Jews without Judaism? Assimilation and Jewish Identity in the United States*

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Objective. As Jewish Americans have become more integrated into the social "mainstream," questions have arisen about the survival of Jewish identity in the United States. The purpose of this research is to model the impact of religiosity and personal contact with other Jews upon Jewish identification in order to cast new light on the "Jewishness" of the most assimilated Jews. *Methods.* A regression model is estimated based on data from the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey. *Results.* The statistical results suggest that lower levels of religiosity and social contact are associated with a weaker sense of Jewish identity; that declining religiosity poses a greater threat to Jewish identity than declining social contact does; and that the "base" of Jewish identity seems fairly impervious to the erosive impacts of declining religiosity and social contact. *Conclusions.* Judaism plays the central role in defining and maintaining Jewish identity; although close interpersonal relations with other Jews play an important role, religious devotion is the main pillar of Jewish identity in the United States. For those who are most assimilated, Jewish identity has been transformed from predominantly religious to predominantly ethnic.

For American Jews, integration into the social mainstream has always ranked among the highest personal and collective priorities, if not the very highest. In recent years, though, concern about "making it" in America has lost ground to concern that assimilation is incompatible with the survival of the distinct group identity Jews have maintained for thousands of years (see, e.g., Cohen, 1983; Cohen and Fein, 1985; Waxman, 1990). As Bershtel and Graubard (1992) put it, "For those with a fundamental commitment to Jewish collective existence as a separate people, religion, and culture," assimilation "evokes profound anxiety, expressed in ever more highly charged phrases like 'internal erosion and corruption,' 'spiritual Jewish genocide,' and the 'end of American Jewish history' " (p. 3).

Signs of assimilation abound, perhaps most obviously the rapid decline in the rate of Jewish homogamy. But does assimilation, defined here as the nonpractice of Judaism and the lack of strong ties with

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other Jews, necessarily entail a loss of Jewish identity? Perhaps not, for even Jews who do not practice Judaism as a religion and who do not participate in Jewish communal life may nonetheless engage in "strong and prideful assertions of Jewish identification" (Bershtel and Graubard, 1992:11–29). That is, they may be practitioners of Jewish "survivalism"—"the interest of Jews in surviving as Jews, with no additional interest in what the *content* of Jewish life and religion should be" (Glazer, 1958). Thus understood, "survivalism" may seem a term of derision, but Glazer is favorably impressed by the capacity of survivalists to attain "a new intensity of self-consciousness and a new level of concern for Jewish issues, among them religious issues."

For centuries, Jews' sense of group identity was reinforced by exclusion from the social mainstream, but in post–World War II America the lessening of overt anti-Semitism and the lowering of traditional barriers to Jewish assimilation removed some potent external sources of Jewish identity. Even so, other sources of Jewish identification remain. For one thing, the "myth of ethnic election"—the belief in the chosenness of the Jewish people—has helped maintain Jewish identity (Smith, 1992:441). More generally, the combination of religious Judaism and ethnic Jewishness has always been a key to Jewish identity (Glazer, 1958). Thus, for those who are religiously committed, Judaism continues to provide a strong bond of identity. However, most American Jews lack strong religious convictions. For many of them, being enmeshed in a web of Jewish kinship groups and organizations provides daily confirmation of their Jewishness.

But what about those who are neither deeply committed to Judaism nor involved in a dense network of personal interactions with other Jews? The real question is not whether those Jews who practice Judaism or who have everyday contact with other Jews maintain a strong Jewish identity. It would be extremely surprising if they did not. Rather, the question is whether those Jews who are relatively or absolutely secular and who have little social contact with other Jews maintain any significant psychological sense of being Jewish. If they do, then concerns about the survival of Jewish identity in an era of Jewish assimilation may be overstated; but if they do not, then such concerns may be well founded.

Prior analyses of Jewish identification in the United States have focused mainly on ritual observance, attendance at religious services, membership in and financial support of Jewish organizations, intra-Jewish marriage and friendships, and other observable behaviors (Cohen, 1983; Himmelfarb and Loar, 1984; Kivisto and Nefzger, 1993). Accordingly, these analyses have treated as indicators of Jewish identification behaviors that we consider conceptually distinct from Jewish identification per se. At issue in the measurement of Jewish identification is the extent to which Jewish Americans see themselves as different from other Americans, not the extent to which they practice Judaism, interact with other Jews, or engage in other behaviors that prior researchers have grouped under the "Jewish identification" rubric. Such behaviors are almost certainly linked to the psychological sense of belonging to a distinctive group, but they do not constitute that sense of identification.

For example, Himmelfarb and Loar's (1984) index of Jewish identification is composed primarily of what we would classify as behaviors indicative of Jewish religiosity (e.g., frequency of attendance at religious services, lighting of candles, observance of dietary laws) and of intra-Jewish social interaction (e.g., membership in Jewish organizations and the religious composition of one's friends, neighbors, and associates). To be sure, also included in this index are certain "affectional" and "aesthetic" items (e.g., pride in being Jewish and enjoyment of Jewish music and literature). But while intermingling religious behavior, social interaction patterns, and attitudes toward being Jewish in a single measure served Himmelfarb and Loar's purposes, it would frustrate any attempt to address the issue that motivates the present study. To address that issue, we need to keep Jewish religiosity and social interaction, on the one hand, conceptually distinct from the sense of Jewish identification, on the other, so that we can assess these linkages empirically.

Kivisto and Nefzger (1993) did maintain these conceptual distinctions, but their measure of Jewish identification leaves much to be desired. They treated responses to a single questionnaire item ("How important is being Jewish to you?") as a measure of Jewish "symbolic ethnicity." Of those surveyed in a medium-sized urban area in the Midwest, 57 percent considered being Jewish "very important" to them, 35 percent said it was "important," and only 8 percent called it "unimportant" or "very unimportant." If we take these responses at face value, we cannot fail to be impressed that 92 percent expressed a positive sense of Jewish identity. But should we take these responses at face value? A skeptic might suspect that 92 percent responded positively simply because this was not a very discriminating question; if "harder" questions had been asked, positive assertions of Jewish identification might have been much less common.

In sum, we set out to model the impact of religiosity and personal contact with other Jews upon Jewish identification, expecting, of course, that Jewish identity would be stronger among those who were more religiously devout and who participated in more distinctively Jewish social networks. The real question, as we posed it earlier, is "How 'Jewish' are the most assimilated Jews?"

Data and Methods

Data for this analysis came from the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS).[1] In the NJPS, nationwide screening of more than 125,000 households yielded approximately 5,000 households with at least one Jewish member (i.e., someone who practiced Judaism, considered himself or herself Jewish, had been raised Jewish, and/or had a Jewish parent). After a requalification phase, approximately 2,500 third-stage interviews were completed, during which a third of the interviewees were asked the attitudinal questions central to the present analysis. Dropping those who did not answer all the pertinent questions and those did not report having at least one Jewish parent,[2] we were left with 510 ethnically Jewish interviewees, for whom we formulated three composite scales: one of Jewish religiosity, one of personal contact with other Jews, and one of Jewish identification.

The *religiosity scale* had three components: religious orthodoxy, public religious observance, and private religious observance.[3] On the first component, we arrayed interviewees from those affiliated with a non-Jewish denomination to those unaffiliated with any denomination and then to Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox Jews, in that order. The measure of public religious observance was frequency of attendance at Jewish services. The measure of private religious observance was a seven-item, 0–21 additive scale patterned after Cohen's (1988) work on ritual observance (see also Cohen [1983] and Heilman and Cohen [1989]). It drew on interviewees' reports of whether or not they fasted on Yom Kippur and refrained from handling money on the Sabbath, and of how often ("never" [0], "sometimes" [1], "usually" [2], or "all the time" [3]) members of their household attended a Passover seder, purchased kosher meat, used separate dishes for meat and dairy products, lit candles on Friday night, and lit Hanukkah candles. Their responses are summarized graphically in Figure 1.

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[1] See Goldstein and Kosmin (1992) for a preliminary overview of the NJPS. We obtained the NJPS data set from the North American Jewish Data Bank. Neither the Data Bank nor the original collectors of the data are responsible for our analyses and interpretations.

[2] Because we are investigating the ethnic aspects of Jewishness in this paper, we chose to drop converts from the sample.

[3] To form the religiosity scale, we standard-scored the three component measures in order to express them in a common metric, summed the three standardized scores for each interviewee, and then standard-scored the summated scale to a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1. Cronbach's alpha for the religiosity scale was .82, indicative of an internally consistent scale. Scale scores ranged from -1.94 (i.e., almost two standard deviations below the scale mean) to $+2.45$ (i.e., about midway between two and three standard deviations above the mean).

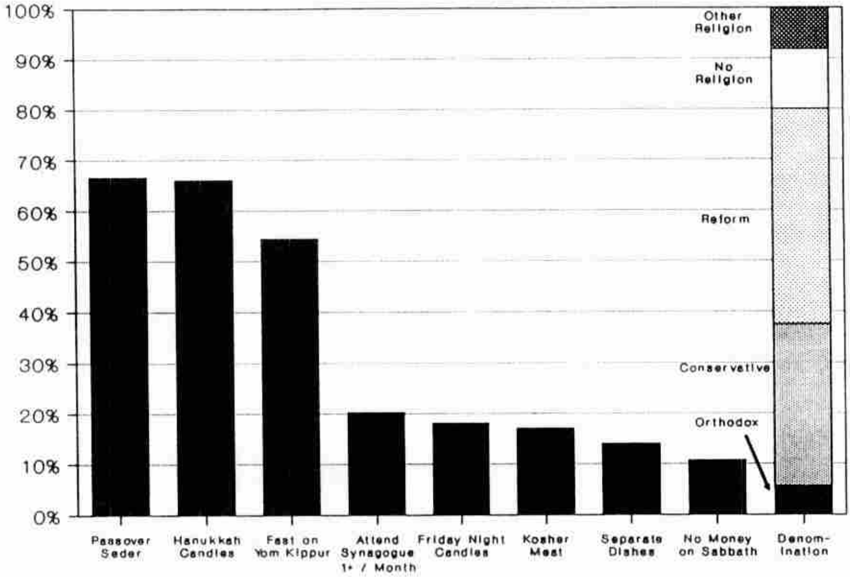

FIGURE 1

Religiosity Index Components ("Usually/All the Time" or "Yes")

Four items comprised the scale of *social contact with Jews.*[4] In increasing order of intimacy, they were: the number of non-synagogue- or temple-related Jewish organizations to which the interviewee belonged, the ethnic character of the interviewee's neighborhood ("not Jewish," "a little Jewish," "somewhat Jewish," or "very Jewish") and of the interviewee's friends (no Jews, a few Jews, some Jews, mostly Jews, all Jews), and the ethnicity of the interviewee's current or most recent former spouse, if any (Jewish or non-Jewish). Figure 2 shows the response frequencies.

The *strength of Jewish identification* scale was based on answers to four questions about the extent to which NJPS interviewees viewed being Jewish as a central aspect of their lives:[5]

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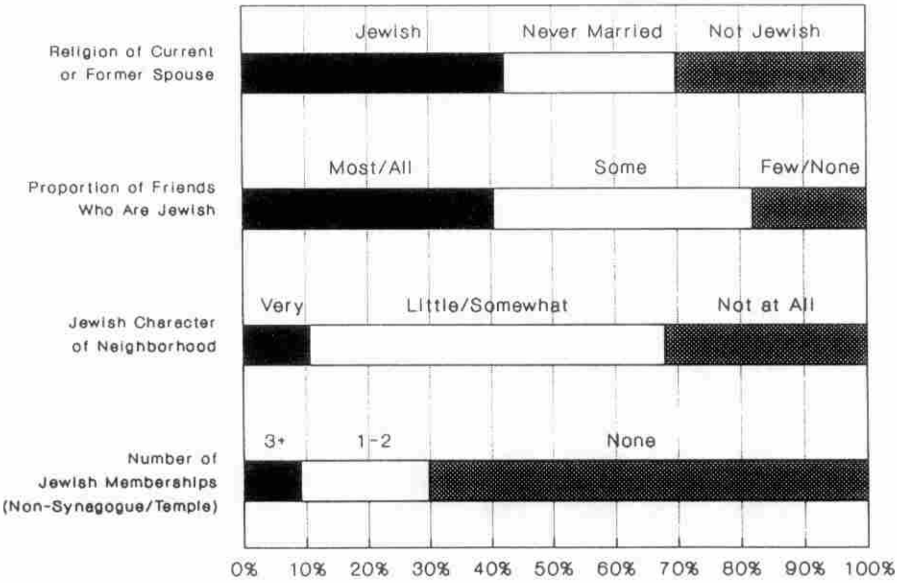
[4] As with the religiosity scale, we standard-scored these component measures, summed the standard scores, and then standard-scored the summated scale. Cronbach's alpha was .68, lower than for the religiosity scale but still acceptable. Scores ranged from -1.90 to $+2.49$, with a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1.

[5] Once again, responses to the component items were standard-scored and summed, and their sum was standard-scored (Cronbach's alpha = .71). Scores on the resulting Jewish identification scale ranged from a low of -2.36 to a high of $+2.02$, with a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1.

FIGURE 2

Social Contact Index Components

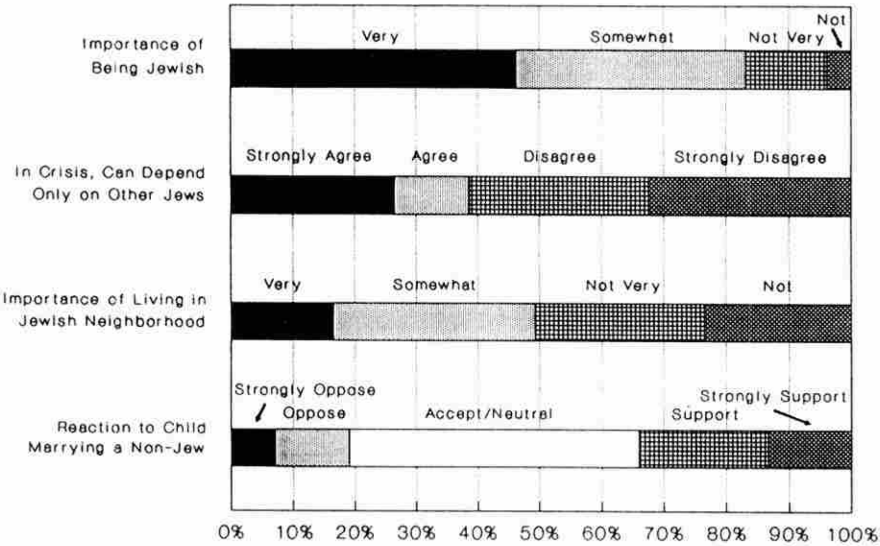


> How important is it to you that your neighborhood have a Jewish character?
>
> Would you agree or disagree that when it comes to a crisis, Jews can only depend on other Jews?
>
> Hypothetically, if your child were considering marrying a non-Jewish person, would you: strongly support, support, accept or be neutral, oppose, or strongly oppose the marriage?
>
> How important would you say that being Jewish is in your life?

The percentages shown in Figure 3 are roughly comparable to those reported by Kivisto and Nefzger (1993). However, the variability from question to question in responses indicative of a strong sense of Jewish identification—especially the high percentage who said that being Jewish is important to them—underlines the point we made earlier about the fallibility of any single indicator of so complex a concept as Jewish identification; those who score high on one indicator of Jewish identification do not necessarily score equally high on another indicator of the same concept.

FIGURE 3

Jewish Identification Index Components



Findings

Ordinary least squares estimation of a model linking strength of Jewish identification to Jewish religiosity and social contact with other Jews yielded the following results:

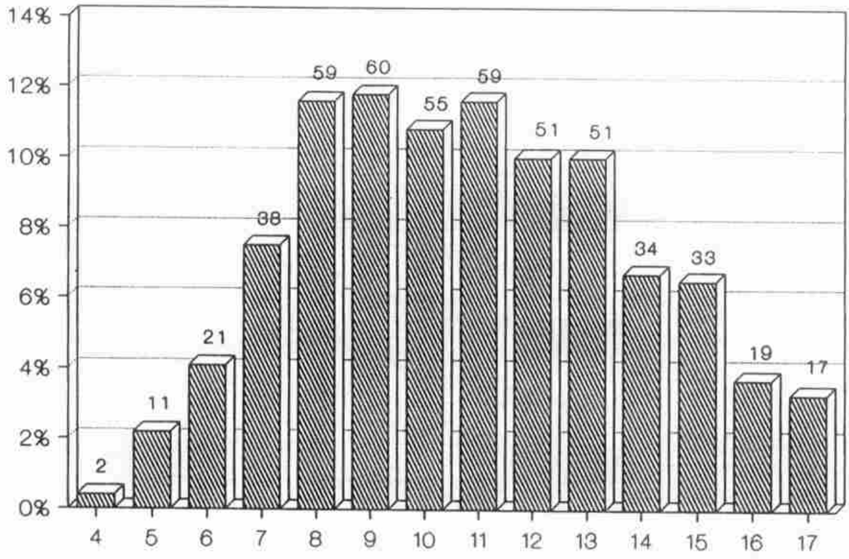
$$\underset{(SE)}{\text{Jewish Identification}} = \underset{(.037)}{.510\ \text{Religiosity}} + \underset{(.037)}{.305\ \text{Social Contact}}$$

with the coefficient standard errors given in parentheses, $R^2 = .535$, and the standard error of the estimate = 0.683. Obviously, the estimated model fit very well. Furthermore, both predictors displayed the expected positive sign, and both coefficients were easily statistically significant ($p < .001$). These results leave little question that strength of Jewish identification varies as a function of religiosity and contact with other Jews, and more specifically that more religious Jews and those who have more frequent social contact with other Jews identify more strongly as Jews.

Thus, we can safely reject the ideas that religiosity and contact with other Jews have no bearing on strength of Jewish identification. However, because no one would seriously advance such ideas in the first place, rejecting them is only a first step. What is really at issue is not

FIGURE 4

Jewish Identification (Unstandardized Frequencies)



whether but rather *by how much* strength of Jewish identification varies as a function of religiosity and social contact with other Jews. Are these effects so decisive that declines in religiosity and social contact hold out little prospect for the survival of Jewish identity?

Questions of this type become especially difficult to answer when guidelines are lacking for how large an effect must be in order to "matter" (Achen, 1982). We know of no guidelines for calibrating strength of Jewish identification. Moreover, our measures of religiosity, social contact, and Jewish identification are expressed in a standardized format that may seem to render our task hopeless.[6]

In this situation, we believe that the most satisfactory approach is to use the fact that the standardized scales indicate *relative* positions as a basis for assessing substantive impacts. Thus we find the following.

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[6] Strength of Jewish identification rises by .510 for every unit increase in Jewish religiosity and by .305 for every unit increase in Jewish social contact. These two coefficients sum to less than 1.00, so as both Jewish religiosity and Jewish social contact rise or fall by one standard deviation, strength of Jewish identification rises or falls by less than one standard deviation. However, because these effects are gauged in standard deviation units, they do not indicate, in a substantively interpretable metric, how great an increase or decrease in Jewish identification is associated with increases or decreases in religiosity and social contact.

It might seem that we could back-translate scores on the standardized scales into their original metrics, but if the matter were this simple we would not have resorted to standardized scales in the first place. Because a wide array of different combinations of scores on the component variables could produce a particular composite score, establishing equivalencies between component variable scores and scores on the standardized composite index is problematic.

> As scores on both religiosity and social contact fall, Jewish identification scores also fall. But strength of Jewish identification does not fall as far, in the relative or positional sense used here, as Jewish religiosity and social contact with other Jews.
>
> As scores on religiosity fall while scores on social contact remain constant, Jewish identification scores fall, but not as far as they do when both religiosity and social contact scores fall.
>
> As scores on social contact fall while scores on religiosity remain constant, Jewish identification scores fall relatively little.

Considered collectively, this pattern points toward three conclusions. First, consistent with widespread concern that has been expressed in recent years, lower levels of religiosity and social contact among Jews are associated with a weaker sense of Jewish identity. Second, because religiosity affects the sense of Jewish identity more than social contact does, declining religiosity poses a greater threat to Jewish identity than declining social contact does. Third, and no less importantly, Jewish identity has a "base" that seems fairly impervious to the erosive impacts of declining Jewish religiosity and social contact, for as religiosity and social contact among Jews fall, Jewish identity also falls, but not as far.

Rejection of Judaism and the Loss of Jewishness

To explore this "base" of Jewish identity, we added several factors to the model: level of education, age, generation of American nativity, Israeli relatives or friends, and childhood religion. Most of these factors, including level of education, age, and personal ties to Israel, added or detracted little from the sense of Jewish identity.[7] However, one additional factor did have a significant impact: having been raised religiously Jewish[8] had a substantial *negative* effect on Jewish identity.

[7] The estimates were as follows:

$$\begin{aligned}\text{Jewish Identification} = {} & \underset{(.041)}{.532^{***}}\ \text{Religiosity} + \underset{(.039)}{.281^{***}}\ \text{Social Contact}\\ & - \underset{(.071)}{.221^{*}}\ \text{Raised Jewish} + \underset{(.100)}{.135}\ \text{Ties to Israel}\\ & - \underset{(.063)}{.067}\ \text{College Education} + \underset{(.026)}{.037}\ \text{Age}\end{aligned}$$

with a triple asterisk denoting significance at $p < .001$, a single asterisk denoting significance at $p < .05$, $R^2 = .542$ and the standard error of the estimate = .677.

[8] The question wording was "Were you or anyone else in your household raised as Jewish?" If the answer was "yes," the respondent was asked, "Was it you yourself or someone else in your household that was raised Jewish?"

Having been raised as a Jew, according to these results, was associated with virtually the same amount of drop-off in Jewish identity score as going from the fiftieth percentile of the social contact index all the way down to the tenth percentile!

Further investigation revealed that this relationship appeared because of the presence in the model, within the religiosity index, of religious denomination. Among currently practicing Jews, those who were not raised Jewish have a weaker sense of Jewish identification than those who were raised as Jews. This is not surprising. But among those who do not now practice Judaism, Jewish identity is *higher* among those who were *not* raised as religious Jews. In other words, it appears that assimilation into the "mainstream" culture is more prevalent among those who have *rejected* the religion of their childhood than among those ethnic Jews who never practiced Judaism in the first place. As Markowitz (1990) has noted:

> An entire generation of Jews have already come of age in affluent suburban temples and have learned well the lesson that to be Jewish is to be like all other Americans. The Jewish identity that they have internalized has been one with little distinctive cultural content. . . . With the depletion of cultural content has come weakening in the attractiveness of their Jewish identity, which for many, had become little more than an empty label.
>
> Dissatisfied with the hollowness of their Jewish experience, some of these people . . . search for meaning in the Judaism that had earlier eluded them. . . . Others . . . search for meaning and satisfaction elsewhere—in their careers, drugs, social movements, sports, and in non-Jewish religions and sects. The Jews who now abandon their Jewishness do so . . . because the watered-down "Judaism" that they learned fails to satisfy their affective and spiritual needs. (P. 187)

More than thirty years earlier, Nathan Glazer (1958), in his seminal work *American Judaism*, also alluded to this "hollowness," writing: "It is the social needs of the individual Jew, and the communal needs of the entire community, that the synagogue has met. . . . But the Jews themselves do not demonstrate any strong religious drive" (p. 125).

The relationship between rejection of Judaism and weak Jewish identity appears to counter any primordialist argument of an intrinsic Jewish consciousness. Early socialization as a Jew (at the least, awareness of Jewish ethnicity) undoubtedly plays some part in the formation of Jewish identity, forming a base that does not atrophy with neglect. When an individual rejects Judaism, however, this base and the cultural heritage around which it is built are severely damaged.

This finding has powerful implications for those who seek to preserve a unique Jewish consciousness. Those who are enmeshed in dense Jewish religious and social networks will continue to have their Jewish consciousness maintained and strengthened. For those who have always had a strictly ethnic conception of Jewishness, the prospects are, if not bright, at least consoling: some sense of Jewishness will continue to exist. For those who once accepted but now reject Judaism (and, presumably, its "myth of ethnic election"), a strong Jewish identity becomes inimical to their own self-image. Revitalizing Judaism, not simply transmitting it to the next generation, appears to be necessary for the preservation of Jewish consciousness among this small segment of spiritually unsatisfied Jews.

Conclusion

In its more traditional form, with its core belief that Jews are God's chosen people, Judaism serves admirably as the tool of ethnic election that Smith (1992) considered a prerequisite to the long-term survival of an ethnic community. More humanistic forms of Judaism serve this need less well; Zenner (1985) pointed out that when Jewishness is seen as a religious preference rather than as an ethnoreligious identity, it loses its status as a "primordialist non-contingent commitment." Such a loss "leads to a diminution of the Jewish community as one built on kinship and descent" (Zenner, 1985: 126), and thus no longer contributes to the long-term survival of a strong and distinct group identity among American Jews.

The evidence presented here suggests that Zenner was correct when he pointed to the central role of Judaism in defining and maintaining Jewish identity. Religious devotion is indeed the main pillar of Jewish identity in America, although close interpersonal relations with other Jews also play an important role. However, Judaism's fundamental role also makes Jewish identity susceptible to its failings. Those who feel they must seek elsewhere for spiritual fulfillment reject not only Judaism but their strong sense of Jewishness as well. Currently this segment is small (perhaps ten percent) and scattered over all age groups, but the potential exists for greater losses, especially as a growing number of children from mixed marriages are able to choose from two spiritual traditions.

Among Jews who are the most assimilated (i.e., those who do not practice Judaism or maintain strong ties with other Jews) and are not part of this small segment, more than a residual sense of Jewish identity remains. This sense of identity represents a transformation from a predominantly religious to a predominantly ethnic understanding of what it means to be Jewish (Singer, 1990). In this newer, more "survivalist"-oriented sense, Judaism and Jewishness are no longer as intertwined as they once were (Goldscheider, 1986: 165). Thus, for example, even active leaders of the Jewish community are more likely than not to disagree with the idea that "to be a good Jew one must believe in God" (Woocher, 1986: 113).

Our findings also have broader implications for the study of ethnicity. The first part of our analysis shows that ethnoreligious participation and social networks are important in strengthening ethnic bonds, but that their effects overlie a base of ethnic awareness. We would expect that childhood experiences, ranging from simple knowledge of an ethnic tie to membership in ethnically based social, religious, and educational associations, contribute heavily to this base. External sources (e.g., labeling or discrimination) can also help define this sense of ethnic identity. The second part of our analysis shows that this base can be devastated through active rejection. When an ethnoreligion is found spiritually wanting, its rejection can entail more than a loss of faith: it can also involve a renunciation of ethnic heritage. While this effect is currently seen in only a small segment of our sample, it suggests that the strong bonding force of an ethnoreligion may instead be a polarizing force, drawing most to itself but driving others away. **SSQ**

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