in the Yellow Pages, after being prompted to connect to a congregation when his daughter started asking him about Judaism. "You know, I was a Jew and I believed in the holidays, but not much else."[96] Aaron's wife's Catholicism weighed more heavily than his Jewishness which is why they decided to raise their children Catholic. Even though the kids were baptized, they still participated in the same major Jewish holidays in which Aaron's wife joined him. "After agreeing that my kids would be baptized, I regretted it because I felt like I had betrayed my birthright, but if you were to ask them today, they would probably say that they are both Jewish and Christian."[97] Aaron went on to explain that when his older sister, who was also raised reform but now identifies as a conservative Jew, found out about her niece and nephew identifying as both Jewish and Christian, she told him that they couldn't be both. At that point, Aaron took the matter to Rabbi Klein. "He actually agreed with her, which surprised me, because he's performed many

[95] Bruce Phillips, *New Demographic Perspectives on Studying Intermarriage in the United States*, 108-109.
[96] Ibid
[97] Thirteen, interview with the author, September 21, 2021.

interfaith marriages and has a certain take on how that should work."[98] Yet, as any congregant at B'li Elohim will tell you, people's religious identities can be amorphous, complicated and full of contradictions and B'li Elohim would probably be the perfect environment for Aaron's children, should they ever want to deepen their relationship with the Jewish component of their identities.

Rabbi Klein sets a certain tone at B'li Elohim by being fairly non-judgmental, agreeing to officiate at interfaith marriages, and by allowing non-Jews to have just has many privileges at the congregation as Jews. Overall, the congregation as an institution creates an inviting environment through these measures and its prioritization of English over Hebrew which serves to welcome people of all backgrounds, literacy and proficiency levels.

[98] Ibid

Jewish Continuity

"What do I do with all of the stuff my grandfather and father told me? I remember learning about chosenness at camp and that's one of those things that made me think, 'what do I do with this?' It's all in my head- there are no commandments, there are only natural laws of humanity to do right by each other and everything else is made up." -Andrea Kranitz

I began this project with the question of Jewish continuity: what are the practices of secular Jews and if they differ from the practices that precede them,, how are they passed on in a way that ensures continuity through recognizability? Therefore, it was important for me to investigate how congregants approached ideas of obligation in terms of Jewish continuity and their commitment to maintain Judaism for themselves and for their families. I was curious: does a human-centered approach to Judaism make people feel less obligated toward the Jewish community in comparison to humanity as a whole and how do congregants understand concepts like chosenness and the idea of being either different or set apart from other ethnic and religious groups? Given that many congregants are the first in their families to be part of B'li Elohim, or for the few who grew up in the congregation, it was interesting for me to understand what Jewish continuity meant to them, what it looked like, and how it compared for congregants who had pivoted from their more traditional Jewish upbringings and for those who had converted to Judaism.

Regarding ideas related to chosenness, I suspected that many who preferred to use the term "human-centered values" to "Jewish values" would not resonate with this concept which shifted during the 17th and 18th centuries as self-perceptions of the Jew changed in shifting historical and political contexts. Given the congregation's affinity for Spinoza, who argued for universal religion, it would make sense if congregants also believed that this particularistic concept was simply a "product of the Jewish mind and

understanding rather than a part of the universalistic truth."[99] Further in line with the approaches of congregants as articulated through this study, are the writings of 18th century theologian, Moses Mendelssohn. Mendelssohn understood the tenets of Judaism to be eternal truths that were accessible to all of humanity which would create a more universal understanding of Judaism by making the essential truths found in Torah available and valid for everyone. To Mendelssohn, who was a fan of using reason and logic to help people discover their religious truths,[100] morality does not require election by God and the aspects of Jewish teaching and tradition that made it particularistic could now provide a universal set of beliefs to everyone.[101] While the majority of respondents spoke about wanting to pass on Judaism, it was difficult to discern whether this sense of responsibility was rooted in a sense of Jewish obligation. For some, "obligation" reminded them of the rules and Jewish law from which they had emphatically turned away and for others, it was bound with the tradition that had motivated their ancestors to pass on Judaism and framed the way things had always been done.

Griffin was the only person who spoke about feeling a sense of obligation to preserve and protect belief systems that are important to the Jewish people even if he doesn't follow them. "They're important to large parts of the community that I'm part of so I feel obligated to protect them."[102] For Marjorie, being Jewish was something she chose for herself; it was not something she felt obligated to accept simply because it was passed down to her. Conversely, she did say that she had an obligation to not only "remain" Jewish in deference to her ancestors who "went through hell and back," but to also "pass down the memory of what it means to be Jewish"[103] to her daughter. For people like Marjorie who see themselves as rational, modern, and enlightened, there is a desire to distinguish themselves from the

[99] Salime Leyla Gurkan*, The Jews as a Chosen People: Tradition and Transformation*, 50.
[100] Robert Seltzer, *Jewish People, Jewish Thought,* 100.
[101] Gurkan*, The Jews as a Chosen People: Tradition and Transformation*, 55.
[102] Three, interview with the author, August 31, 2021.
[103] Ten, interview with the author, August 26,2021.

traditions of their parents, with which many have negative associations. In many ways, it is hard for people like Marjorie to emulate some of the same practices and hold some of the same ideas that may have motivated the generations that came before them. This is because the majority of respondents pivoted from the traditions with which they were raised, and there's a tendency to want to see themselves as more enlightened than their ancestors when in actuality, many of the Jewish motivations are similar.

On one hand, they disagree with ideas of obligation when they solely understand the term to mean adherence to Jewish law, or if they understand it to mean being responsible for replicating traditions they don't agree with or understand. On another hand, some acknowledge a sense of responsibility with regard to their Jewishness and feel charged to pass it on because they acknowledge that Judaism has made their lives meaningful. There is also a third component which is evident when people like Marjorie say that they wouldn't care if their children didn't raise their children as Jews because "that's up to them." She doesn't want her daughter to do something purely from a place of obligation; rather she wants her daughter's decision to pass on Judaism to be motivated by choice, like her decision was. Other respondents also spoke about obligation to their ancestors and to future generations. Catherine feels an obligation toward her ancestors and wants her children to be part of an "unbroken chain." The idea of maintaining Jewish identity and feeling a sense of guilt about breaking the continuity was also expressed when she asked rhetorically, "It's that nagging feeling that makes me ask, who am I to break the chain? I want my kids to learn they are Jewish because [that's what I learned]." [104] This data is interesting because among secular Jews, four percent think it's important that their children and grandchildren are Jewish and among unaffiliated Jews, this increases to eleven percent.[105]

[104] Four, interview with the author, August 24, 2021.
[105] Pew Research Center, May 11, 2021, "Jewish Americans in 2020," 103.

Maintaining an unbroken chain is different for each person. For Julie, this is ensured by keeping the traditions that "have meaning in the 21st century or taking traditions and revising them in some way."[106] How does one decide which traditions are relevant, worthy of practicing and passing down, and which ones are obsolete and deserve to be tossed out? For Jack, obligation is about rules and rules don't enter his Jewish identity other than being "an area that is worthy of study." The only sense of obligation he feels is "to declare [his] Jewishness." [107] For his wife who converted to Judaism, her obligation factors into her decision to convert and raise their children as Jewish and thinks she fulfilled the promise she made to herself to "give the world three Jewish kids."[108] She admits that they grew up and each "did their own thing" meaning, they did not marry other Jews, but at least they grew up at B'li Elohim. As she said, "I feel okay because I did that part. Now let's work on the next generation and see what we can do. With them, I feel a responsibility, not an obligation." This responsibility motivates her to "enrich, help create, and help support the next generation,"[109] and it manifests through making sure her grandchildren attend Sunday School each week so they can be brought up with the same values espoused at B'li Elohim. Another factor in a person's decision to promulgate Judaism is to not just to make sure Judaism is passed down, but a recognizable Judaism is practiced by one's children and grandchildren. This ensures that parents and children, grandparents and grandchildren not only share the same values, but have recognizable practices and can participate with one another. In the case of B'li Elohim, where liturgy and many traditions have been modified and differ from traditional Jewish spaces, it is important for these new practices to be transmitted to another generation so what started 40+ years ago won't be lost.

[106] One, interview with the author, August 31,2021.
[107] Sixteen, interview with the author, October 4, 2021.
[108] Ibid
[109] Ibid

Some respondents who had converted had a tough time understanding the concept of obligation and when it was explained to them, folks like Oren responded, "If I feel a sense of obligation at all, it's not because I'm Jewish- it's because I'm a human and alive."[110] Others like Jean plainly said that the idea "just didn't resonate."[111] Even respondents who were raised Jewish had similar thoughts about obligation which made me wonder how obligation is talked about within the congregation?

As Meredith explained, "Rabbi Klein taught us that a sense of obligation comes from being human, not from being Jewish."[112] Perhaps approaches toward a person's community and future generations are more influenced by their general approaches toward brotherhood and humanity and less about their deference to what they inherited from their ancestors? The way a person is taught about obligation is also a contributing factor because if Rabbi Klein's approach were Jewish specific and rooted in prioritizing other Jews over the whole community, then the congregation's approach would likely to follow his lead given the reverence people have toward Rabbi Klein's teachings.

This redefining of obligation as something that is rooted in choice is felt by others like Erin and her sister, Mollie. Erin distinguished between feeling a sense of obligation toward Judaism and *wanting* to be obligated to it. As opposed to being motivated by guilt or responsibility, she felt as though she wanted to learn more and do more for Judaism because it benefits her. Rabbi Klein's reframing of obligation as something people *get* to do versus something people are *expected* to do is apparent in congregants' philosophies about the topic. For Mollie, being Jewish makes her feel special and unique, but not chosen. As she said, "I feel as though my obligations as a Jewish person are the same as the obligations

[110] Eleven, interview with the author, September 23, 2021.
[111] Nine, interview with the author, October 4, 2021.
[112] Six, interview with the author, October 4, 2021.

of anybody else, but just through a different lens. To me, Jewish obligations are human obligations. I don't feel as though I'm commanded or obligated to do anything specific because I am Jewish, but that I *get* to do things because I am Jewish."[113]

Vanessa also spoke about an obligation toward all of humanity and not just toward Jews. "I'm not obliged to do anything for anybody else, but in order to exist in a non-*Lord of the Flies* type of world, I feel at least a small sense of obligation, but I don't feel like I need to advertise that I'm one of the chosen people. Why do we have to talk about that?"[114] Hannah spoke about chosenness, but for her, the idea of chosenness was not from above, but from below. "It's bottom up and, in a way, that's been a good thing because it has kept our community together through many bad years."[115] While she admitted to wrestling with both the implications of chosenness in how it can be a "crippling" mindset, as well as the veracity of God choosing the people Israel or the people Israel choosing God, she admits that the idea inculcates a commitment to Jewish values like repairing the world. "Our Jewish values, our Jewish history, our Jewish story - these are ways of looking at what we have done, how we failed, and what we still need to do. And [these values] create community that carry them, and it creates a calendar, which I think is really important because that is also part of being in a community, so I like that."[116]

Anita expressed an aversion to the idea of chosenness. "I dont relate to chosenness- I actually completely hate the idea because it is limiting. I don't believe there are commandments, and I don't feel any sense of commandedness; there are natural laws of humanity to do right by each other. Everything else is made up." Yet, she wondered, "what do I do with all of the stuff my grandfather and father

[113] Fourteen, interview with the author, October 4, 2021.
[114] Eight, interview with the author, August 30, 2021.
[115] Seven, interview with the author, September 20, 2021.
[116] Ibid

taught me?" When it comes to Jewish values, Anita is motivated to give to her community and volunteer. As she says, "*Tikkun olam* and *tzedekah* are big for me."[117]

What is the relationship between Jewish values, human values, and one's motivations to help others? Many don't want to feel obligated to observe Jewish holidays or engage in Jewish rituals because they want those choices to be made from their own volition, but would they be making those choices if it weren't for their Judaism and what they learned from their rabbis? Perhaps B'li Elohim's definition of obligation can be understood not as obligation to Jewish law, but as obligation from human connection and not wanting to feel commanded to do something because of unique affiliation but wanting to do it because it benefits the common good (and Jews too).

[117] Five, interview with the author, September 20, 2021.

Theology

"I first learned to conceptualize divinity through people, and I think that ended up being a lot more meaningful for me and has allowed me to create my own religious framework because it doesn't rely on an external [entity] that I was fed information about from a young age. It relies on how I view myself and the people around me and what divinity looks like in my everyday life.

I believe that God is us and people are God." -Mollie

Before describing specific respondents' theologies and what they believe (or don't believe) about God, and their approaches toward Judaism, it would be beneficial to first describe what the congregation believes generally because there is something invaluable about being in community with people who share beliefs about God, science, the universe, humanity, and personal responsibility. In addition to being in congregation where these otherwise *avante garde* beliefs are common, is that they are legitimized from the pulpit. While a typical congregation forms around shared denominational affiliation, this congregation is composed of secular, unaffiliated, Humanistic-leaning Jews. From the findings gathered through this study, I believe that a congregation is more likely to have a role for a community when there is alignment between the tenets of the congregation, the liturgy it utilizes, and their beliefs about God, science, the universe, humanity, and personal responsibility.

The explicit themes that emerged in this discussion of respondents' beliefs about God or lack of God, were:

- Knowledge of and alignment with the writings of Baruch Spinoza (Jewish medieval philosopher from the 17th century)
- Prioritization of human agency over divine power
- Denial of an omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent God

- The desire to reconcile science with Jewish tradition and history

As I will explain through detailed accounts and quotes from interviews, some implicit themes were:

- The desire to redefine God/create one's own metaphor for the divine
- The desire to align liturgy with philosophy and theology

When one walks into B'li Elohim's sanctuary, the congregation's philosophy is evident in the design of the room, the art represented in the stained-glass windows, the location of the ark, the design of the *ner tamid* (everlasting light) and finally the congregation's liturgy. There are several quintessential traditional Jewish elements of the space that redefine what is otherwise familiar to match the congregation's ethos. In a video on B'li Elohim's website, Rabbi Klein gives a tour of the sanctuary and explains that the twelve stained glass windows are not meant to depict the days of creation, holidays or tribes (as commonly found in other synagogues), but the Big Bang because the scientific approach is the most appropriate reflection of the congregation's philosophy.[118] The windows depict the Big Bang exploding across the congregation, wrapping them as a community in that "historical scientific moment"[119] which begins over the *ner tamid* and moves outward. The colors change, transitioning to colors found in the natural world (the green of the planet, the blue of the water and sky, the brown of the earth). The principles that frame the congregation are based in science, reason, the idea that humans evolved out of nature and the emotional religious experience. In the video, Rabbi Klein explains how both sets of values (scientific and emotional) are meant to be balanced in the sanctuary.[120] The ark is intentionally situated off-center to highlight that authority in the congregation comes from the

[118] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PvLI0I9GjV4&t=1s
[119] Ibid
[120] Ibid

congregation itself - not the rabbi, not the Torah housed in the ark, and not the past, but rather from the people. Above the ark is a *ner tamid*, which is commonly found in Synagogues and Temples, but this one is unique in that the flames are composed of interweaving strands of DNA to highlight the idea that the community approaches the human and religious experience through a scientific and reasoned perspective.

The centrality of science and reason is not only apparent in the physical space, but also in the philosophies of respondents. The urge to reconcile Jewish tradition and stories with what is scientifically known about the universe is expressed in the physical space, in the liturgy and it is openly discussed by congregants. Griffin wondered if the twenty-seven percent of Jews who identify as "Jews of no religion" would be more likely to affiliate with Jewish religion if Jewish liturgy spoke more to a worldview that balanced science and religion? He wishes for B'li Elohim's approach to liturgy to be adopted by other Jewish spaces to create more room for connectedness. I also wondered how many Jews in the 21st century wish that Jewish institutions talked about these tensions and attempted to resolve them, rather than ignore them? If more religious spaces were to have those conversations (let alone put them in the center of their sanctuary through their stained-glass windows), would the rise of unaffiliated and secular Jews slow? Would there be more traditional ritual and Jewish practice among secular Jews of no religion? To answer this question, I will describe the theological and philosophical viewpoints of respondents because they have unconsciously redefined "religious" so Jewishness can also include science and reason.

Many respondents spoke about their alignment with the 17th century rationalist and philosopher, Baruch Spinoza. While Spinoza was trained in Talmudic scholarship, he was eventually excommunicated for his minority views about God. His views were incorrectly labeled atheistic, when in actuality, he

believed that "everything that exists is God,"[121] and he also aligned God with nature. In addition, Spinoza believed that God was not the creator of the world, but that the world, universe, and nature were extensions of God.

It's no coincidence that a congregation that prides itself on science and reason would align with a rationalist like Baruch Spinoza. When asked why respondents would have deep knowledge of a specific Jewish philosopher like Spinoza, Rabbi Klein explained that he spoke about him during a High Holiday sermon and Spinoza's views probably resonated because of his beliefs about the separation of church and state. Considering that the congregation intentionally designed their sanctuary to highlight that authority comes from the people, it is interesting that Rabbi Klein didn't see the power that his words had in shaping the theologies and philosophies of congregants. It's like a chicken and egg situation: congregants' needs and views simultaneously shape Rabbi Klein's sermons, teachings and the culture of the congregation, and what Rabbi Klein espouses shapes the beliefs of the community. While there is an attempt to lessen the authority of the rabbi, the rabbi clearly impacts the thoughts and leanings of the congregation.

Among secular Jews nationally, seven percent believe in God as described in the Bible and forty-eight percent believe in another higher power or spiritual force. Among unaffiliated Jews, twelve percent believe in God as described in the Bible and fifty-two percent believe in another higher power or spiritual force. The rates of those who don't believe in either the God of the Bible or another higher power or spiritual force is forty-four percent for secular Jews and thirty-five percent for the unaffiliated.[122] At B'li Elohim, fifty-six percent of respondents said that they believed in God and then

[121] https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/baruch-spinoza
[122] Pew Research Center, May 11, 2021, "Jewish Americans in 2020," 67.

proceeded to offer their qualifiers. One person spoke about the Aristotelian idea of a Prime Mover, and another explained that for him, there might have been an energy or entity that created the universe, but he couldn't fathom it being powerful enough to create it and then merely step aside. All but one of the people who believed in a Higher Power believed that it was not omniscient, omnipotent, or omnipresent. Jack, who seemed to have spent time wrestling with these questions, explained: "Did God create the world and then step aside? I don't know. Do I think there might be some unifying equation that has yet to be identified? Maybe. The issue with which I'm having the greatest difficulty wrapping my head around is the concept of the universe being all that there is and the concept of multiple universes. That is, I don't know if this is theology, philosophy, or physics." His wife interjected. "Or maybe it's all part of the same pot."[123] Very few respondents spoke about a God who responded to their prayers, and in fact, most people who believed in God explained that their God was not responsible for changing the world or fixing inequities - those responsibilities are on the shoulders of humanity.

Griffin explained, "I'm not going to celebrate God, who took away my loved one randomly, I'm just not going to do it. When that happens, I think it's part of the natural order, which we human beings struggle against. It's just the universe and the way it is, and the way that biologically, we've evolved. I don't blame God because I don't think God is intervening. For me, meditation is a form of spirituality, not prayer. When I meditate on the vastness of the universe, or the beauty of the ocean, or the resonance of a piece of music- *that's* my spiritual experience. Moments with another human being, or in nature - those are spiritual experiences to me. Aside from the fact I was born into Judaism, the reason I'm still involved with being a Jew, and really what's at the heart of it is the Jewish belief that every human being is sacred. God's role is to be there and for me to participate in life in a way that brings meaning to life and connects me to myself. I believe in a God that is part of the universe, as it is, as it exists, as it began,

[123] Seventeen, interview with the author, October 5, 2021.

as it grew, and as life evolved. God is in the universe and can't be separated from the universe. What we do on earth is completely up to us. There's no reward, there's no punishment other than what we do."

For people to define what they believed about God, they first had to explain what they did **not** believe.

Common themes were:

- God is not an old white man in the sky with a big white beard
- God didn't create the world and step aside
- God is not an authoritarian
- God is not in control
- God is not an interventionist
- God is not able to perform miracles
- God is not a divinity
- God is not a man or father who tells us what to do
- God is not a supreme being
- God is not a judgmental overseer

Themes as to what God is/might be:

- A natural, universal force
- Inner life force that connects all beings
- The force that encourages living things to reach for light, for growth, for spring, and for hope
- A higher power
- Nature
- God is us and people are God (God is not separate from people)

- The beauty, goodness, and kindness - the best within us
- God is the good part of every person put together
- Connectedness
- An energy that seeks balance

Whatever God *is* for people, there is a lot of hesitancy around labeling that "God" because that term has been defined and used to mean many things with which they disagree, and this one term couldn't contain both their unorthodox beliefs about God as well as the more traditional understandings of God. Is this part of the reason why people seek other metaphors? As Anita explained, "The word God sends me running the other way because it's attached to so much that I dont believe in! I believe in an energy that seeks balance. It is made up of all the people that ever lived and will live and it's so big that it makes me think of my place in the universe and my place is to respect that bigger energy and be mindful of my actions."[124]

With fifty percent of respondents always or sometimes lighting a *yartzeit* candle to commemorate the death of a loved one, conversations about memory, legacy and death also emerged in these conversations about theology. Preston, who described himself as a cultural and spiritual person who doesn't believe in the idea of a God who is a judgmental overseer, thinks that "when we die-scientifically, we go into the ground. Bits of us reside in the people who we've touched throughout our lives - that's what I believe, but I don't think that I'm going to go to heaven to meet my father [when I die]."[125]

[124] Five, interview with the author, September 20, 2021.
[125] Twelve, interview with the author, August 24, 2021.

For Meredith, the inner life force that connects all beings is sacred to her. While God may not have divine authority over her life, that inner life force is able to influence those around her. "I believe in an inner life force that connects all beings. I believe on a very scientific level that atomically, hormonally, living beings are connected and we do influence each other and that is sacred to me. I believe in intentions and energies. When we raise our voices together in song or calls for actions, I think it does have an impact on us. Metaphysically, physically, biologically, chemically I feel connected to all living things... I am of service to them and by recognizing a connection to creation, I show respect for life. Spirituality for me relates to our relationship with nature, nature's relationship with nature and our relationships with each other. My understanding and belief are related to the way that humans exist with each other, the way we exist in the world and the greater universe, our responsibility to each other, our responsibilities to nature. It's not nature's responsibility to care for itself."[126]

For some respondents, the existence of God or the non-existence of God has no impact on their lives and for others, the inner life force that connects them to nature, nature to nature and them to other humans very much impacts their lives. Very few people who participated in this study believed that God has an active, interventionist role in their lives. For the majority, God, if they didn't offer a different metaphor, is simply a presence that exists that lacks the power to impact their lives, but played a role in the creation of the universe.

A lot of respondents spoke about seeing God in relationships or in other people, and many talked about feeling awe when they are in nature. The presence of this entity keeps people grateful and humble and very few of them ask anything from it. Marjorie, one of the few who talked about an interventionist God, explained, "I have no right to ask for anything from God – it doesn't feel Jewish to me. I attribute to

[126] Six, interview with the author, August 30, 2021.

God when things could've been worse. Like when our house was flooded with toxic water, and I thanked God for the fact that we happened to be out of town. This way of thinking about God is the only way to keep a positive attitude that someone is looking out for me in the broadest possible way."[127] In moments like that, is God simply filling the space created by the unexplainable?

On the opposite end of the spectrum was Madelyn who said, "I appreciate the strong sense of personal responsibility at B'li Elohim and that we don't rely on a deity to intervene in things. If you want to make it happen, make it happen. if you want to affect change, get involved!"[128] While she spoke mainly about effecting change in the world and Marjorie spoke about gratitude for the positive things that occur in her life, they both attributed different characteristics to the entity. Madelyn continued, "I think I believe in God? Everything comes from somewhere, everything started somewhere. To me, the concept of God is more like deism in that there was a God, or a force, or something that sort of put all this stuff in motion, but that does not necessarily interfere in day-to-day life. It's definitely not all powerful and all knowing. I can't say that I definitively believe in God or rely on God because I'm like, '*I* gotta make things happen.'"[129]

While Marjorie may not believe in prayer, she did believe in an interventionist God and only one other respondent comes close to this category because she spoke about a God who responds to her prayers. For Jean, God exists in her mind and in her heart and when she calls on God, who she referred to as "him," he can hear her.[130] To her, God is the big brother she never had and is like an "outside force that allows me to come together."[131] While Jean is a minority in this community, it is important to note that

[127] Ten, interview with the author, August 26, 2021.
[128] Eighteen, interview with the author, September 23, 2021.
[129] Ibid
[130] Nine, interview with the author, September 28, 2021.
[131] Ibid

while there are some generalizations and assumptions that can be made about a congregation largely composed of secular and unaffiliated Jews that was historically connected to Humanistic Judaism, it's not always feasible to draw assumptions or make connections based upon affiliations.

For others, a relationship with God serves to remind them that they're not in control. For one individual who understands God as a universal energy, the idea of God helps her feel safe and protected. Her relationship with this energy manifests in her relationships with her family, especially the women in her family and she spoke about ancestors that watch over her and "look out for her."[132] That energy that unites her with the women in her family is considered to be divine because it reminds her of her connections with family and therefore puts her in a place of being able to express love.

Given these diverse takes on God and the fact that one person said that the word God sends her running the other way because it is "attached to so much," it was interesting to ask respondents about metaphors for God and which terminology would be more fitting for their theologies. Several talked about "energy" or "universal energy" while others offered "eternity", "mother nature", "God as people", "blessings", "helping hand", or understood God as a "book of life." Considering these metaphors and the spiritual nature of several congregants, I was curious to know about the role of prayer and style of liturgy, which will both be addressed in the next section.

For the respondents who emphatically did *not* believe in God, I was curious to know more about what they *did* believe about nature and the universe. Some spoke about a belief in science, humanity or themselves, ideas that were shared by respondents who believed in God. There was a strong focus on

[132] Fifteen, interview with the author, October 5, 2021.

the “I” and the individual which largely comes from the congregation's human-centered approach to Judaism.

For Claire, who converted to Judaism after meeting her husband, the existence or inexistence of God makes no difference in the way she leads her life. "I don't have to believe in God or the Father, Son and Holy Ghost to tell me I must do this or that. *I* choose how I want to lead *my* life." Her husband, Jack, summarized his theology in two words: "Shit happens. I believe in randomness. I do not pretend to have any knowledge of the origins of the universe - the Big Bang theory is about as good as I have heard so far. On top of that, it has no effect on me whatsoever in my day-to-day life."[133] Julie had a similar take. In her opinion, she is one hundred percent responsible for what happens in her life and in the world. For folks like Claire, Jack, and Julie, the existence or inexistence of God does not affect the way they live their lives.

Many people understood "religious" as being bound by rules, rituals, keeping kosher, lighting candles, and following the strictures of Orthodoxy. This lack of flexibility hearkened back to upbringings out of which a handful of respondents worked hard to transition when they were in college or adults. As Vanessa explained, "being religious is being a person who prays every night."[134] Another person spoke about realizing she was religious when she accepted that she believed in God while another respondent who had converted, hinted at her Catholic upbringing when she explained that "religious" reminded her of catechism classes, communion on Sundays, and the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. "To me, those things are religious,” she explained. “What we do at B’li Elohim is not that."[135] While B’li Elohim may have intentionally situated itself outside of religious Judaism, it still provides other ways for congregants to

[133] Seventeen, interview with the author, October 5, 2021.
[134] Eight, interview with the author, September 21, 2021.
[135] Seventeen, interview with the author, October 5, 2021.

connect with their Jewishness (weekly Adult Studies classes, bimonthly Shabbat gatherings, services for lifecycle events) and if these gatherings, which are based on Judaism, occur regularly, wouldn't that render them religious? The term "religious" is still considered a bad thing by people who regularly engage with these activities because they see themselves as secular, and in their minds, secular Jews are mutually exclusive from religious activity.

Other respondents spoke about Jewish peoplehood, culture and community all constituting what it means to be religious. For Erin, being religious is defined as "being part of a community that is worthwhile."[136] Meredith explained that "if religious means a system of values and beliefs that influence your behavior and practice, then yes! I would identify as Jewish by religion." Hannah, who explicitly said she would *not* define herself as a religious person, explained that she would have to redefine "religious" in order to see herself as a religious person based upon how she practices Judaism. She may not keep kosher, but she feels very connected to Jewish community, history, and Jewish stories. There is a sense of pride that comes from being secular and in intentionally distancing themselves and creating boundaries from what they deem as religious, and all that they dislike, they situate themselves away from something of which they are still apart.

Anchoring many respondents' comments about their beliefs in God, how they defined spirituality, whether they considered themselves to be spiritual, God's role in their lives, their preferred metaphors for God, the role of prayer, what prayer looks like, and finally what it means to be religious, were references to Humanistic Judaism and descriptions of how Humanistic Judaism fits into their lives. Underlying many of those references was the idea that humans are one hundred percent responsible for what happens in their lives regardless of whether God exists or does not exist.

[136] Fifteen, interview with the author, October 5, 2021.

There were a variety of responses defining Humanistic Judaism and a human-centered approach to Judaism. Several congregants used the term “Humanistic” to describe the congregation's affiliation and did not know that B’li Elohim is not formally associated with the Society for Humanistic Judaism. This confusion makes sense because on their website, B’li Elohim describes itself as “[approaching] Judaism from a humanistic perspective.”[137] One person used the phrase "Human-centered Judaism" to describe B’li Elohim’s approach and because I appreciated the simultaneous flexibility and specificity of this phrase, I chose to use this during other interviews and in this report. I noticed a difference between the definition of Humanistic Judaism provided by Rabbi Klein and what was found on the SHJ's website and what respondents described. According to the SHJ's website, Humanistic Judaism "celebrates Jewish life while foregoing appeals for divine intervention and instead puts faith in human reason and human power as the best vehicles for improving the world."[138] Rabbi Klein explained that the congregation ascribes to the same values. Yet, respondents offered definitions of Humanistic Judaism that were unique from what I learned from Rabbi Klein and from what I gathered from the SHJ's website. Preston defined it as "someone who is concerned about the world and is concerned about where we are and who we are in relation to everybody in the world, not just to other Jews."[139] This sounds like a conflation of Humanitarianism with Humanism, which according to the SHJ's website, have similarities, but are not the same. As the website explains, "Humanism is the reliance on people to solve human problems. Humanism includes humanitarianism, which is the act of promoting human welfare and social reform."[140]

[137] https://www.bethadam.org/about-us
[138] https://shj.org/meaning-learning/what-is-humanistic-judaism/
[139] Twelve, interview with the author, August 24, 2021.
[140] https://shj.org/meaning-learning/what-is-humanistic-judaism/

In these amended definitions, it appeared as though respondents were describing their approaches to being ethical and being Jewish by connecting these ideas to their understandings of Humanistic Judaism. "Humanistic" was defined based upon the way some respondents have made Judaism work into their lives, not the way they make their lives work within the framework of Judaism.

There were very clear themes expressed in people's definitions:

- I/we are responsible for the world, not God.
- If God exists, God is not omnipotent, omniscient, or omnipresent so therefore the responsibility is on humans and if you want to change something about the world, don't just pray, take action to make it happen.
- Belief in people takes precedence over a belief in God.
- People direct their beliefs (and prayer practice, if they pray) toward people and the connections between people.
- Alignment - people want to say what they believe and believe what they say.

Some of the respondents' unique definitions are below:

- "Humanistic Judaism allows me to gain knowledge from my fellow not just from the rabbi or the Bible. It requires humans to be honest, direct, and considerate." [141]

[141] Nine, interview with the author, September 28, 2021.

- "Humanistic Judaism is looking at Judaism from a modern point of view as opposed to this is the way it's done or if we don't do it this way, we're dishonoring our ancestors." [142]
- "Humanistic Judaism gives me a way to believe in what Judaism teaches without feeling like a hypocrite. It shows me exactly what path to take to keep myself feeling like I'm helping people and not making it worse for others. I can confidently say that I'm not trying to be better than anybody else, or that they're not as good as me. I'm trying to say that I want to be a better me and this is the Judaism that helps me do that." [143]
- "Humanistic Judaism gives me a way to literally take Jewish teachings and integrate them into my belief system and the way I live my life without feeling like I must follow everything so strictly. I'm not any less part of their group because I don't follow things strictly." [144]
- "My personal, humanistic philosophy is that every human life is sacred, and we humans have the power to help people because when you save a life, you save the universe." [145]
- "I define it as someone who is concerned about the world, concerned about where we are and who we are in relation to everybody in the world, not just other Jews." [146]
- "It's affirming my identity with the tribe." [147]
- "Humanistic Judaism helps me conceptualize how I see myself, how I see others, how I treat myself, how I treat others and how I treat the world. Growing up at B'li Elohim, I first learned to conceptualize divinity through people. I believe that God is us and people are God. It's the natural laws of humanity to do right by another human and be kind." [148]

[142] Ten, interview with the author, August 26, 2021.
[143] Eleven, interview with the author, September 23, 2021.
[144] Ibid
[145] Three, interview with the author, August 31, 2021.
[146] Twelve, interview with the author, August 24, 2021.
[147] Seventeen, interview with the author, October 5, 2021.
[148] Fourteen, interview with the author, October 4, 2021.

- “It’s humans' responsibility to make sure that we are nurturers, guides, preservers of the spaces in which we live. It's the way that humans exist with each other, the way we exist in the world and the greater universe, our responsibility to each other, our responsibilities to nature and that it's not nature's responsibility to care for itself.” [149]
- “It’s Judaism, but with an emphasis on belief in people, not a belief in God.” [150]
- “I don't use religion to explain my world. I prefer to let science explain my world. the role of religion is community, family, history, values, connection. It's not belief. My religion has nothing to do with belief. I can be Jewish with integrity- I dont have to sit and be a hypocrite and say things that I don’t mean. We're grownups who take responsibility for who we are and what we do. When I was eleven, I realized that God is the good part of every person put together.” [151]
- “It's about humans, and how we relate to the world. And so even though we're not central in the world, we're central in our own lives. You know, nature is way more powerful than we are. But if we're going to try to make some sense of some purpose, we have to do it. It’s the B’li Elohim idea that humans have the power to make choices and to see things in a hopeful way.” [152]
- “I appreciate the very humanistic principle about having a strong sense of personal responsibility, and not necessarily relying on some deity to intervene in things. if you want to make it happen, make it happen. if you want to affect change, get involved! At B’li Elohim, our values are not going to be carried out with a lot of prayer, or just writing a check.” [153]

[149] Six, interview with the author, August 30, 2021.
[150] Fifteen, interview with the author, October 5, 2021.
[151] Four, interview with the author, August 24, 2021.
[152] Seven, interview with the author, September 20, 2021.
[153] Eighteen, interview with the author, September 23, 2021.

Despite having a human-centered approach to Judaism with a God that may or may not exist and certainly isn't all-powerful, many respondents described themselves as spiritual. Having a human-centered approach to Judaism doesn't preclude a person from being spiritual and about fifty percent of respondents considered themselves to be spiritual. Erin explained that she feels connected to nature and the universe. " I feel like everything in my life is incredibly spiritual and otherworldly kind of, and I love it, it gives everything meaning."[154] Jack explained that he feels spiritual in the presence of great lumps of earth. "Mountains, trees, and streams… I'm thinking of a line in our service that says, 'let me be part of that to which I belong.' That captures how I feel."[155] Another respondent who grew up in the congregation said that as an adult, she is much more religious and spiritual than she ever was when she was a kid. "I'm much more aware of what is sacred to me and in a very DIY way, I'm building my customs around that."[156]

In these definitions, one notices how people have combined their own approaches to Judaism with their understandings of a human-centered approach to Judaism. When respondents defined human-centered Judaism they didn't only offer a blanket definition, they also defined how it empowers them Jewishly. The theme of being responsible for human action and one's own life was common.

[154] Fifteen, interview with the author, October 5, 2021.
[155] Sixteen, interview with the author, October 5, 2021.
[156] Fourteen, interview with the author, October 4, 2021.

Prayer

Even though B'li Elohim rejects a God centered approach to Judaism, several respondents nonetheless prayed, or had "near prayer" experiences. Which people pray and what does it look like when they do? A little over sixty-one percent of respondents said they didn't pray and for the thirty-four percent who did, prayer took a variety of forms. In fact, even when people said they didn't pray, their comments were often followed with "I don't pray, but I *do* have a gratitude practice," or "I meditate," "contemplate," "am introspective," or "seek strength from within." All of these alternatives were offered in place of prayer, or in tandem with prayer. Are these practices distinct from prayer, and is the same reticence behind using terms like "God" also behind using terms like "prayer"? These personal experiences sound a lot like prayer, but because respondents don't utilize traditional Jewish prayer rubrics or structures, the practices are seen as distinct from prayer. In fact, I noticed a tension between the people's personal practices and the institution's practices. While the formation of the congregation was motivated by the desire to intellectualize Judaism, there are congregants who reflect the zeitgeist of spirituality and mindfulness, especially parents of children enrolled in the Sunday school program, which has an orientation of mindfulness and spirituality. There is a tension between the founders' desire for an intellectual Judaism and the needs of those who want both intellectual Judaism and something spiritual. As the children grow up, they will want adult services and programs to reflect the values that formed the foundation of their Sunday School curriculum.

Many of the people who didn't pray and had a "but I do __" caveat attached to their statement, also used different metaphors for God. and this attempt to redefine prayer practice is not new. In fact, theologians like Martin Buber, Mordecai Kaplan, Abraham Isaac Kook and Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote at length about this topic. Heschel defined prayer as "[taking] notice of wonder, to regain a sense

of the mystery…"[157] and "an attempt to answer the inconceivable surprise of living," while Kook saw prayer as a way to "uplift all of creation [and] unite all beings with themselves."[158] On the other hand, Kaplan understood God as a process and the experience of that process as a personal one with prayer serving as the conduit for the "dialogue between our purely individual ego-centric self and our self as representing a process that goes on beyond us."[159] Based on these understandings and approaches toward prayer, don't respondents' meditations and contemplations directed toward a universal energy also constitute prayer or does a person have to self-describe what they are doing as prayer in order for it to be called prayer? Would people be more inclined to pray if they could classify their contemplations, meditations, and introspections, as a form of prayer, or would this still send them "running the other way"[160] as Catherine described during her interview?

Other themes related to prayer that emerged were:

The urge to meditate/contemplate/be introspective during life changes like retirement or divorce, after a natural disaster, or during life cycle events like birth or death. As Griffin said, "I only pray when I'm in a foxhole."[161] Oren, who was not born Jewish, spoke about becoming more contemplative and thinking more about the use of prayer after the death of his Presbyterian mother. Interestingly, Oren's wife Marjorie doesn't believe in prayer, and she doesn't think it's Jewish to ask for things from God so she only thanks God when things could have been worse.

[157] Lawrence Hoffman, *The Way into Jewish Prayer*, 15.
[158] Hoffman, *The Way into Jewish Prayer*, 16.
[159] Ibid
[160] Four, interview with the author, August 24, 2021.
[161] Three, interview with the author, August 31, 2021.

While some respondents were stark atheists or called themselves spiritual agnostics, many people spoke about feelings of awe, wonder, spirituality and having practices for expressing blessings and aspirations, but they don't utilize the traditional language of Jewish prayer because that felt insincere to them. Why? Speaking in a language that is not native to them creates challenges because most, if not all respondents, were not Hebrew speakers, let alone understood Biblical Hebrew or Aramaic. Even though they could rely on translations, respondents desired to speak in their vernacular because this makes it possible for them to make sure their prayers align with their thoughts. Another factor was that many prayers include God-concepts and metaphors for God that they felt were irrelevant, obsolete, or plainly disagreed with. These factors contributed to the endeavor to create unique, B'li Elohim liturgy which will be discussed in the following section. Respondents explained that Jewish meaning doesn't come from uttering ancient words for the sake of tradition and repeating prayers that are hundreds of years old, or even a thousand years old. For this community, there is less value placed on the Jewish history that manifests in liturgy and prayer as compared to the values of Jewish culture and peoplehood. In addition, PEW found that when people attend services, it is because they are either "spiritually meaningful, feel a sense of belonging, or feel connected to their ancestry."[162]

One of the reasons why people don't attend services is a lack of knowledge and because they think they won't know enough to participate. In fact, according to PEW, twenty-three percent of all Jews cite this as their reason and among unaffiliated Jews, this rises to thirty percent. Among Jews ages 18-29, this increases to thirty-six percent.[163] For this non-denominational community where prayer may not be central, the unique, simplified liturgy and its prioritization of English does provide a meaningful source of connection in that people are truly able to speak what they believe without any intermediary steps.

[162] PEW Research Center, "Jewish Identity and Belief," 11.
[163] Pew Research Center, May 11, 2021, "Jewish Americans in 2020," 84.

Many of the concerns related to outdated liturgy are not unique to B'li Elohim and similar concerns were present when Rabbi Sherwin Wine, the founder of Humanistic Judaism, was invited to be the rabbi at the newly formed Birmingham Temple in Detroit, Michigan in 1963. Chief among the dissatisfactions of the group was a dissatisfaction with "liberal temples [who] promised a synthesis between science and religion but delivered instead of a hodgepodge of infantile theology and quasi-scientific jargon,"[164] and a dissatisfaction when liberal spaces were "confronted with the full results of reason [but] retreated into clichés of Orthodoxy."[165] Like B'li Elohim, the Birmingham Temple also had a liturgy committee that produced their own liturgy after retiring the Reform prayer book that they had been using because prayers were inconsistent with the Temple's philosophies. In the beginning, the new liturgy retained the *Barchu, Shema, Mi Chamocha*, a couple of psalms and the *Mourner's Kaddish* and "substituting for the body of some of these prayers were meditations on themes such as tradition, individual potentiality, humanism and love."[166] God was to be understood as a metaphor for 'the best in man '[167] and the term was used until October 1964 when the religious school was alerted that the word "God" should no longer be used unless in historical contexts.[168] Not long after this directive, liturgy was modified to reflect the change and the *Barchu*, *Shema* and *Mourner's Kaddish* were removed from the service and in their place "Humanist Hebrew responses were sung to Israeli and Hassidic melodies."[169] Similar to the Birmingham Temple which is now known as the Congregation for Humanistic Judaism in Metro Detroit, B'li Elohim's congregants also sought to synthesize science and religion as well as express their feelings

[164] Norman Mirsky, *Unorthodox Judaism*, 114.
[165] Ibid
[166] Ibid
[167] Ibid
[168] Norman Mirsky, *Unorthodox Judaism*, 115-116.
[169] Mirsky, *Unorthodox Judaism*, 116.

of awe, wonder, and gratitude with the community in a language that was authentic to the way they expressed themselves regularly.

The following chapter will include a description of some of B'li Elohim's services and liturgical readings as well as a discussion of liturgical innovation and what liturgy must include in order to qualify as Jewish liturgy.

Liturgy

As previously mentioned, B'li Elohim developed its own unique liturgy which was written by its Ritual and Life Cycle Committee at the inception of the congregation. In fact, many respondents explained that the liturgy is one of the things that attracted them to B'li Elohim and keeps them there. To Julie, it's "poetic and beautiful… and other synagogues' liturgy is just ridiculous [because it uses] language like we're living in 1500 and it's meaningless and irrelevant to my value system. B'li Elohim's liturgy has meaning that I or any person can discern from the words. We're not just reciting something that we don't understand or don't even agree with." According to an informational pamphlet included in a kit of Home Services which includes services for Shabbat, Havdalah, Hanukkah, and a Home Dedication Service for installing a *mezuzah*, the congregation wrote their own liturgy because they wanted their services to "reflect their values of intellectual honesty and open inquiry."[170] As they say, "we strive to write liturgy that deepens our moral and spiritual selves and guides us to accept our responsibilities to ourselves and humanity. Because we respect our ancestral Jewish heritage, our liturgy also incorporates historical Jewish texts."[171] While there are also services for in-person *Shabbatot*, *B'nai Mitzvah*, a custom *Haggadah*, and pamphlets entitled *Beyond the Silence: Readings for Times of Crisis* and *A Benediction for Life* (which is intended for funerals), I will only be sharing excerpts and descriptions of readings found in the *Benedictions for Life* pamphlet as well as services found in the Home Services Kit. I will also be discussing the current hybrid Shabbat services that take place in-person and on Zoom. This discussion of liturgy as separate from prayer is meant to show the distinction between the language used to articulate institutional belief (liturgy) and personal practices that are captured through individuals' "prayer" practices. B'li Elohim's unique liturgy both showcases their authenticity and their adherence to tradition.

[170] Ritual & Lifecycle Committee, *Home Services Kit*.
[171] Ibid

The congregation's endeavor to balance intellectual honesty with historical ways of practicing Judaism is captured in their "service books," which are essentially prayer books minus the outward reference to traditional religious practice.

A Benediction for Life

Given the place Judaism has during lifecycle events, the desire for comfort while grieving and the theological questions that often accompany death, I was curious to see examples of the congregation's liturgy used during funerals from which Rabbi Klein sometimes utilizes readings. Most of the time, *A Benediction for Life* is given to grieving families and all of the readings found within it were written exclusively by the Ritual and Lifecycle Committee. This 20-page pamphlet begins with a statement on page one which explains that these "collected readings reflect a range of questions and emotions that we experience in our grief", and although God is not mentioned, there is talk of "source," "cause," and descriptions of humans as an "intelligence unfolding…."[172] There are many themes of nature and the natural order serving as a source of comfort to the bereaved. While traditional funeral readings and *piyyutim* offered for the grieving reference God, these poems and this liturgy reference relationships thus suggesting that relationships can be the equivalent of a sacred and holy connection.

To whom are these benedictions offered? At times, it seems they are directed toward the community, and at other times, it seems they are intended for the dead, or the Source, or even the one experiencing loss. All readings are in English, except for B'li Elohim's *Memorial Prayer* which is their take on the *Mourner's Kaddish*. This prayer is bookended with Hebrew that was specifically written for B'li Elohim, but no transliteration is provided. The English sandwiched in between not only references courage and

[172] Ritual & Lifecycle Committee, *A Benediction for Life*, 2.

strength to not forget, but it also references what remains after death.[173] The meter of the reading was written to match the meter found in the *Mourner's Kaddish* to incorporate a component of tradition. Without transliteration of the Hebrew at the beginning and end, are congregants able to speak the words and maintain what is otherwise understood as the Jewish anchors of this reading?

Opening:

אין בידי המות הכח לעקר מה שטמון בלב

Death cannot take

That which is locked

In our hearts.

Middle:

With our tears

In our sorrow

We remember.

With our courage

And our strength

We do not forget.

Acts of kindness

[173] *A Benediction for Life*, 10-11.

Deeds of courage

Will remain.

Beauty created

wisdom shared

is not lost.

With our tears

In our sorrow

We remember.

Closing:

עם דמעות בעינינו בעת אבלנו נשמור על זכר אהובינו

With our tears

in our sorrow

we remember.

The third to last reading of the pamphlet is meant to be shared during an Unveiling Ceremony and speaks of memory "whose true place is in our hearts" so "the essence of spirit and soul [can live] on."[174] While there is a lack of traditional theological metaphors, the honesty of the questions asked, and the lack of firm answers still have the ability to bring great comfort to mourners. Following this is a page

[174] *A Benediction for Life*, 16.

titled *Candle Lighting* and contains the congregation's version of a reading to offer while lighting a *Yartzeit* candle, which forty-seven percent of respondents said they don't light. During a conversation with Rabbi Klein about this pamphlet, I was told that the Ritual and Lifecycle Committee opted for English equivalents of Jewish and Hebrew terminology and concepts to make rituals more accessible. The *Candle Lighting* begins with a paraphrasing of Hannah Sennesh's poem *Yeish Kochavim,* and is followed by a short English reading which alludes to the Jewish idiom *zikhrono l'vrachah,* which translates to “may _’s memory be for a blessing.” Instead, the Hebrew is interpreted as: "May __'s memory illumine this family who loved him/her, continuing to strengthen us through our lives."[175] The *Candle Lighting* ceremony concludes with the blessing over the candle where Hebrew, English and Hebrew transliteration are provided and can be found below.

ברוך האור בעולם

Baruch ha'or ba'olam

Blessed is the light within the world.

ברוך האור באדם

Baruch ha'or ba'adam

Blessed is the light within each person.

The pamphlet concludes with an English reading promising the restoration of balance after grief.

[175] *A Benediction for Life*, 18.

Shabbat

The Home Shabbat Service begins with a short explanation of Shabbat, where it is described as an opportunity to "mark the difference between this and other daily meals, and to appreciate the beauty and calm that Shabbat can provide."[176] People are instructed to light the Shabbat candles, "savor the wine and share the *challah*" and to "recall [their] link to Jews of other times and places, to Jews throughout the world…."[177] Candles are called candles, wine is called wine, *challah* is called *challah,* and Shabbat is called Shabbat*,* not the Sabbath*.* Following the brief introduction explaining Shabbat*,* are two English readings before the lighting of the *Shabbat* candles. These reference ancestry, the desire to understand and "push beyond the bonds of ignorance,"[178] and to not only transition from seeing fire as magic and appreciating its wonder and beauty, but to also allow the candles to "kindle warmth within our hearts, wisdom in our minds and passion in our souls."[179] There are strong themes of using knowledge and wisdom to move tradition forward so tradition can provide a way for people to both appreciate Judaism and to also increase their understanding of the world and humanity.

Three poetic readings precede the blessing over the wine which reference the ordinary moments of smiles, kisses and hugs as well as the mysteries of nature which provide opportunities to "affirm that which is good."[180] Like the candles, wine is not given its Hebrew equivalent and, in the second reading, it referred to as the "fruit of the vine."[181] Much like the readings for the candle lighting, these also reference nature as well as the agency humans have in determining how nature unfolds. Before reading the blessing over the wine, the third reading concludes with "Tonight we say *L'chaim*!"[182] All of the

[176] *Shabbat Home Service*, inside cover.
[177] Ibid
[178] *Shabbat Home Service*, 2.
[179] *Shabbat Home Service*, 3.
[180] *Shabbat Home Service*, 4.
[181] *Shabbat Home Service*, 5.
[182] Ibid

elements of a human-centered approach to Judaism are incorporated - wisdom, understanding, responsibility, and Judaism. the inclusion of Hebrew, words like'"*L'chaim,*"*challah,* phrases like "fruit of the vine," and the impetus surrounding the recitation of the blessings, are enough to make this secular ritual hearken to religious aspects of Judaism. Much like other aspects of their liturgy, content has been adapted while the Jewish structure has been maintained.

There are three readings which precede the blessing over the *challah*, the only blessing which utilizes the ritual term in its title. Earth, nature, humanity and "all that which has been created through human effort"[183] are intertwined in these readings which speak to the "bonds with all who walk upon this earth" over the unique bonds stitching together just Jews. While Shabbat and the blessing over the *challah* are uniquely Jewish, these readings work to bridge and highlight the commonalities shared by all humans in addition to common themes shared by Jews. The Shabbat service concludes with a blessing shared often at B'li Elohim, not just on Shabbat and is included below and found under the heading *Concluding Shabbat Blessing.*

While the blessings and readings in the Home Shabbat Service don't mention God, Shabbat *is* referred to as "Shabbat" and not "Sabbath" and blessings for the candles, wine and *challah* are written in Hebrew with transliteration and translation thus connecting these innovations to historical tradition. In many ways, the congregation pushes the envelope of reform, but the Hebrew keeps them anchored to Jewish tradition. Candle, wine and *challah* blessings are included below and all follow a specific formula where either light (candles), life (wine), and the work of our hands, vision of our minds, and the bread of the earth (*challah*) are all blessed. Some blessings reference the world or earth (candles, wine and *challah*), humanity and/or people (candles and wine), and finally human capabilities like the mind and the work of

[183] *Shabbat Home Service*, 7.

the hands (*challah*). While traditional Jewish spaces might direct prayers and blessings toward God and community, these blessings are directed toward one's fellow and toward the community and according to the theologies described by some respondents, the connections between individuals are also sacred and holy.

The blessing over the Shabbat candles:

ברוך האור בעולם

ברוך העור באדם

ברוך העור בשבת

Baruch ha'or ba'olam

Baruch ha'or ba'adam

Baruch ha'or ba'shabbat

Blessed is the light within the world

Blessed is the light within each person

Blessed is the light of Shabbat

The blessing over the wine:

ברוכים החיים בעולם

ברוכים החיים באדם

B'ruchim he'chayim ba'olam

B'ruchim he'chayim ba'adam

Blessed is the life within the world

Blessed is the life within us

The blessing over the *challah*:

ברוך עמל כפינו

ברוך חזון האדם

ברוך לחם הארץ

Baruch amal kapeinu

Baruch chazon ha'adam

Baruch lechem ha'aretz

Blessed is the work of our hands

Blessed is the vision of our minds

Blessed is the bread of the earth

Concluding Shabbat blessing:

May we know blessings those who are near

May we know blessings those who are far

May the Sabbath bring its goodness to everyone soon wherever they are

May we know blessings through the day

May we know blessings through the night

May health before our children and all things soon be right

May we know blessings in our comings

May we know blessings when we depart

May we live each day with peace and wisdom in each heart

כן יהי (*ken yehi)*

let it be

The in-person/hybrid Shabbat service differs only slightly from the Shabbat Home Service that B'li Elohim provides to congregants. The liturgy seems typical: Shabbat is referred to as both Sabbath and Shabbat and Shabbat is also referred to as a time when "no buying, no selling, no working, no laboring, no straining…"[184] take place. It is a "gift" and an "opportunity to be together."[185] While traditional Shabbat themes are embedded (ie congregants are prompted to "recall their ancestors" before lighting the candles), other more Humanistic themes of wonder, wisdom, intelligence are woven throughout. While there is no mention of God, there is a reading on page ten which speaks of creation being about source, cause and the inseparability of living creatures and their connection to that source. This reading captures many of the theologies described by respondents.

[184] *Hybrid Shabbat Service*, 2.
[185] *Hybrid Shabbat Service*, 3.

"Everything, everywhere comes from one source

Our lives, all life, springs from that cause.

Each thing, everything, is made of the same matter

Our lives, all life, is inseparable and of that ground.

We are, each of us, uncommon expressions of that source

An intelligence unfolding to live one certain life."

Before the wine is blessed, the service includes a memorial prayer for mourners wishing to commemorate the memories of loved ones. This unique prayer includes three Hebrew quotes bookending the English which, as stated above, were written specifically for B'li Elohim and aren't sourced from Biblical texts. Unlike the *Mourner's Kaddish,* this text mentions death explicitly and calls mourners to remember and not forget "acts of kindness, deeds of courage, beauty created, and wisdom shared."[186]

Havdalah

Like the other programs in the kit of home services, the Havdalah booklet begins with a short explanation of the ritual describing it as a return to the coming week and involves a braided candle, wine, and spices. In addition to being lights in the world, the flame is also meant to represent humans, who are "[seekers] of wisdom"[187] because "wisdom and knowledge are meant to drive fear and ignorance from the shadows."[188] The same first two lines of the candle blessing for Shabbat are used to bless the *Havdalah* candle.

[186] *Hybrid Shabbat Service*, 12.
[187] *Havdalah Home Service*, 2.
[188] Ibid

In the page explaining the significance of the spices, the Jewish people are described as an "exotic people."[189] Considering the way human-centered Judaism prioritizes universal qualities, this is a strange reference to Jewish uniqueness. Unlike the traditional *Havdalah* ritual that utilizes spices to remember the sweetness of Shabbat to carry into the week ahead, these spices are meant to remind people of the immense journey of the Jewish people through Jewish history and to "reaffirm the possibilities of our lives."[190] Symbols are given new meaning and the traditional blessing is changed to read:

ברוך מותק החיים

ברוך מותק זמננו ביחד

Baruch motek ha-chayim

Baruch motek zi-mah-nay-nu bi-ya-chad

Blessed is the sweetness of life

Blessed is the sweetness of our time together

The service concludes with a blessing over the wine which is meant to symbolize the end of Shabbat, our connection to past generations and a reminder to "shape our own story and sing our own songs"[191] as we move into the future. The same wine blessing used on Shabbat is used here.

[189] *Havdalah Home Service*, 3.
[190] Ibid
[191] *Havdalah Home Service*, 4.

Hanukkah

The *Hanukkah* booklet begins with a brief introduction of the holiday which explains that the intention of the booklet's writers is to bring contemporary meaning for each candle lighting. After reading descriptions of each night's candle, the desire to bring contemporary meaning makes a lot of sense for this congregation which prides itself on the ability to weave modern and scientific approaches to the world with Jewish history. Some of the more intense and violent elements of this holiday are made more palatable by giving each night its own meaning. Night one is about remembering the bravery and determination of ancestors and night two sheds light on the inventiveness of the holiday by explaining how made-up stories about the changing seasons were incorporated into the ritual. Night three is about the war our ancestors fought and how we strive toward reason and peace, night four is about Jews at odds with each other and the tension between those who wanted to preserve the past (Maccabees) and those who wanted something new (Hellenistic Jews). Night five is about renewal, rededication, and renewing the commitment to Judaism. The theme of night six is the legend of the oil and how the lighting of the *Hanukiah* can symbolize the stories of the past. Night seven is meant to highlight heroes of the Jewish tradition including Judah the Hammer, and night eight concludes the holiday by recycling the Festival of Lights theme. This time, the theme is meant to remind people that we join forces to dispel the darkness of tyranny. The candle lighting blessing is printed at the bottom of each page, but the final line is ברוך האור בחנוכה and there are no additional blessings to commemorate the first night of Hanukkah. Each night's blessings are the same except for night eight which concludes with:

May the lights of courage and commitment shine and inspire us to action.

May the lights of freedom burn brightly in this and every generation.

May the lights of Hanukkah remain as beacons which illuminate the darkness.

The *At Home Hanukkah Service* ends with an explanation of the dreidel game and the lyrics to the song *I Have a Little Dreidel.* For a holiday about rededication, this service synthesizes history and gives new meaning to the Festival of Lights in a way that highlights the celebrations and inventiveness of humanity and the Jewish spirit.

Home Dedication

The ceremony for affixing a *mezuzah* describes this ritual item as a "meaningful way to declare membership with the Jewish people… and declares to all that the residents of the home are committed to the on-going evolution of the Jewish people."[192] At the end of the booklet is a special B'li Elohim scroll for inserting into one's *mezuzah*. Much in-line with the philosophy of the congregation, the scroll is unique in that it doesn't contain verses from Torah and the words of the *shema.* Rather, the words of *Ma Tovu* are written to "reflect the joy and hope in a Jewish home."[193] This is consistent with B'li Elohim's liturgy and the fact they don't recite the *shema* or any blessings or prayers that contain references to God. Numbers 24:5 (*Ma Tovu)* is not only the sole verse printed on the scroll, but these words are also offered at the beginning of the *Home Dedication Service* in order to remind those dedicating their home that they too are "bound to the ever unfolding history of [the Jewish] people" and serve as a reminder of the "moral and ethical principles to which we aspire."[194] Similar to the other services, themes of ancestry, history, ethics, morals and human reason are interspersed throughout the service. On the following page, residents are instructed to place the *mezuzah* "on the upper part of the door frame on the right side" at a diagonal with the "top inclined inward."[195] The *mezuzah* symbolizes to

[192] *Home Dedication Service*, introduction.
[193] *Home Dedication Service*, inside back cover.
[194] *Home Dedication Service*, 2.
[195] *Home Dedication Service*, 3.

all who see it that this is the home of individuals who "celebrate their membership within the Jewish people,"[196] and also reminds those inside the home that the dwelling is "filled with the warmth of the human spirit and the light of human reason."[197]

It's interesting what liberties have been taken with this very traditional practice*;* the style of hanging the *mezuzah* follows typical orientation and guidelines, yet the words on the scroll are unique. *Ma Tovu* is repeated and followed by an English reading before blessing the bread which "symbolizes the sustenance of the human spirit."[198] The words of this blessing are the same as what is offered on Shabbat over the *challah*. The service concludes with a blessing over the wine after reciting an English reading which explains that "warmth and concern, honesty and truth…vitality and creativity, rest and joy"[199] should be found in this home, a "shelter of humanity, love, happiness and peace."[200] Should one understand "warmth and concern, honesty and truth…vitality and creativity, rest and joy" to be extensions of the Judaism be found within the home or is that represented by the people who dwell inside? Either way, the service stitches together the universal values of humanity with the particularities of Judaism to reflect Jewish ritual in an easy-to-understand way.

B'li Elohim's endeavor to create their own liturgy calls into question how to achieve a balance between English and Hebrew, the rubric of traditional prayer and poetry, and what liturgy has to retain in order to still be considered Jewish. What does liturgy have to have to be defined as liturgy as opposed to poetry? This problem has been addressed by 20th century Jewish philosophers and theologians and their opinions about the degree to which liturgical change can happen has been discussed by Rabbi Jack

[196] Ibid
[197] Ibid
[198] *Home Dedication Service*, 5.
[199] *Home Dedication Service*, 6.
[200] Ibid

Cohen in his book *Major Philosophers of Jewish Prayer in the 20th Century* which was published in 2000. He explains that much of the changes and adjustments that they entertain are a product of their "personal idiosyncrasies and the mood of the age."[201] Some like Mordecai Kaplan "attempted serious change in the content of the prayers"[202] while also trying to preserve form. Rabbis like Eugene Borovitz and Lawrence Hoffman were/are also fans of change, but they shied away from "liturgical revival."[203] As Rabbi Cohen explains, the style among many has been to turn to "reinterpretation of the traditional liturgy in order to ensure continuity between their sometimes radical theologies and the age-old prayer book, but they pay little or no attention to adapting the wording of the prayers to those theologies"[204] because nobody has wanted to go so far as to "alter ancient text."[205] Tradition, as defined through use of a particular *siddur* and its liturgy, becomes codified and respect for the tradition set by both the liturgy and the *siddur* has taken precedence over the desire to adjust it because, as Rabbi Cohen points out, "the content of the prayers [was] basically irrelevant to the human-divine dialogue."[206]

Aspirationally, generations of rabbis and liturgists wanted prayer to be reinterpreted or to inspire Jews to "invest it with their individual and soulful adjustment to the times."[207] If adjustments were made, it was to balance Hebrew and the vernacular, as was the preference of the philosopher Hermann Cohen who preferred translating to "changing liturgical content."[208] For many 20th century Jewish philosophers and theologians, "intellectual honesty had nothing to do with what one [said] and only to do with what one [meant]."[209] Yet, this case study of B'li Elohim will show that what one says very much has to do

[201] Jack Cohen, *Major Philosophers of Jewish Prayer in the 20th Century,* 2.
[202] Ibid
[203] Ibid
[204] Ibid
[205] Ibid
[206] Ibid
[207] Jack Cohen, Major Philosophers of Jewish Prayer in the 20th Century, 3.
[208] Cohen, 2.
[209] Ibid

with how one connects to prayer, the community, the rabbi, to Judaism, and especially to God. While B'li Elohim has taken a lot of liberties in their adjustments, even going so far as to change the entire prayer rubric and not mention the name of God, the language of their liturgy has been modified to create space for each congregant to establish their own relationship and metaphors with the divine, with the community and with Judaism. While the endeavor to make these changes is not unique, the degree to which they've made the changes pushes boundaries.

What defines Jewish prayer and makes prayer Jewish? The Tannaim suggested that everyone who prays should direct their mind to God,[210] but did the Tannaim anticipate how Jews would pray if they did not believe in God? As Rabbi Cohen explains, if a congregant doesn't know to whom they are directing their prayers, intention is rendered meaningless. Respondents in this study often spoke about having intentional aspirations and while they may not have been directed toward God, they were directed toward some universal essence. In fact, much of B'li Elohim's liturgy speaks toward the moral order of the universe, something that Hegel understands as a fair substitution for the word "God" which he believed had become "empty of meaning"[211] in that the name God had become disassociated from its "content and meaning… and [should] stem from one's human experience."[212]

Instead of names for God or prayer structure, perhaps the question about what constitutes Jewish prayer should be situated around whether Jewish-inspired content is able to "[engender] emotional experiences"[213] and encourage meditations on how to become "the ideal person."[214] For those engaging in prayer to develop one's moral character, language, structure, and metaphors are secondary to the

[210] b Berachot 31a
[211] Cohen, 5.
[212] Ibid
[213] Ibid
[214] Cohen, 6.

intention at the foundation of the utterance. This debate goes back to the balance between *keva* (structure) and *kavana* (intention) and prayers solely filled with intention are missing the components that connect them to tradition and history. Is this what is happening in some of B'li Elohim's liturgy? Congregants say otherwise.

Rabbis and theologians like Jacob Petuchowski and Abraham Joshua Heschel attempted to balance *keva* and *kavana* by preserving as much traditional prayer as possible by placing more flexibility on the poetic nature of prayer language which Rabbi Cohen believes is an issue because when too much flexibility is imbued into the language, words with "limitless meaning"[215] become meaningless. As Rabbi Cohen explains, "reading meaning into terms not coined for those purposes has reached its limits. The endeavor to find *kavana* in *keva* must at times founder on the rocks of casuistry and the boring pace and repetitiveness of communal prayer."[216] Therein lies the endeavor of the Ritual and Lifecycle Committee at B'li Elohim and that is to change the language of liturgy to allow room for intention, thoughtful metaphors, intellect, reason and yes, even tradition which is not always apparent in the liturgical structure, but underlies the motivations compelling each congregant to utter words and engage in ritual. Rabbi Cohen believes that "the future of prayer cannot be isolated from the general human condition,"[217] and I think B'li Elohim's bold pursuit to rewrite tradition in a way that incorporates the postmodern needs of the congregation continues the rabbinic exercise of interpretation and reinterpretation so the *siddur* and Jewish prayer, while having been redefined, are still able to "perform [their] spiritual tasks."[218]

[215] Cohen, 130.
[216] Cohen, 131.
[217] Cohen, 8.
[218] Cohen, 7.

Role of the Rabbi

I was curious to know about congregants' relationships with the rabbis as a way of trying to understand how influential rabbis are in people's relationship to Judaism. Does the rabbi have a role in teaching and transmitting Judaism, and shaping a person's Jewish practice? Even for members of this non-denominational community that has a unique take on seeing Jewish text as myth, the rabbi has a typical role as teacher, educator, and transmitter of knowledge. While the community's practices are innovative, the role of the rabbi is very much on par with traditional rabbinic responsibilities.

At B'li Elohim, there have been three different rabbis over the course of the congregation's history - Rabbi Klein, who has been there since the inception of the congregation, Rabbi Lewis, who worked there from 2006 to 2015 and co-founded Our Jewish Community, and finally the current Rabbi Educator, Rabbi Fine, who has been on staff since 2018. There have also been numerous rabbinic interns given the congregation's relationship with Hebrew Union College- Jewish Institute of Religion.

When respondents were asked about their relationship with the rabbis, many spoke about their relationships with Rabbi Klein, who had the most impact on individuals and families by guiding them through lifecycle events like b'nai mitzvah, weddings, and funerals. Given the intimacy that comes from working with a family or couple experiencing transitions of this nature, many spoke about a feeling of closeness with Rabbi Klein. Some have also worked with Rabbi Fine when experiencing life cycle events and spoke fondly of his pastoral skills and the way he has led the children's Sunday school program.

Outside of being a source of pastoral comfort, rabbis in this community are mainly regarded as teachers, and revered for the ways they make Jewish tradition relevant and meaningful. Rabbi Klein has been a constant in the Adult Studies program, which, as previously stated, has been part of B'li Elohim's

programming since its inception. Due to this, as well as other roles the rabbi often occupies, respondents often described him as their teacher and the source of knowledge for the congregation. Among the many reasons people had great respect for him was the fact that he is considered to be the transmitter of knowledge and for many, he is the one who changed the way they thought about Judaism. Respondents, like Aaron, look up to Rabbi Klein because of the way he has helped them "flesh out" their internal conflicts with the "Jewish myths" to which they were connected and I think this is a huge piece of why congregants admire Rabbi Klein. Conversely, because Rabbi Klein is so intrinsically tied to the congregation, if a person doesn't like him, or his leadership and teaching style, then they most likely would not continue as members even if they liked other positive aspects of the community.[219] In many ways, Rabbi Klein's approach to Judaism and unique brand of teaching tradition, oral and written Torah as myth and folklore as opposed to infallible doctrine around which Jews need to conform their practice, has not only reshaped and reconfigured Judaism for many people who would have been "happily unaffiliated,"[220] but it has also condoned and normalized a lot of emotions and frustrations that have kept some people from engaging with Judaism altogether.

For many, the rabbis determine the ethos, philosophy, values, and mission of the congregation. Even though this is a dual effort between the Rabbi and the Board, in this community, where the senior rabbi has been there since the beginning of the congregation, the rabbi gets sole credit. At B'li Elohim, Rabbi Klein is regarded as the one who not only promotes the mission of the community, but also ensures the next generation and keeps the congregation going. He is also described as less of a source of pastoral care than he is described as a teacher and moral exemplar, but people still depend on either him or Rabbi Fine emotionally, knowing that they can go to either during a time of change or trauma. Although

[219] One, interview with the author, August 31, 2021.
[220] Thirteen, interview with the author, September 21, 2021.

at B'li Elohim, the priority is not pastoral. Rather, it is the way the rabbis churn and translate tradition into something that congregants can fit into their lives. In this way, the rabbis get people excited about Judaism who otherwise wouldn't be excited about it.

Other sentiments and expectations shared about the rabbis were that they are like "the glue that holds the community together and holds us to Judaism making it attractive and interesting."[221] According to others, the rabbi speaks to their values and is "central to the health and strength of a synagogue."[222] Even though congregants are proud to call B'li Elohim nontraditional, the traditional standards applied to rabbis apply here.

For Erin, who was raised at B'li Elohim, Rabbi Klein's sermons were a "guide and resource "[223] as she grew up and figured out where she aligned Jewishly and politically. As she said, "Rabbi Klein informed the way I think about Judaism."[224] For adults who came to B'li Elohim later in life, the rabbi is still a guide for determining how to live a moral and purposeful life and the one who guides the congregation along the path of values that they hold dear. When pressed to define those values, Preston described them as "the importance of the human spirit, the value of where we are and where our place is in relation to others, in relation to the world and in relation to the environment."[225]

Griffin, who was raised at one of the Reform temples in Cincinnati and came to B'li Elohim as an adult, spoke about a very impactful relationship he developed with his Bar Mitzvah tutor. "He helped me appreciate Judaism differently and he is the reason I have a relationship with HUC." In addition, many of

[221] Sixteen, interview with the author, October 5, 2021.
[222] One, interview with the author, August 31, 2021.
[223] Fifteen, interview with the author, October 5, 2021.
[224] Ibid
[225] Twelve, interview with the author, August 24, 2021.

his Sunday School classes were taught by HUC rabbinical students on HUC's Cincinnati campus. How connected are positive relationships, memories and learning experiences with rabbis and the way people like Griffin connect with Judaism as adults? He continued, "even though I've never gone to a rabbi for pastoral care, I see the benefit because rabbis bring both wisdom and caring."[226]

There were others who spoke fondly about the positive relationships developed with their Hillel rabbis either before coming to B'li Elohim, or after growing up there and how this relationship furthered their relationships with Judaism. Mollie described a close relationship with her Hillel Rabbi, with whom she spent a lot of time and greatly adored. "Like Rabbi Klein, she was integral because she was a keeper of knowledge. She had a knowledge of history, the Jewish community, and the Jewish people and the way she disseminated it made it meaningful and allowed others to also make meaning of it. Rabbis are keepers of a long, long history and I trust them to know or have the knowledge and I appreciate when they trust me to do what I will with it."[227] The rabbi holds the unique position of being able to help people appreciate and connect with Judaism on terms that are particular to each person's experience and background and the empowering and trust factors that enable each congregant to do with Judaism what they see fit, are huge determinants in a person's relationship with their rabbi. Conversely, having a negative relationship with a rabbi, religious teacher or congregation can be powerful enough to cause people to turn away from Judaism altogether. Although, I think this would be the case for people who have tenuous relationships with Judaism to begin with.

Jack had a positive experience with a Hillel rabbi, but this was after having a sour experience in the *cheders* (religious schools) where he was sent as a kid. He was raised with parents who rebelled against

[226] Three, interview with the author, August 31, 2021.
[227] Fourteen, interview with the author, October 5, 2021.

their own Jewish backgrounds (his father grew up Orthodox and his mother grew up Labor Zionist) and despite their rebelliousness, Judaism was important enough for them to send Jack to every *cheder* in Chicago after each one threw him out for boldly stating that he "didn't believe this stuff."[228] Even though they clearly insisted on a Jewish education, Jack's father would take him to the horse track on *Yom Kippur*. Suffice it to say that Jack had an interesting experience with Judaism as a kid and teenager. In fact, the final *cheder* where he landed was an Orthodox one where he strangely felt at ease. Why? "The rabbi made no attempt to teach Judaism- he only wanted us to learn Hebrew and never bothered translating so it was rote memory and ignorance was bliss for me." The summer before Jack was supposed to have a bar mitzvah, he told his parents that he wasn't going to go through with it because it felt like hypocrisy to him. When his parents told the rabbi, he complimented Jack for actually thinking it through. Jack doesn't consider the lack of a bar mitzvah a void in his life; he has clearly made up for skipping this lifecycle event through his connection to his Hillel rabbi and later becoming one of the founding members of B'li Elohim.

Jack's skepticism and distance from Judaism as a teen took a positive turn after meeting his Hillel rabbi when he attended Northwestern University. "He inspired a kind of rebirth of Judaism in me. This young Orthodox rabbi who was clean shaven and smoked on Shabbat was provocative and studying with him was the first time that I started feeling at ease with another aspect of Judaism- the intellectual and historical parts of it, rather than the rote observance."[229] Jack tells a story about the Hillel rabbi convincing him to work at a summer camp where one day, he was roped into leading a portion of the morning *minyan*. "They needed someone to lead the *bruches* and because I'm a Levite, I volunteered. They were so surprised when everything from my upbringing came back and I was able to lead the

[228] Seventeen, interview with the author, October 5, 2021.
[229] Ibid

service. At that point, I started to feel more at ease with Judaism and identify more with it."[230] Jack's upbringing turned him off from Judaism, but even during his off years, that language and familiarity was still present in the background and could've been the source for cultivating a relationship with the rabbi at Hillel, where he encountered a Jewish leader who spoke to his frustrations and long-standing questions.

Another theme that emerged was the rabbi having the dual responsibility of being a "moral exemplar" and representing what congregants like Catherine believe to be a "good Jew."[231] Additionally, the rabbi is regarded as a teacher who is responsible for churning tradition in a way that speaks to the skeptics and contrarians. One woman, who does not identify as Jewish but supports her Jewish husband and family through her affiliation and leadership roles in the congregation, described Rabbi Klein as the one who presents material in a way that actually makes a person think about it - "he doesn't just regurgitate it."[232] For someone like her, having a teacher who makes historical material relevant is integral to the way she supports the building of a Jewish home because this helps her feel a sense of agency as a member of this community so that she isn't mindlessly following rules she doesn't understand.

Oren talked about something similar. As he said, "the rabbi is supposed to make you think about what you're actually listening to, and how you feel about it and where your path lies based on that."[233] Rabbi Klein and Rabbi Lewis taught and spoke about Judaism in a way that made it so he could support his Jewish wife and family. "Everything the rabbis have taught me through services, through OJC programming, and through video interviews have pointed me to the way I am now. I didn't grow up with

[230] Ibid
[231] Four, interview with the author, August 24, 2021.
[232] Eighteen, interview with the author, September 23, 2021.
[233] Eleven, interview with the author, September 23, 2021.

much religion - my mom was Presbyterian, and my dad wasn't religious. Today, I'm not anti-religion, or an atheist, or agnostic, and can't say that I'm exactly up there with someone who has a strong relationship with their rabbi, but if it weren't for the humanistic [approach], I don't know if I would be part of this congregation. I've met many rabbis, but getting along with them personally helps someone like me learn something from people like them. That makes a big difference." For him, the rabbi's unique ways of translating tradition made it so these spouses who weren't raised Jewish could not only support their Jewish partners and families, but create bridges of connection for themselves.

There is a difference between those who were raised Jewish and those who came to Judaism by choice in terms of the ways they regard their rabbis as arbiters of tradition and how their Jewish practice is shaped. Yet, in many ways, congregants at B'li Elohim, no matter if they were raised Jewish or converted, regard Rabbi Klein's teachings as doctrine because of how dramatically he reshaped the ways they understood Jewish tradition and Jewish stories. For both people who were raised Jewish and people who chose Judaism, the rabbi is regarded as a teacher, leader, the source for information, and also holds the responsibility of being able to shape the way the community understands Judaism to the extent that what they say is regarded as doctrine. Are rabbis in traditional spaces also given these same responsibilities? For those who grew up in the tradition and have a certain level of Jewish literacy and knowledge, does the rabbi also hold all of these roles simultaneously or are they more likely to take what the rabbi says with a grain of salt? This is a question for further research as there have not been studies on this topic.

Rabbis also bring a certain amount of judgement, or lack of judgement when it comes to people's fluid and changing Jewish observance and practice. "Rabbi Klein doesn't care if I fast and there's a comfort in

that)."[234] Rabbi Klein's nonjudgmental approach has set the tone for the congregation in that B'li Elohim is a welcoming space for people with a wide array of backgrounds, literacy levels and practices. Not once during the course of the interviews did anyone mention that they felt self-conscious for not doing "enough" in terms of Jewish practice. Regardless of fasting status, proficiency, or lack of proficiency with Hebrew, or whether a person lights Shabbat candles, there don't appear to be congregational roadblocks that make it difficult for newcomers or congregants to engage with the community on a practice level.

A small handful of respondents spoke about a closeness with Rabbi Klein as if he were a friend and someone with whom they have drinks or dinner. While some consider Rabbi Klein a friend, others solely regard him as their teacher, leader, "authority and the *jefe*."[235] In contrast, the Rabbi Fine was regarded by many as warm, caring, approachable and "huggy." Do congregants desire a rabbi as a teacher more than rabbi as counselor? Also, due to the split in responsibilities and the Rabbi Fine's focus on the Sunday School, at the time of these interviews, many of the adult respondents said that they didn't know him well enough even though he has helped lead High Holiday services and delivered High Holiday sermons. There is a primacy placed on Rabbi Klein that will make it difficult to transition to another rabbi once he retires.

For congregants who don't live in Cincinnati and were historically part of Our Jewish Community which enabled them to join the congregation virtually, Rabbi Lewis, who co-founded OJC, was spoken about. Oren and Marjorie explained that they were much closer with her, and that she was really good at engaging the online community because she multitasked during services by both leading and

[234] Four, interview with the author, August 24, 2021.
[235] Seventeen, interview with the author, October 5, 2021.

simultaneously utilizing the chat. Since her departure, they have felt like "students in the back of the room talking while the rabbi is giving a lecture."[236] As they explained, "we've lost some of that intimate, 'we're all together, having a discussion' feeling that she really helped to cultivate."[237] It seems as though the way she engaged both the in-person and virtual communities helped to create a sense of intimacy and re-creation of community for which they are nostalgic. They also spoke about feeling comfortable enough to email her with their questions, but now, because it's not the same, they rarely email the rabbis. While hybrid learning and prayer serve to engage congregants both near and far, the task must be done in a way that fully involves both groups and simulates one room in which both groups feel present and able to contribute.

As has been documented, B'li Elohim's unique liturgy has radically transformed Judaism for many of its congregants. Yet, the congregation sustains the look and feel of tradition by continuing to utilize Hebrew and some traditional liturgical structures. It also maintains significant lifecycle occasions like the *b'nai mitzvah* for teenagers, and has traditional roles and responsibilities attached to the rabbi. While some traditional Jewish structures are continued, the content is altered. Given the diversity of "prayer" practices in relation to the practices and liturgy of the institution, there are tensions that will need to be resolved. For a congregation that was created by people who sought an intellectualized Judaism, providing institutionalized spiritual practices could seem paradoxical, but it would be a worthwhile endeavor especially because the reconciliation of science and Judaism has opened avenues for congregants to pursue deeper levels of engagement. Yet, there is a tension created by the old guard that forms a glass ceiling between the urge to preserve what the founders built and the needs of congregants who desire something deeper.

[236] Ten, interview with the author, September 23, 2021.
[237] Ibid

Challenges, Personal Reflections, and Conclusion

As a soon to be ordained HUC – JIR Rabbi who will be tasked with the responsibility of being a Jewish leader in an America where increasing numbers of Jews self-describe as either secular, unaffiliated, or Jews of no religion,[238] I have quite the task ahead of me. The latest PEW report of Jewish America found that over one-quarter of Jews in the United States identify as Jewish by ethnicity, culture, and family versus identifying as Jewish by religion. By not identifying as Jewish by religion, these individuals prefer to define themselves as atheist, agnostic or nothing in particular, and will henceforth be referred to as Jews with no religion, or JNR's. This number increases to four-in-ten for American Jewish adults under 30.[239] What can a burgeoning Jewish leader like me do with this forecast?

From this case study of B'li Elohim, an unaffiliated Jewish community with a human-centered approach to Judaism in Cincinnati, I heard the stories of people who find great meaning in being Jewish apart from being religious. For synagogues, temples, and congregations to continue to be relevant to the growing number of JNR's, Jewish institutions need to change to reflect the liturgical and praxis-based needs described by some of the respondents in this case study.

How much change is too much change?

I got a sense for the degree of change the Reform movement is willing to allow on their spectrum of innovation when the UAHC refused to admit B'li Elohim because their liturgical changes were deemed too extreme. By eliminating key prayers like the *shema, Mourner's Kaddish,* and other components of

[238] Pew Research Center, May 11, 2021, "Jewish Americans in 2020," 2.
[239] Ibid

liturgy that speak of God, B'li Elohim's reforms were deemed too radical to be included within the movement of Reform Judaism. While the respondents to this case study were not random and all happened to be members of a human-centered congregation, I was able to formulate a picture of Jewish practices and the elements of Judaism that resonate and don't resonate with both secular Jews and unaffiliated Jews regarding the role and content of liturgy and Jewish practice.

Some of the needs expressed by respondents may seem extreme on the spectrum of how much change is too much before it is no longer recognizable, and this is a question I wrestled with throughout the course of this case study. If Jewish leaders wish to be both relevant in the ways they choose to face the desires of their communities, and humble in the ways they think they can affect change or prevent change, then the needs and practices of those who identify as JNR's, secular, or unaffiliated Jews must not be discounted. Also, Jewish organizations ought to not give up on engaging this growing population because congregations can still have a role in their lives if only congregations are willing to innovate Jewish liturgy which will affect Jewish prayer and Jewish practice. B'li Elohim's philosophy and ethos are expressed in their unique liturgy which informs the ways congregants practice Judaism. Practice is defined as engaging in prayer, ritual, or Jewish culture and is also affected by the ways Rabbis Klein and Fine reframes Jewish history.

Liturgy

When the tensions between God, nature, Jewish history, and science are either ignored or not reconciled by rabbis and through Jewish liturgy, people turn away from Jewish religion and/or congregations, but they're not disbanding from Judaism. Since synagogues and congregations were once the epicenters of Jewish life, they were the one place that was meant to meet the needs of people who identify as cultural, spiritual, religious, and even some secular Jews. This is a fragile foundation because

when pieces of a synagogue's building blocks no longer satisfy the needs of its constituents, many congregants disband and one of these unsatisfying components manifests in liturgy. When liturgy contradicts people's beliefs about God, and/or what they know about science and the universe, this tension is used as evidence for the claim that congregations are obsolete, irrelevant, and out of touch.

At B'li Elohim, over and over again, I heard people say that they want to say what they believe; they do not want to be hypocritical and express religious ideas that contradict their belief systems which are informed by what they know about philosophy and science. They left other congregations because they felt hypocritical about the ideas they were asked to express in communal prayer, or what was written in the prayer book, and some were happily unaffiliated until stumbling across B'li Elohim. As reflected in the congregation's liturgy and in the physical space of the sanctuary, congregants' thresholds for cognitive dissonance was low; they do not utter words that are out of alignment with their own philosophies, even if it's tradition or the way things have always been done. Synagogues and congregations ought to also reconcile the tensions between what science have proven, what people believe and what Jewish tradition says and not only utilize liturgical alternatives to reflect this assimilation of these ideas, but have leadership that legitimizes these thoughts from the *bimah.*

Since religion is not the end-all be-all for these Jews, they still seek community because there is intangible value to learning, studying, celebrating milestones, and experiencing significant lifecycle events with people who share one's common denominators of shared belief, philosophy, practice, values, and culture. Despite the "divergent" beliefs of these informants (that are actually becoming more common according to PEW), the respondents in this study see themselves as part of a continuum of Jewish history which is what motivates their desires to innovate. They want to continue tradition in a

way that feels authentic to their worldviews and what they believe which is what drove them to write their own liturgy.

In writing their own liturgy and prayer rubrics, they made bold decisions about what to include and what not to include. In doing this, the Ritual and Lifecycle Committee decided what about Jewish practice was obsolete and what was still relevant and worthy of continuing and transmitting. On one hand, this created a Judaism that was inclusive and didn't have barriers to entry. Anybody could participate and engage with it because there were very few literacy requirements necessary to do so. One respondent recognized the paradox in not liking synagogues that emphasize tradition, custom and ritual so much that it created a sense of rigidity, but she also felt like an outsider when she attempted to participate in traditional spaces because all she knew were her unique B'li Elohim prayers.[240] A Judaism distilled of many of its particularities is good for interfaith families when non-Jewish partners want to engage without feeling ostracized, but on the other hand, it creates a Judaism that celebrates more of its universal characteristics than its particularities. This removal of key components of the token liturgical structure and adjustment of pivotal prayers like the *Mourner's Kaddish* can make Jewish prayer feel too universal. Is it possible to achieve a balance between these polarities to create accessible prayer while still retaining unique Jewish qualities?

Some of the unique Jewish components that were maintained felt like rusted anchors tethering these bold changes to a corpus to which the congregation feels obligated to remain connected. These components were the occasional inclusion of Hebrew, the use of Israeli poetry, quotes from *TaNaKh* and *Mishna*, and the impetus to gather for Jewish rituals like Shabbat*, Havdalah, b'nai mitzvah* ceremonies, the installation of a *mezuzah*, as well as the observance of other lifecycle events. Despite these critiques,

[240] Fourteen, interview with the author, October 4, 2021.

it is evident that the congregation wants to create an accessible Judaism for non-Jewish partners, converts, secular Jews and Jews who want to say what they believe by teaching and maintaining the parts of Judaism that they feel are worthy of continuing.

In addition to this evolved corpus of liturgy that reconciles science with tradition, are prayer practices that don't fall under the traditional definition of prayer. Congregants don't say "*baruch atah Adonai Eloheinu melekh ha-olam"* at the start of their blessings; the bold distillation has reduced this to a simple *baruch* (if at all) as seen in the Shabbat blessings. Given that the category of liturgy has been expanded to include prayers that no longer contain traditional rubrics, the definition of prayer should also be expanded. Often, respondents told me that they didn't pray, but they meditated, contemplated, expressed gratitude or were introspective. Yet, the impetus for these practices was quite similar to what inspires one to pray. The motivation to pray, meditate, contemplate, express gratitude, or become introspective ought to weigh just as heavily as the rules that dictate that lighting Shabbat candles entails blessing the role of light in creation and in the world. Although, I wrestle with whether the definition of prayer should be expanded to include daily *mussar* practices like when Julie reads her *Every Day Holy Day* book, or whether this is a desperate attempt to code the rituals of secular Jews as religious just to keep them in the count and create another rusted anchor between what was and what is happening now.

The connection between thought and action was a theme that also came up for me. Thought and action were once measures for how a person expressed their Judaism, but I think there is a factor that is not included in this equation. Meaning and resonance played large roles in determining some of the respondents' Jewish practices, but didn't always have visible counterparts. Very few strictly fasted on Yom Kippur; the majority restricted what they ate during the day to separate the sacred from the

profane and imbue meaning in a way that was convenient for them. The majority of people had *mezzuzot,* but a handful had them in drawers because they "just hadn't gotten around to putting them up." These symbols and actions clearly had meaning for respondents, and the meaning isn't diminished just because it wasn't strict or displayed prominently on doorframes. Practice can't only be understood as the connection between thought and action; it should also include the accumulation of historical meaning and the resonance of certain rituals, symbols, and practices. The participants of this case study were folks who are actively picking and choosing pieces of Judaism that fit into their lives that made sense with their experiences of the world. While it may be easier to determine the observance level of a Jew who is committed to following *halakha*, or Jewish law, measuring the Jewishness of non-Orthodox Jews is much more complicated. For them, Jewish practice ought to be defined by thought, action and meaning because the thoughts and impetuses motivating people to practice and do were there even when actions weren't fully completed, as tradition has historically defined certain practices.

It was clear that respondents were part of this congregation because of something Jewish in their hearts, or because they felt it was important to raise Jewish children, and this is immeasurable. If we can no longer measure a person's Jewish identity based upon whether they affiliate with a congregation, then we ought to consider thought, action and meaning when attempting to quantify. Yet, despite how many questions were asked over the course of these interviews, my attempt to quantify and understand Jewish practice and belief still felt like it came up short.

When congregants prayed or meditated/contemplated/expressed gratitude/were introspective, to whom were their thoughts and words directed? Based upon the liturgy, sometimes words and thoughts were directed toward the community, and based upon comments from respondents, words and thoughts are also directed toward a higher power, nature, the good part of every person put together,

and also the natural, universal force that pervades the universe, connecting all beings, and encouraging living things to reach for light, for growth, for spring, and for hope. Many times, during the theology section of these interviews, people spoke about not believing in an old man in the sky with a big white beard who is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent. When limited, parochial conceptions of God are depicted and deemed the norm, it's easier to be dismissive of ideas about God and opt for a secular approach to religion.

When God is conceived as an old man with a beard, sitting in a chair presiding over our actions, grading them, and awarding points or demerits, it's no wonder why people wouldn't resonate with these ideas and would run the other way. When people are given the opportunity to expound, they explain that even though they don't believe in a supreme judgmental overseer, they do believe that "bits of us reside in the people who we've touched throughout our lives."[241] There is something sacred and holy in ideas like what are often presented as the contrast to the old, judgmental man in the sky, and these theologies ought to also be incorporated into revised liturgy and prayer practices. If people have higher powers, congregations and rabbis should empower people to cultivate relationships with them, and if they have atheistic beliefs, then congregations should still have liturgy that reflect the spectrum between believing in a higher power and not believing. This is possible because liturgy is just as much about intentions and contemplations directed toward the community and the self as it is about intentions directed toward a higher power.

[241] Twelve, interview with the author, August 24, 2021.

Practice

At B'li Elohim, hybrid Shabbat services are biweekly. Every other week, Rabbi Klein or Rabbi Fine share online interviews that can be streamed at any time. In fact, congregants are also able to stream High Holiday services at any time because they are also virtual. When people convene virtually, or when they can watch services at times that are convenient for them, this affects the sense of community that people traditionally sought when they participated and attended religious services. While there were also religious factors motivating people to attend services, community has always been a huge piece of the equation. As a continuation of the discussion about motivation and impetus, the definition of what it means to participate, practice, and attend ought to also be modified, especially in the age of Zoom when the definition of what it means to "attend" services has changed. One respondent described watching Shabbat services from the background, only after his wife "put them on."[242] What happens to intention and *kavana* when the definition of what it means to be attend services is broadened? When people join programs and services from near and far and are often multitasking while they do so, it becomes difficult to measure attendance and practice. Given that secular Jews are still practicing traditional rituals, albeit in modified ways, the definition of practice ought to be broadened to include modified ways of observing the High Holidays, fasting, keeping Kosher,[243] and engaging in prayer.

A challenge that emerged, not just in the realm of liturgy but also practice, was how to pass down "evolved" traditions and liturgy while keeping these connected to what preceded them. One challenge noticed at B'li Elohim was the significance of the congregation's unique liturgy and some congregants' simultaneous lack of familiarity with traditional Jewish liturgy and prayer practices. This made it difficult for individuals who developed their Judaism or learned about Judaism at B'li Elohim to participate in

[242] Eleven, interview with the author, September 23, 2021.
[243] One respondent explained that he and his wife don't go out of their way to "keep Kosher," but they don't bring ham into the house.

other Jewish spaces. How much change is too much change before people feel illiterate when they're outside of B'li Elohim, or when the congregation's liturgy is not recognizable to non-congregants? Many respondents talked about their love for B'li Elohim's liturgy and their frustrations with only being able to use that liturgy within the congregation, unless they wanted to have the responsibility to teach it to people who weren't fluent in B'li Elohim's ways. They also talked about their frustrations with a lack of literacy in other Jewish spaces because they only knew B'li Elohim's ways and didn't know traditional Jewish prayers. When they try out other Jewish spaces, the discomfort between what they know and don't know creates a learning curve that some are not willing to endure so they either stream B'li Elohim's services from afar, or do not participate in services at all. These respondents never learned what they did not see, hear, or experience and while it is nice when there is continuity and a person can go into any Jewish space and know what's going on, we cannot only look at things in terms of how relatable, recognizable and shareable it will be to Jews in other settings, or Jews of the past. Yet, B'li Elohim's unique brand of Judaism should not prevent converts and people who were raised at the congregation, as well as non-Jewish partners, from participating in other Jewish spaces because of a lack of knowledge so there needs to be an additional focus on learning the evolution of liturgy and practice to help this continuity.

Another challenge that emerged was that "the way things have always been done" is a sentiment that pervades new communities as well as old ones. Even at B'li Elohim, there is a status quo that the old guard wants to maintain. The congregation formed because of the desire for a Judaism that coincided with the ways modern, 20th century Jews understood the world, tradition, and science. Change is uncomfortable for everyone and every organization, but for continuity to be maintained and for the congregation to continue to be relevant for another generation of congregants, they will need to listen

to the needs of the young families and new congregants who desire Judaism that is not only grounded in science and reason, but spirituality as well.

Will the Jewish practices of future generations be recognizable to previous generations, and does it matter if it's unrecognizable if the impetus and meaning are there for each of the people engaging in these Jewish rituals? Rabbinic Judaism is certainly not Temple-based Judaism and Reform Jewish practice of the 21st century is different from Rabbinic Judaism. As evidenced in this community through their very responses, Jews with varying practices and beliefs who see themselves as part of a continuum of Jewish history are modifying tradition to continue practicing Judaism in ways that feel authentic to their worldviews and what they believe. The way they continue the chain of transmission with integrity is by redefining Jewish practice in meaningful ways.

Recommendations

- In addition to biweekly interviews with the rabbis and hybrid services where congregants read the Shabbat liturgy, provide opportunities for people to log on and simply light Shabbat candles via Zoom with the B'li Elohim blessings.

- Keep a database of the individuals who have had their *b'nai mitzvah* ceremonies at the congregation because, in addition to Sunday School families, these are the people who are the most likely to come back to the congregation as members because these are the Jewish practices with which they are most comfortable.

- B'li Elohim's virtual programming through Our Jewish Community, which began in 2009, still engages congregants who live outside of Cincinnati, but some feel secondary because they

aren't engaged as much as the people who are able to show up in-person and feel like "the kids in the back of the classroom." With so many prayer options available via Zoom nowadays, the congregation needs to decide if they want to continue OJC and if they do, they ought to figure out how to engage both in-person and virtual congregants equally.

- Create more home services and programming around other Jewish holidays. There are ways to reframe Tu B'shvat, Purim, Sukkot and even Simchat Torah so these are not just Pagan customs cloaked in Jewish holidays but rather meaningful experiences for modern Jews.

- In addition to Spinoza, teach about other philosophers and theologians who also tried to reframe and reform liturgy, practice, and God. Moses Mendelssohn also wanted to reform Jewish prayer, Abraham Joshua Heschel wanted people to have intention and *kavana* in their prayer practices, and Mordecai Kaplan experienced God in nature and would use the term "power" or "force" to describe God. These ideas could also resonate with congregants.

- In addition to traditional services, create more communal, secular practices in the sanctuary space for congregants with alternative prayer practices. People spoke about practices that included leaving themselves open to kindness and to other people's emotions, concentrating their focus so they can be part of the universe, seeking strength from inside themselves in order to connect to their stronger parts as well as expressing and acknowledging gratitude by putting out requests and intentions for family, friends and humanity. Perhaps Friday nights can also include these rituals because seeing them legitimized on the *bimah* can help normalize them.

- Even after God language is removed, the unique Jewish characteristics and messages of some prayers can be maintained thus ensuring accessibility to secular Jews, spiritual Jews and non-Jews. For example, *Asher Yatzar* captures the sense of awe and wonder that respondents described feeling and wanted reflected in their liturgy and it is still possible to retain the message of prayers like this after removing barriers to literacy and obsolete descriptions of God.

- Given that B'li Elohim was bold enough to rewrite liturgy and reframe tradition and Jewish history, why do they shy away from redefining ideas about prayer and God? When people utilize others' definitions of what it means to be religious, what prayer looks like, or what God means, they situate themselves on the outside. In asking the question, "what does it mean to be religious?" I wanted respondents to see that their practices had weight and value. Using other people's definitions of practice, prayer, and God can exclude one's own ways of being Jewish and being spiritual.

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