THE TRANSMISSION OF JEWISH IDENTITY AMONG FAMILIES IN A NON-JEWISH NEIGHBORHOOD

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The Jews of Canada, as well as those of the United States, have been known for their strong "survivalist" orientation. Assimilation is widely defined as a problem. Even when formal Jewish socialization is minimal, social identification as a Jew is transmitted through extended family and neighborhood ties.

In the Toronto area, residential concentration has been one element in a strategy of Jewish survival. When the Jews moved north from their central city neighborhoods, they relocated together in suburbia. In 1961, 90% of the Jewish population of the Toronto area was concentrated in the suburban corridor along the north end of Bathurst St. (Social Planning Committee, 1979:6). Since then, the community has become geographically dispersed, with a major movement to the north-east into neighborhoods which are less extensively Jewish. There has also been a smaller migration of Jews into the downtown area, some to former areas of Jewish concentration, others to areas where few Jews previously resided.

This paper is addressed to the Jewish identity of the families who have moved to downtown Toronto in the 1970s and to the development of the Jewish identity of their children.

In considering these topics, it is useful to make two distinctions. First, it is possible to distinguish between the social component of an ethnic identity and the cultural component. This distinction follows the distinction between social structural pluralism and cultural pluralism (Gordon, 1964: 159). The social component of ethnic identity is based on shared experiences with members of one's ethnic group. Interaction with parents, sibs, kins, neighbors, classmates and friends of the same ethnic background creates common experiences which give practical instruction in how one's ethnicity is expressed and strong reactions to people who share one's ethnicity. The cultural component of ethnic identity is based on awareness and understanding of the traditions and symbols of one's ethnic group.

Secondly, it is useful to distinguish the direct role of the parents in ethnic socialization from their indirect role. Parents are directly involved, com-

municating through their life-style the extent to which they consider their ethnicity meaningful. Parents are also indirectly involved as gatekeepers to other sources of information about ethnicity. Decisions about place of residence, what friendships to encourage, whether and what kind of Jewish school to enroll their children in, and what kind of institutional affiliations the family establishes all open and close gates to identity-forming experiences. Jewish socialization, then, depends not only on what the families think and do as individual units, but also on the extent to which the families become related to each other and to the Jewish community.

JEWISH FAMILIES IN DOWNTOWN TORONTO

This paper describes characteristics of Jewish families in downtown Toronto, discusses strategies of Jewish socialization they have developed and draws some conclusions about the kind of identity that may be emerging among Jews downtown. The description is based upon 44 interviews conducted under the sponsorship of the South Branch of the Jewish Family and Child Service of Metropolitan Toronto in 1977-78, supplemented by personal observation in these and subsequent years.

The child-rearing Jewish families downtown are overwhelmingly white collar, mainly professional, in occupation. There is a sizeable academic group, but the interviews also included persons who work in law, medicine, social work, education, the arts and business. In the large majority of families both adults work. A number of households are headed by divorced or separated, professionally employed women. The number of children varies from 1 to 3. Most families are owners of their first home, which they purchased in the 1970s.

Both the interviews and the author's observations indicate that most of the Jewish parents downtown are from outside Toronto. Among those interviewed, roughly one-third were from the Toronto area, one-third were from elsewhere in Canada and one-third were from out of the country. The small percentage of the Toronto born may be related to three factors. First, the doubling of the Jewish population in metropolitan Toronto over the past 40 years has largely been the result of in-migration. Secondly, downtown is not an attractive place of residence to many Toronto Jews in their thirties and up. They have a negative image of it as the place they struggled so hard to get out of. Finally, in contrast, Jews from out of town may be more receptive to Toronto's image as a city with urbane, pleasant residential neighborhoods downtown.

In the interviews, living downtown is always presented as a conscious choice. Living near work, being within walking distance of shopping and

recreation, getting more house for the money, and living in an ethnically and economically mixed neighborhood are commonly mentioned advantages.

Within the downtown area, Jewish families are scattered. While they are nowhere numerous, in 1971 only one census tract was more than 10% Jewish, and that one was on the northern fringe of downtown, some areas are more Jewish than others. In the old Jewish neighborboods, shops, restaurants, garment factories, wholesalers and a few synagogues give a Jewish ambience. In the part of the old neighborhood near the University of Toronto, elderly Jews who never moved to the suburbs, university students, singles and couples are part of the social environment. The Bloor St. branch of the Jewish Community Centre remains a visible institutional presence.

Without attempting to estimate numbers, the following variations in the Jewish content of the life-styles of downtown Jewish families can be identified: (1) from those for whom their Jewish background has no significance or is a negative characteristic to be ignored; (2) to those who are comfortable with the Jewish community as the place from which they have come but not necessarily as the place in which they would like themselves or their children to remain; (3) to the many who are ambivalent, who neither accept nor reject the religious content of Jewish culture, who have chosen to live in a marginally Jewish neighborhood yet identify with the Jews in it, who identify with Israel but are not Zionists, who wish to derive personal values from the Jewish tradition but are not sure how to go about it, who want to pass on Jewish identity to their children but are not sure what it means; (4) to those who have found more or less satisfying ways of locating themselves within the Jewish community, through family ties, mainly those with local relatives but also some who remain psychologically close to distant relatives, through religious observance, through organizational affiliation or in other ways.

The large ambivalent group is crucial for understanding the problem of maintaining identification with a Jewish "community." Those who are ambivalent are uncertain about the basis on which they form a community with other Jews and feel the awkwardness of someone making a claim on them, or conversely, offering something, simply because both share an ethnic label. Such ambivalence is certainly also present among Toronto born Jews who live in the suburbs, but it is less obvious because ties of kinship and neighborhood give practical daily content to Jewish identity. Among the downtown Jewish families, which are mainly from out of town and geographically dispersed, the ambivalence is more readily apparent.

The recently arrived Jewish families have little contact with most of the

half dozen small Orthodox congregations that remain downtown. The desire for a non-Orthodox place of worship was commonly expressed in the interviews. In many cases, theirs was not a doctrinaire position, but an expression of the awkwardness felt by Jews whose minimal contact with the synagogue has been limited to the modern suburban type and who find in the typical downtown synagogue a small group of mainly elderly men, without a rabbi, who conduct lengthy services entirely in Hebrew from an unfamiliar prayerbook.

There have been two cases where recently arrived families have become involved with synagogues. The Beaches neighborhood in the East end of Toronto never had a large Jewish population, but local shopkeepers did build a synagogue in the 1920s, which in recent years was only used infrequently. Some of the Jewish families who moved into the area gravitated to the synagogue as the only local Jewish institution. Services at the synagogue have been modified to accommodate them; the congregation is now informally considered to be Conservative rather than Orthodox. The congregation also sponsors a Sunday school of 30-40 children, grouped in three classes. In a more central part of the old Jewish neighborhood, a small Orthodox congregation has taken tentative steps to make a new generation feel at home, physical renovations, new prayerbooks with both Hebrew and English, hiring a rabbi for the High Holy Days. Half a dozen families whose children know each other from a recently formed Jewish school have joined the congregation.

In contrast to the modest contact between the downtown synagogues and recently arrived families, the Bloor branch of the Jewish Community Centre is a major focus of affiliation; about two-thirds of those interviewed had some connection with it. The Bloor J.C.C. was built in the early 1950s, just as the northward migration was gathering momentum. In the early 1970s, a much larger, more flexible J.C.C. was built "up north" but the Bloor branch was kept open. Its membership includes those who work downtown but live elsewhere, non-Jews who live downtown and Jews who live downtown. In the mid-seventies, it had become pre-eminently an athletic facility, but it operated a nursery school with an excellent reputation. The nursery's 60 students were, and continue to be, a mixture of Jews and non-Jews, those from downtown and those who come south on the school bus. In the past few years, responding to other groups which have spoken for or on behalf of the recently arrived Jewish families, the Bloor J.C.C. revived its group services department and has been developing family and child oriented programs. The downtown Jewish families, however, are minimally involved in decision-making and priority setting at the branch.

Two other Jewish schools have been founded downtown in addition to

the one at the Beaches synagogue. It is the schools which have become the distinctive institutions of downtown Jewish families. The schools meet an obvious need, not met by previously established downtown Jewish institutions. As new institutions, they are not committed to previously established policies or philosophies.

In the early 1970s, a group of academics, who had been mainly unaffiliated and uninvolved with the Jewish community, organized a school at the Hillel House of the University of Toronto. This school has been defined since its inception as an organization for families, not just for children. The parents founded the group to define for themselves the meaning of their Jewishness and to engage their children in the same process. Parents who send their children to the school must themselves be willing to attend an adult discussion group held at the same time. Parents also take an active role in defining the curriculum with the teachers, emphasizing those aspects of Jewish identity with which the parents are most comfortable and de-emphasizing or eliminating those with which they are uncomfortable or are controversial within the group. After fire damage to the Hillel House, the school rented space, first at a Reform Temple four miles to the north, and then at a public school closer to downtown. Downtown families now account for about half of its membership.

The third school opened in 1979. The initiative which eventually led to the organization of this school originated with the branch office the Jewish Family and Child Service had established at the Bloor J.C.C. to serve its downtown case load. Under the sponsorship of the J.F.C.S. the interviews with downtown families were conducted; an advisory committee, with lay participation from the downtown population, was established; Jewish events which the agency helped plan on behalf of its clients were opened to the downtown population; a mailing list was compiled; and an M.S.W. student interning with the agency worked on community organization. The student intern distributed a questionnaire about Jewish needs downtown and convened three meetings to discuss the needs identified on the questionnaire.

The process of group formation begun with these meetings continued after the student's completion of her work for the agency. After several additional meetings, a committee of thirteen members, representing eight families, constituted themselves the Board of Directors of the Downtown Jewish Community School. This school grew from 45 students in its first year to over 100 in its second and third years. Its aims and objectives emphasize developing a positive sense of community, partly through joint family activity, and a personal identity based on an awareness of the pluralism within the Jewish community.

DEVELOPMENT OF JEWISH IDENTITY

Having described characteristics of Jewish families downtown, their relationship with the Jewish institutions there and the schools they have founded, the distinctions made at the beginning of this article can be used to draw some conclusions about the kind of Jewish identity developing.

The social component of the Jewish identity of the parents will be considered first. Most of the parents do not have strong feelings of identification with the Toronto Jewish community. They did not grow up in the community. they have not known other Toronto Jews since childhood. Their families did not build or participate in the institutions of the local community. Moreover, they live in predominantly non-Jewish neighborhoods.

For the parents involved, organizing Jewish schools downtown creates Toronto-based social ties to other Jews. Arriving at a consensus about what the school should be like, doing the work required to establish it and giving it guidance as an on-going enterprise, are significant shared experiences. All the downtown schools appear to be as much projects for the parents as for the children. The parents appear to want the schools to provide not simply content, but shared experiences in which all family members can participate. These shared experiences provide the opportunity for the coalescence of informal networks of Jewish families. In addition, once the schools are established, they are mediating institutions between the families and the organized Jewish community. The schools give the affiliated families a voice in the inter-organizational network through which the organized Toronto Jewish community identifies needs and goals and undertakes coordinated activities.

With respect to the cultural component of Jewish identity, the parents involved in the schools are faced with the internal cultural pluralism of contemporary Jewish identification. While they are committed enough to want to raise their children as Jews, they do not have a consensus on a particular version of Jewish identity. In the modern world, numerous alternative and contradictory ideologies of Jewish identity, some religious, some secular, have been proposed and have won adherents. In the Toronto area, almost all formal instruction in the cultural content of the Jewish heritage takes place under the sponsorship of some ideologically defined organization, be it Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, Zionist, Yiddish, Socialist, or other. The Jewish schools downtown have opted to emphasize community over ideology. They teach, as the statement of aims of one school states, "that there are many ways to be a Jew."

Nevertheless, some specific content has to be taught. A good deal of

time has been spent by the parents trying to assess what they want taught. They have not accepted ideologically sponsored pre-packaged curricula. Different decisions about content are made by different schools, but they share the orientation that the children should be introduced to a pluralistic community in which they will come to their own self-awareness as Jews.

The parents' role as gatekeepers to sources of information about Jewish identity outside the immediate family is readily apparent in the establishment of schools and the shared activities with other Jewish families which go along with these projects. The fact that so many downtown families have weak ties with the Jewish institutions in Toronto effects the gates towards which the children are directed. Out of the Jewish neighborhood, with fewer kinship ties and long-established friendships in the Jewish community, and fewer organizational ties, the Jewish families downtown experience less social pressure to use already established schools. Not finding any gates they are pleased to have their children go through, they are constructing their own.

To summarize: In a neighborhood which is not very Jewish, parents who wish to pass on a Jewish identity to their children are establishing schools which are intended to teach their children that they are part of an ideologically plural community. Formal instruction is supplemented by shared family activities and, to some extent, by parallel adult education.

This approach to the intergenerational transmission of Jewish identity is not unique to the families residing in downtown Toronto. There are some similarities to the *Havurot* movement. The emphasis on pluralism and community is fostered in the United States by the National Jewish Conference Center, and there are schools which share this orientation in other new areas of Jewish settlement.

There are indications that the emergence of several groups of Jewish parents willing to invest the great amount of effort necessary to establish a school caught the established community off guard. The downtown Jewish parents are mainly strangers to the community, do not affiliate with established Jewish organizations or ideological groupings, and have chosen to live out of the geographic mainstream of the community. Many in the local community appeared to have perceived the Jews downtown as well along the way to assimilation.

Why, then, have parents with few prior social ties been willing to work so hard on joint projects? Three interrelated explanations can be suggested.

First, there is the pragmatic desire of parents to encourage the morality of their children. Regardless of their understanding of their Jewishness, the downtown parents express a consensus that the Jewish tradition is a moral one. Cooperation around Jewish education assists in the transmission of

values from one generation to another. Jewish traditions are enlisted on behalf of the values the parents wish to inculcate. Joint family activities and symbolic celebrations communicate that the values the parents wish to transmit are not idiosyncratic, but are the values of a social group with which the family shares a certain common life.

Second, parents working with other parents to establish an institution in which family units participate are creating a situation in which the individual families may have a greater sense of psychological security. Community institution building not only strengthens the ethnic group, it strengthens the individual family unit. Through shared voluntary participation, families become less isolated, able to provide mutual assistance and more self-confident by virtue of their shared success. Conversely, shared institution building directs attention away from the broader society's unrealistic perfectionist standards for family life (Skolnick, 1979), constant inducement to link one's self-esteem to consumption and the temptation to respond to failure to meet unrealistic goals by apathy and dependency. In short, through participation in the shared efforts of a group of families, the larger society is made "less menacing" (Lasch, 1977:215).

Third, the creation of these schools may be a stage in the coming to consciousness of a new Jewish ethclass. To quote Gordon, who coined this term, "the ethnic group is the locus of a sense of *historical identification*, while the ethclass is the locus of *participational identification*" (Gordon, 1964:53). Only members of the same ethnic group *and* social class share a sense of peoplehood *and* behavioral similarities (ibid.). The majority of the Jewish parents downtown may be placed in the social structure as members of the intelligentsia. Their institution building may be taken as the founding of participatory structures in which they feel comfortable on the basis of class as well as ethnicity.

The perspective of developing ethclass consciousness incorporates the approaches to the parents' motivation which look to ethnic legitimation for moral instruction and a greater sense of psychological security. The Jewish intelligentsia, like other Jewish ethclasses, uses the tradition selectively. To pass on that selective usage, its own schools are highly advantageous. Likewise, emerging ethclass consciousness is strengthened through the association of families which share similar life-styles.

Therefore, what is being transmitted from one generation to another among the families downtown and in other similar settings may not be an undifferentiated Jewish identity, but a specific, if not clearly articulated, ethclass identity.

This interpretation raises issues which require separate discussion on their own. Emerging ethclass consciousness among the Jewish intelligent-

sia is having, and will continue to have, an effect on the structure and governance of the organized Jewish community. Moreover, the emergence of an ethclass conscious Jewish intelligentsia with its own socializing institutions has to be noted in the on-going debate over the prospects for Jewish assimilation or continued group survival.

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