

[Are you religious or secular? A Bad Question! Blog by Rabbi Marc D. Angel](#)

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From time to time, we read about polls taken among Israelis, asking if they are religious or secular. These polls reflect a popular Israeli division of its population into "dati" (religious) or "hiloni" (secular). This use/misuse of terms leads to confusion, and does not serve to clarify the needs and interests of Israeli Jews.

Are you religious or secular? This is a bad question, based on an erroneous assumption that a person must fit neatly into one of the two categories. The result of a bad question is a bad answer. Because of the popular misuse of these terms, people may put themselves into one or the other category inappropriately.

Are the following people to be placed in the religious or secular categories?

1. A person who attends Shabbat morning services, but goes to the beach on Shabbat afternoon.
2. A person who believes in God, is highly spiritual, but does not keep kosher or observe Shabbat.
3. A person who is careless about religious observance all year long, but fasts on Yom Kippur and has a Seder on Pessah night.

I believe that all of the above fit into the "religious" category. They are not secular i.e. they do not deny God or all of religious tradition. They are not fully observant of Torah and mitzvoth, yet they are surely not secular. Yet, they are often defined (and define themselves) as "hiloni".

The vast majority of Israeli Jews identify in some positive ways with religious tradition. A small minority is actually "secular"--living as though there is no God, denying the validity of religious tradition. I would guess that the number of secular Israelis is about the same as the number of hareidi Israelis--perhaps 9 or 10 per cent of the population each. These are the two extreme groups. The masses of Israelis are religious in some sense, and belong more to the "religious" category than to the "secular" category.

What is the value of dividing Israelis (and all Jews) into two separate camps, forcing many to be counted (or to count themselves) as though they are secular/"hiloni"? These categories are constructs created by sociologists and pollsters for their own reasons--but these categories do not serve to reveal the many subtle nuances in religiosity among Jews.

I suggest that the terms "religious" and "secular" be permanently dropped from polls and studies that seek to understand the religious life of Israelis/Jews. The fact is that we do not and cannot be

fit into two neat categories, especially when these categories are not specifically defined, and when the public uses these terms in "unscientific" ways. The borders between these two categories are not clearly marked in the public's mind. Bad questions beget bad, erroneous and misleading answers.

Instead of imposing two categories on the Jewish public, students of Jewish life should be trying to elicit the vast diversity within the Jewish community. They should be sensitive to the fact that a large majority of Israeli Jews have a religious dimension to their lives that is important to them. Instead of blithely writing people into the category of "secular/hiloni", they should try to evaluate the nature of the Jewish religious, spiritual life of the people. Moreover, they should seek to understand that even religious Jews have "secular" qualities e.g. integrate modern secular values into their lives.

Most Jews are religious/secular--not religious or secular. Instead of dividing us into competing groups, we should be seeking a more inclusive, compassionate and nuanced way of bringing us together. Are you religious or secular? That is a bad question. What is the nature of your religiosity? That is a much better question.

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