In this chapter I will describe several salient trends pertaining to the Jewish religion today. In my description I will focus upon the largest Jewish communities in the world—that of the United States and Israel. Even with respect to these communities I shall not be able to cover all contemporary developments and trends, especially in regard to the various sub-communities. I shall rather focus upon those trends which seem to reflect or echo global trends as regards religious adherence or participation, religious belonging and the relationship that religion has to other social spheres and to social life in general.

I shall argue that the Jewish religion partakes of three different trends that characterize religion today, globally. These tendencies are not total, nor do they exhaust the religious picture today, but they are salient enough that they have attracted significant scholarly attention. These trends consist of:

1) The focus upon the individual and his/her personal or intimate experience, meaning or realization. The attachment that one has to religion, very often centers around the individual, the personal and the intimate. Sometimes, this takes place with a reduction in certain communal commitments, belonging and identities. In other cases it goes together with strong collective commitments.

2) A disjunction between Jewish belonging and personal belief or behavior. This points to two related phenomena: a) “Belonging without believing.” Belonging to Jewish organizations and especially Jewish religious organizations does not necessarily imply adherence to traditional Jewish religious belief in God, revelation, the commandments, life after death etc. b) “Vicarious religion”—This implies that membership in a (the) Jewish religious collective does not require that one carry out or perform religious behaviors by oneself. On the contrary, it seems to free one from carrying out
such behaviors on the grounds that they are performed for one, by specially designated or official role incumbents—be these clergymen or the Orthodox population as a whole.

3) An increasing abstraction of Jewish religious practice from Jewish culture or Jewish “life” in general. This development characterizes mainly fundamentalist groups, yet as we shall see it constitutes a continuation and enhancement of the social differentiation that characterizes modern society as a whole. This process, among Jewish ultra-Orthodox, as among Islamic fundamentalists, seems to be responsible for some of the recent expressions of “religious extremism” especially in regard to separation of the sexes. According to this line of thought Islamic and Jewish fundamentalists are becoming increasingly radical because of their increasing modernization and globalization.

Some of the ideas advanced in this chapter are new suggestions which call for further research. I am raising them here in order to show the possible fruitfulness of comparing religious Jewish phenomena with trends in worldwide religion.

The Centrality of Personal Experience

The American Case

The most salient development in Jewish religious attachment is the centrality of personal experience, meaning and realization. This trend was identified first in regard to American Jewry by Steven Cohen and Arnold Eisen in their book The Jew Within (Cohen and Eisen 2000). Cohen and Eisen initiate the summary of their argument as follows:

"The starting point of our analysis was and remains the sovereign self: confidant of its unalterable Jewish identity by virtue of birth to at least one Jewish parent and asserting an unquestionable right to choose how, when and whether it will enact that identity in practice. The self—albeit in negotiation with others, particularly other family members—is the ultimate arbiter of Jewish expression… (p. 185)."

Cohen and Eisen stress that communal or collective expressions of Jewish attachment are much less salient than they used to be: “…relative to the parents’ generation, today’s Jews in their thirties, forties and early fifties are finding less meaning in mass organizations, political activity, philanthropic endeavor and attachment to the State of Israel…” (p. 184).