

# Commentary

---

JULY/AUGUST 2016 POLITICS & IDEAS

## Meir Soloveichik on Yuval Levin's 'The Fractured Republic'

Symposium

by **Meir Y. Soloveichik**

**Y**UVAL LEVIN, THE EDITOR OF THE QUARTERLY NATIONAL AFFAIRS AND A sometime contributor to *Commentary*, has just published *The Fractured Republic*, an essay in book form about the political divide in the United States. It has excited more attention in the weeks leading up to its release than any comparable work in memory. I called it “the book of the year” in a *New York Post* column, and in a review in these pages in May, David Bahr said *The Fractured Republic* “merges a deep philosophic understanding of the American experiment and a conceptual analysis of American history into a practical basis from which we can examine contemporary American problems with crystalline clarity.” Given the richness of the book, we invited four right-of-center intellectuals to expound upon, and expand on, Levin’s themes and message. -John Podhoretz

T



BIRTHRIGHT ISRAEL  
FOUNDATION

# Create Your Jewish Legacy

Learn more about legacy  
giving to Birthright Israel  
Foundation today.

[LEARN MORE](#)

he most sobering feature of Yuval Levin's brilliant analysis of America's "fractured republic" is what he calls a "revolution in the structure of American religiosity." Multitudes of Americans, Levin persuasively argues, have ceased to view traditional religion as "an ideal with which to nominally identify" and have come instead "to see it as an option to reject." It is not, he points out, that the dedicated members of traditional faiths are dwindling; on the contrary, religious communities are vibrant, and flourishing. At the same time, they have become counter-cultural; the biblically based consensus that at one time "contributed enormously to the cohesion and success of American society" has evaporated,

adherents of religious orthodoxy have “lost their place of honor in the moral life of our society,” and an increasing number of Americans have even become “hostile to religion to varying degrees.”

In such an environment, Levin wisely counsels believers in America not only to fight for religious liberty, but also to allow their flourishing communities to teach by example. They should offer, he suggests, an alternative moral order that is not only negative but also positive, drawing people’s eyes and hearts “to the vast and beautiful ‘yes’ for the sake of which an occasional narrow but insistent ‘no’ is required.” Traditional faiths in America, Levin suggests, should serve as “living models of practical orthodoxy,” ever-mindful of Tocqueville’s insights that in eras dominated by individualism, it is the firmly orthodox institutions that prove

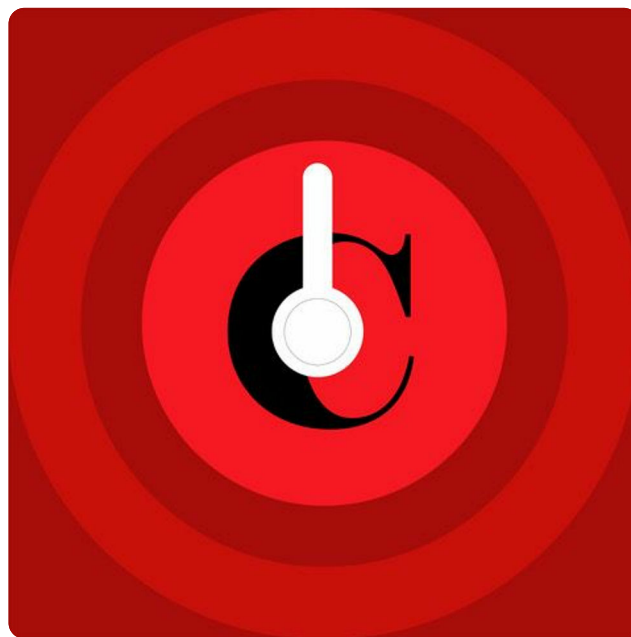
most attractive “thanks in no small part to their countercultural character.”

Traditionalists should illustrate by their very lives that a genuinely biblical, and authentically American, version of freedom is “not only that people be free to choose, but also that they be able to choose well,” living their faith in the world confident that their example “will make that world better and be drawn to the spark.” In other words, they must learn to balance being both part of, and apart from, society, confident in the face of a much more secular society, and even in the face of Americans who may at times be hostile to their faith.

Levin is undoubtedly correct about the state of American religion, both in diagnosis and prescription, and reading his book has made me more convinced that it is at this moment that American Orthodox Judaism may have found a unique calling. As Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik has pointed out, religious Jews have

always sought to embody Abraham’s identification of himself in the Bible as a *ger vetoshav*—a stranger *and* a neighbor, aware of what makes one different while engaging the world and, like Abraham in Canaan, speaking candidly and eloquently about why they are different. Last summer, an Ivy League–educated lawyer who is also a devout Christian, struck by how so many traditionalists feel that they now live in a culture not welcoming to them, wrote me a remarkable email, asking me to write an essay providing these Christians with encouragement. “What I’d love to have happen,” he wrote,

Listen and Subscribe to the *Commentary Podcast*



### Hostage to Our Radicals

076068



0:00

55:52





is for a devout Jew to write an article saying, “To my Christian friends—welcome to my world.” The idea of the article would be to provide a little “older-brother” wisdom and point out that government pressure on one’s religious practices is entirely to be expected and that one should not immediately go into mourning when one experiences pressure. Orthodox Jews are a great example of remaining true to principle and belief under both the most extreme and most subtle forms of opposition; Christians should realize that they can stand for their principles as well. Christians just have to get over the shock of realizing that not everyone is going to be nice to them all the time.

As I argued in a recent symposium in *Mosaic*, the Jewish example can lead faith communities in a joint project to safeguard an America that will allow all of us to be “strangers and neighbors”—to fight for our religious freedom and distinctiveness, while also articulating a conservative vision of the American idea—and thereby illustrating how traditionalists can, in Levin’s words, “live out their faiths and their ways in the world.”

**Create Your Jewish Legacy**

Learn more about legacy giving to Birthright Israel Foundation today.

[LEARN MORE](#)

 BIRTHRIGHT ISRAEL FOUNDATION

This, in turn, points to one fascinating instantiation of unity in our fragmented society that is a genuine cause for good cheer, one which I have experienced more and more over the past few years, and is not stressed in Levin’s book: the genuine interaction, and fellowship, that is emerging between diverse religious communities. While losing the public square, devout Jews, Catholics, Protestants,

and Mormons have begun sincerely engaging one another, standing side by side in facing a more secular society, even as each faith community remains devoutly and firmly dedicated to what makes each one of them different. In the dismaying era of a “fractured republic,” this is something worth celebrating.

## **Other Contributions to This Symposium:**

---

**>By Matthew Continetti**

**>By David Frum**

**>By Kevin D. Williamson**

---

Meir Y. Soloveichik is the rabbi of Congregation Shearith Israel in New York City and the director of the Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought at Yeshiva University.

