

JEWISH SOCIOLOGY PAPERS

**NEW
PERSPECTIVES
IN AMERICAN
JEWISH SOCIOLOGY**



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This publication is one of a series of American Jewish Committee papers assessing the Jewish condition in America toward the close of the 20th century and highlighting significant developments in Jewish religious and communal life.

For several decades, serious scholars have predicted that increased intermarriage, declining birthrates and widespread assimilation would bring about the weakening, perhaps even the disappearance, of American Jewry. More recently, however, these dire predictions have been challenged by new studies pointing to a vibrant Jewish community, working confidently for a secure Jewish future. As the debate continues, the American Jewish Committee continues to monitor trends in contemporary Jewish life and to assess their policy implications for the Jewish community.

On May 28-29, 1986, the AJC's departments of Jewish Communal Affairs and Information and Research Services sponsored a two-day conference at the AJC's national headquarters in New York City on "New Perspectives in Jewish Sociology." This paper by Nathan Glazer, Professor of Education and Sociology at Harvard University—preprinted from the 1987 *American Jewish Year Book*—was the keynote address.

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FOR THE FIRST TIME in the 40- or 50-year history of the sociology of American Jews, we have among the central figures engaged in that enterprise a substantial and meaningful debate over the future of the American Jewish community. It is a debate that can be identified in a number of ways, but all of them come down to one central question, which has perhaps been given its most useful naming in Steven Cohen and Paul Ritterband's forthcoming work on the Jews of Greater New York¹—the argument between the "assimilationists" and the "transformationists." The terms themselves are interesting, perhaps tendentious, because who in Jewish life (or indeed in the study of Jewish life) is for assimilation? Indeed, the "assimilationists" in this polarity are not for assimilation, but say that it is happening. And who is not for transformation? And yet I cannot find better terms.

Still another formulation that we owe to Cohen, this time in collaboration with Leonard Fein, contrasts "integrationism" and "survivalism."² Until 1967, Cohen and Fein argue, integration into American society was "the highest priority on the collective agenda of the Jews; since then it has been survival." We borrow the terms for a somewhat different purpose, to refer to the chief anxieties of the two opposing groups of sociologists. "Integrationists," like "transformationists," see no major threat to Jewish survival in American Jewish integration into American society; "survivalists," parallel to "assimilationists," do.

Perhaps the most neutral and sober formulation is that which contrasts those who expect "straight-line" change as we move from generation to generation, with those who see the possibility of a U-shaped curve of Jewish "identity" and "commitment" as against a straight descent.

However the matter is put, what we are in fact asking is whether American Jewry is headed for assimilation or whether it is engaged in transforming the terms in which Jewishness and Judaism are to be understood. In

¹I will have to return a number of times to Cohen and Ritterband's as yet unpublished work. A good part of its import is already available in Steven M. Cohen, *American Modernity and Jewish Identity* (New York, 1983).

²Steven M. Cohen and Leonard Fein, "From Integration to Survival: American Jewish Anxieties in Transition," *The Annals*, July 1985, pp. 75-88.

other words, is there a straight-line process of reduction in Jewish knowledge, commitment to Jewish causes, involvement in the Jewish religion, connection to the Jewish community—American or international—with each passing generation or with the passage of time since immigration to America, or is there, rather, despite obvious changes, many of which can be presented in the language of decline—lesser quantities or intensities of one kind of measurement or another and a distancing from connection and involvement—the emergence of something new? Settling this issue requires meticulous attention to concepts, assumptions, and measures about which we have become increasingly sophisticated in recent years.

What are the issues in the debate? One that has perhaps engaged the greatest interest of the Jewish community is the extent and meaning of intermarriage. Has it increased over time, and by generation, and by how much? The central question of numbers in turn leads to many subordinate issues that are relevant to the “assimilationist”—“transformationist” debate. How many of the non-Jewish spouses convert to Judaism or, indeed—but this information is unavailable—how many of the Jewish spouses convert to another faith? How do the intermarried relate to the Jewish community? How fertile are these marriages? How many of the children of these marriages are raised as Jews? And regardless of how many are raised as Jews, what is the nature of their Jewish “identity” or “commitment”?

All this is relevant to the question of the future size of the Jewish population, which is another part of the debate discussed below. Will there be “enough” Jews, and what is enough? Although the sensational projections of decline voiced a few years ago are now not heard, it is clear that American Jews stand at a point where the maintenance of their absolute numbers in the United States, let alone their proportion in the general population, is unlikely.

Another key element in the debate is the effect of increased levels of education, occupation, and income on Jewish identity and commitment. On this issue, common and elite wisdom have diverged. It is doubtful that ordinary Jews have ever felt that they should be more poorly educated, engage in occupations of lesser status, and receive lesser incomes in order to maintain the strength of Judaism and the Jewish community. Nor have the leaders of the Jewish community ever taken this position. But sociologists, ironically, have almost taken it for granted—before some recent research, that is—that the inevitable result of rising education, occupation, and income would be increased assimilation, however measured. (One important tendency in Zionist thought, too, has looked doubtfully on prosperity in the Diaspora, arguing that it could never be counted on in the face of anti-Semitism. In this line of thought, prosperity also undermined the factors—poverty and distress—that spurred *aliyah* and contributed to the

very Jewish exceptionalism that Zionism sought to overcome.) In any case, since the prosperity of American Jews has been indisputable, one key element in the current debate is its effect on the balance between assimilation and transformation, integration and survival.

A fourth related issue is the effect of a decline in anti-Semitism on the balance between assimilation and transformation. Certainly such a decline should, by the logic of the terms and concepts, make assimilation easier or more possible. But has it?

A fifth issue in the debate involves causality in the opposite direction: the effect of the balance of assimilation and transformation on the relationship of American Jews to Israel. The chief function of Jewish community organization in this country would appear to be support of Israel. Indeed, this support almost fully defines the range of interests of Jewish community organizations in politics. At the same time, Israel occupies a major place in the content of Jewish life; it defines much of the curriculum of the Jewish school and much of the subject matter of the Jewish sermon. Assimilation certainly must mean, if it means anything, increasing indifference to the fate of Israel and the connection between American Jews and Israel. But what about transformation? Does that in the end mean anything different?

Before we fully engage in this debate, it is interesting to see what is not much in question, what is not even included in it. A discussion of new perspectives must include some mention of old perspectives that are no longer central.

One subject that is not included in the current debate is concern over the economic position of Jews in the United States. Undoubtedly Jews have economic problems. Young Jews, like all young Americans, have difficulty getting the kind of education they want, paying for it, and establishing themselves in the professions. Established Jews are affected, as are all Americans, by the ups or downs of the American economy. Older Jews, again, like all other Americans, may struggle on insufficient pensions and Social Security. But one must always ask: compared to whom? The economic issue, a central concern of Jewish organizational life until the 1960s and one that still aroused Jewish communities in the 1960s—recall the estimates of the Jewish poor during the war on poverty—and that engaged Jewish organizations in the form of the fight over affirmative action in the 1970s, is simply not an issue in the late 1980s. Whatever the weaknesses that afflict the American economy generally—huge budget deficits, an enormous trade deficit, the growing number of poorly paid service jobs, the inability of so many young people to get the education or training that make possible any job—they do not particularly affect Jews. Insofar as the debate between “assimilationists” and “transformationists” is concerned, the key issue is not the impact of economic shocks on the balance between assimilation and

transformation; rather, it is the effect on American Jews of relatively unbroken and untroubled prosperity, whatever the condition of the American economy.

Note, for example, that there has been surprisingly little concern over the decline of the Rustbelt or Snowbelt, despite the fact that some of the largest Jewish communities—Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, St. Louis, etc.—are located in those areas. Obviously the businessmen and professionals who make up the majority of Jewish employed persons in those communities, as in all others,³ must have been adversely affected by the changes taking place, even if not as seriously as blue-collar workers and small merchants. Yet it is interesting that this great national misfortune seems to have gone unnoted in studies of American Jews, which leads one to think it was for them not as great a misfortune.

Whether or not sociologists study a question is not the only index to its importance, of course, and economic troubles and dangers may be a more important matter than we imagine. But whether research on an issue is funded is one index to the seriousness with which an issue is taken by communal leaders, and we have seen no spate of inquiry into the economic position of Jews. It is a perspective that is, for the moment, abandoned.

Yet a second issue about which one hears much less than in the past—but more, it is true, than about the economic dangers to American Jews—is anti-Semitism. The major Jewish community organizations that have been created to fight anti-Semitism are not without functions in this area. There has recently been great concern about anti-Semitism in the black community and some concern about the exploitation of the difficulties of farmers by anti-Semites. There is an old populist anti-Semitism (connected with anti-Eastern, anti-big-business sentiment) that can be tapped in farming areas, and some people are trying to do so. The concern about anti-Semitism among blacks is more substantial: after all, there are more blacks than farmers, and Jews live in closer contact with them. But as those contacts diminish, concern over black anti-Semitism inevitably becomes less urgent.

Recall that in the period of the summer riots in the late 1960s, one concern of Jewish organizations was the fate of Jewish shopkeepers in black areas. (There appeared to be less concern over the fate of Jewish property owners, whether slumlords, landlords, or home owners.) But there is precious little Jewish presence in the black ghetto these days. When one hears of shopkeepers being killed in poor black neighborhoods—an index to the

³The percentage of Jewish manual workers as reported in recent Jewish community studies ranges from 4 percent (Washington, D.C.) to a surprising 14 percent (Phoenix, Arizona), with Chicago and Cleveland at 10 percent, which seems to be the mean. See Gary Tobin and Alvin Chenkin, "Recent Jewish Community Population Studies: A Roundup," *AJYB*, vol. 85, 1985, pp. 154–178.

perilousness of their situation—they tend to be Chinese or more likely Korean. The Jews are all out. Even the tensions of the 1960s and the 1970s between Jewish teachers, administrators, and social workers and incoming blacks seem to me—by the index of public attention—markedly reduced. Perhaps there are simply fewer Jews in these occupations. Many of the Jewish teachers and administrators involved in the great New York school war over decentralization in 1968 must by now have retired. The transition to teachers, principals, and administrators who better reflect the dominant racial and ethnic makeup of students in various communities has been substantial.

So neither the Jewish economic position nor anti-Semitism seems to engage Jewish sociologists much these days. I should point out that in paying less attention to these areas, Jewish sociologists are, in part, at least, following the funding priorities of Jewish communal organizations. Both may be out of touch with Jewish popular feeling. I note that even in a community like Los Angeles, which we would think does not have to worry much about anti-Semitism, a survey shows considerable concern.⁴ What one is seeing, I suspect, is a general uneasiness and anxiety among Jews, still unabated despite the absence of many concrete acts of prejudice and discrimination. But perhaps the Jewish masses know something that their leaders and scholars do not.

Let me point to still another reflection of this popular uneasiness. In talks to Jewish community groups, I heard a number of positive comments about a review I had written of Charles Silberman's *A Certain People* in the *New York Times Book Review*.⁵ "I am glad you took him to task for his optimism," I was told. But then it immediately emerged that the speakers were criticizing Silberman for his optimism about anti-Semitism—with which I agreed! They had not noted that my criticism of Silberman had to do with his optimism about the quality of Jewish life.

Which brings us to the central issues in the current debate.

II

Since numbers are clearly a necessary base for the maintenance of Jewish life, I begin with the question "How many Jews will there be?" How large that base must be is, of course, itself arguable. It is known that the

⁴The percentage who perceive a lot or some anti-Jewish prejudice or discrimination is high: 79 percent mention private clubs; 63 percent, employment; 38 percent, housing; and 37 percent, education. Can Jews really have faced that much discrimination in Los Angeles? See Neil Sandberg, *Jewish Life in Los Angeles: A Window to Tomorrow* (Lanham, Md., 1986), p. 159.

⁵*New York Times Book Review*, Sept. 2, 1985, pp. 2, 17-18.

percentage of Jews in the American population has been dropping. Sidney Goldstein suggests that the percentage peaked in 1937, at 3.7 percent.⁶ Schmelz and DellaPergola give a figure for 1980 of 2.54 percent of the American population.⁷ No one suggests that this population proportion will go up in the future. American Jewish fertility has been below general American fertility for 60 years. Jewish immigration will remain very low; that from the Soviet Union remains a question mark, that from Israel remains small, and there is no need to explore other, much smaller possible sources of additional Jews, whether from South Africa or some other country with a Jewish population that may be experiencing problems. A good part of U.S. population growth is now contributed by a sizable flow of peoples from Asia and Latin America, which includes few Jews, and for that reason alone the Jewish proportion of the population will decline. (By 1990 there will be more Asians than Jews in the United States.) The 30-percent reduction over 50 years in the proportion of Jews in the American population means—if these estimates are correct—that the American Jewish population is smaller by 2,500,000 Jews than it would have been had the percentage of 1937 been maintained. Clearly, one can easily maintain a gloomy “assimilationist” perspective on the basis of the population figures alone.

On the other hand, one can argue that numbers alone hardly tell the entire story, whatever the particular story that we want to tell—whether of sheer survival, or of the ability to maintain Jewish institutions of all kinds, or of the possibility of influencing American politics, or of defending the interests of Israel or—should they ever appear threatened—the interests of the American Jewish population itself. Despite the decline in the proportion of Americans who are Jews, the Jewish community is still very large and will remain so for some time, even on the basis of pessimistic assumptions. (Schmelz and DellaPergola’s lowest estimate for the year 2000 is 4,639,000.⁸) Jewish community institutions are on the whole more extensive and stronger than in the 1930s, and Jewish political strength is substantially greater. This may be attributable in part to changes in the American polity itself. Even quite small groups, such as Greek-Americans, and groups with very few representatives in Congress, such as Hispanic-Americans—there are three times as many Jewish as Hispanic congressmen—exert substantial political influence. Because ethnic and other subgroup claims are no longer seen as threats to Americanism—a word which itself has gone somewhat

⁶Sidney Goldstein, “Jews in the United States: Perspectives from Demography,” *AJYB*, vol. 81, 1981, p. 8.

⁷U.O. Schmelz and Sergio DellaPergola, “The Demographic Consequences of U.S. Jewish Population Trends,” *AJYB*, vol. 83, 1983, p. 144.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 179.

out of favor—the majority is tolerant of, even acquiescent to, minority demands.

So the argument as to the meaning of numbers is not decided by the numbers themselves. Yet the numbers themselves are of considerable importance. We see their weight when we consider the effect of numbers—births—on Jewish schools. American Jews show, even more than other Americans, an exceptional capacity to control their fertility on the basis of individual decisions that maximize individual interest. The result for all Americans of such a capacity is widely varying numbers of children being born, depending on a range of factors: the impact of the Great Depression, lowering marriages and births; the impact of World War II, delaying them; the postwar baby boom, making up for depression and war; the decade of the sixties with its remarkable drop in births for reasons that remain unexplained; and the recent modest resurgence of births with the onset of a period of rather late marriage and late childbearing.

Amid all these shifts, Jews seem to exaggerate the overall behavior of the American population. One is reminded of the mock Hasidic song, “*Ven der rebbe tantzt, shpringen alle hasidim.*” As all this variation takes place, Jewish birthrates remain steadily below general white American rates. Or, as Calvin Goldscheider has put it: “Jews have tended in the past to be in the forefront of major socioeconomic revolutions. American Jews are located in social statuses and geographic locations that are most responsive to changes in marriage and the family. The high proportion of Jews with college- and graduate-level educations, their disproportionate concentrations in major metropolitan areas, and their middle-class backgrounds and values place them in the avant-garde of social change.”⁹

The effects of shifting birthrates are striking indeed. In 1980, 21.7 percent of American whites, but only 16.2 percent of Jews, were under the age of 14. On the other end, only 11.8 percent of the American white population, but 15.5 percent of the Jewish, were over 65. Cohorts vary widely: the peak years of births, 1956–1960, contributed a substantial part of the current American Jewish population, 10 percent; just a decade later, a five-year period of low growth (1966–1970) contributed less than half of that, 4.7 percent. This variation in cohort size is another factor depressing Jewish births, since a wide disparity may develop at any given time between the number of marriageable males and females, assuming that females are generally two-and-a-half years younger at marriage (or at least were in 1970–1971—I suspect that there have been changes in marriage practices in the intervening 15 years). This disparity means, according to Schmelz and DellaPergola, that there have been since 1981—and this will continue

⁹Calvin Goldscheider, *Jewish Continuity and Change: Emerging Patterns in America* (Bloomington, 1986), p. 59.

through the decade—125 marriageable males for every 100 females, or only 80 marriageable Jewish females for every 100 males.¹⁰

We could pursue the argument over numbers and fertility further and point out, from the more optimistic side, other findings: that marriage is delayed rather than rejected; that childbearing is delayed rather than abjured; that the fourth generation expects to have larger families than the third or even the second; and that, perhaps most interestingly, higher education and working status no longer depress, as demographers had assumed they must, the expected family size of Jewish women.¹¹

III

Differences in evaluating marriage and fertility trends of American Jews, serious as they are, pale when we come to the issue of intermarriage. Here is a matter that has always been of high concern to the masses of Jews, but that has been a major issue for American Jewish and other Jewish demographers and sociologists only since the 1970s.

Until the National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) of 1970–1971, it appeared from most studies that the Jewish intermarriage rate, while rising, was still very low when compared to that of other American ethnic and religious groups. However, the NJPS showed remarkably high rates for those marrying most recently (1965–1971): 41 percent of Jewish males marrying wives not born Jews and 10.3 percent of Jewish females marrying husbands not born Jews, for a combined rate of 29.2 percent. It is important to observe, though, that conversions reduce this “outmarriage” rate to a lower “mixed marriage” rate—30 percent of non-Jewish wives of Jewish men were converting, as were a few non-Jewish husbands of Jewish wives, bringing down the rate of mixed marriage to 22.5 percent. Furthermore, most of the children born to outmarried Jewish women were being raised as Jews despite their unconverted husbands. When all outmarriages are considered, it appears that half the children were being raised as Jews.¹²

In this argument over figures there are many unknowns: the NJPS is already 15 years old, and there have been no other large national studies; each local Jewish community that has been studied shows a different pattern; and Jewish community studies (as well as the NJPS) do worst in finding the intermarrieds who want least to identify with the Jewish community, who live in non-Jewish neighborhoods, and who are unconnected to Jewish organizations. There is also an argument as to whether the

¹⁰Schmelz and DellaPergola, *op. cit.*, pp. 144–145, 150.

¹¹Goldscheider, *op. cit.*, pp. 58–73, 90–107; Sandberg, *op. cit.*, table 46.

¹²Schmelz and DellaPergola, *op. cit.*, pp. 165–169.

1966–1971 figures showing such a huge rise are dependable, in view of the small sample on which they are based. Bernard Lazerwitz argues that they are not, and using figures for the entire decade of the 1960s brings the combined rate down to 14 percent.¹³ Between “assimilationists” and “transformationists” a good deal of discretion is exercised as to which figures to emphasize. Even more controversial are the meanings to be attached to the figures. Yet the figures, as indicated in the NJPS, can be surprising. Note that the NJPS population size of 5,800,000 included all those in Jewish households—and those in Jewish households included 430,000 non-Jews! (These are the non-Jewish spouses and children. It is not clear whether account has been taken in these figures of those spouses who had converted and those children who were being raised as Jews.¹⁴)

Certainly our understanding of the intermarriage issue has been made considerably deeper and more complex by the work of Jewish demographers in recent years. We now know that we must take into account conversions, the numbers of children being raised as Jews, the proportions of marriageable males and females at given times, the great differences among communities, and the like.

Around the question of intermarriage and what it means, the issue between “assimilationists” and “transformationists,” integrationists and survivalists, is most sharply engaged. Interestingly enough, the two variant views on intermarriage were put forth almost simultaneously in two books on American Jews that were included in leading series on ethnic groups in America, published in the late 1960s. Sidney Goldstein and Calvin Goldscheider, in *Jewish Americans: Three Generations in a Jewish Community*—part of the series on “Ethnic Groups in American Life,” edited by Milton Gordon—were perhaps the first to argue, in a careful analysis of a 1962 survey of the Jewish community of Providence, R.I., that the meaning and significance of intermarriage were changing. The “imports,” they maintained, were larger than the “exports”: “In every instance in which the non-Jewish partner had converted to Judaism, the children were being raised as Jews. In all, 136 children in the sample belonged in this category. Among the couples in which the non-Jewish partner had not converted to Judaism, 84 children were being raised as Jews, and 60 as non-Jews.”¹⁵ Goldstein and Goldscheider added some important qualifications to the generally optimistic note of these observations, but whatever the qualifications, their tone was strikingly different from that of Marshall Sklare,

¹³For this dispute, see Charles Silberman, *A Certain People: American Jews and Their Lives Today* (New York, 1985), pp. 287–297.

¹⁴Schmelz and DellaPergola, *op. cit.*, pp. 142–143.

¹⁵Sidney Goldstein and Calvin Goldscheider, *Jewish Americans: Three Generations in a Jewish Community* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1968), pp. 168–169.

writing in the parallel series "Ethnic Groups in Comparative Perspective," edited by Peter Rose. Sklare argued in his work *America's Jews*:

Intermarriage is an issue that all minorities face. If the minority is assimilationist in orientation, intermarriage is experienced as an opportunity. If the group is survivalist intermarriage is experienced as a threat. . . . [T]he threat exists both on a collective as well as on an individual basis. In its collective aspects, intermarriage menaces the continuity of the group. In its individual aspects it menaces the continuity of generations within the family, the ability of family members to identify with one another, and the satisfaction of such members with their family roles. . . . American Jews experience intermarriage more as a threat than an opportunity.¹⁶

Regardless of the theoretical viewpoint taken by particular scholars in the field, there is no denying that attitudes toward intermarriage have become more accepting over time. They have changed strikingly since, for example, Sklare's Lakeville study of 1957–1958 (the book was published ten years later): 43 percent of the population in that prosperous suburb said that they would be "somewhat unhappy" if their child married a non-Jew, while another 29 percent indicated that they would be "very unhappy."¹⁷ In Boston, 20 years later, negative attitudes toward intermarriage had dropped substantially, and particularly so among the younger age group: 43 percent of those over the age of 60 were very negative, compared to only 5 percent of those aged 18–29.¹⁸

What about a comparative historical perspective on intermarriage? Should we be looking at the situation today with alarm, comparing it to that in Central Europe in the 1920s and 1930s? Is not the entire context that determines the attitude toward intermarriage, and possibly its effects as well, drastically different at present from what prevailed then? In the earlier period, the purpose of intermarriage—we believe—was to escape Judaism and its penalties. It was part of a complex that included conversion and the conversion of Jewish spouses to Christianity. It was inconceivable in that context that non-Jewish spouses would convert to Judaism. The "transformationists" do have an important point here. They argue that intermarriage no longer means or is the result of a desire to escape from Judaism or the Jewish people. As Goldscheider points out: "No ideological base for intermarriage was uncovered which favors out-marriages among Jews, nor is there any evidence that intermarriage reflects values emphasizing assimilation. Younger Jews in their late teens and early twenties see little connection between intermarriage and total assimilation."¹⁹ The intermarried show no

¹⁶Marshall Sklare, *America's Jews* (New York, 1971), p. 100.

¹⁷Marshall Sklare and Joseph Greenblum, *Jewish Identity on the Suburban Frontier* (New York, 1967), p. 307.

¹⁸Goldscheider, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 172.

particular tendency toward greater assimilation. Half of their children are being raised as Jews. Why then the alarm?

In Central Europe in the 1920s and 1930s, intermarriage was the result of the exclusion of Jews from the surrounding society and of their efforts to join it. It reflected “self-hatred,” a term that is just not heard today. At present in the United States, intermarriage is the result of the acceptance of Jews by the surrounding society and of Jewish unself-consciousness in taking part in it. Doing so inevitably leads to education with non-Jews, work with non-Jews, and political participation and social life with non-Jews. A perfectly understandable integration results—no consequence of a desire to assimilate. And after all, integration and upward social mobility are what Jews have wanted. They have sought to leave the central cities, where their children have attended such schools as New York’s City College, and move to the suburbs, from which they hoped their children could aspire to Harvard and Yale, with understandable consequences.

I believe that the differences pointed out by the “transformationists” between intermarriage in Central Europe and intermarriage in the United States are important. These scholars, however, may not have as strong a case on the consequences of intermarriage. The converted may be better Jews than those born within the fold, and indeed often are, but it seems undeniable that their children have alternatives before them that the children of families in which both parents were born Jewish do not—they have legitimate alternative identities.

The argument that non-Jewish American acceptance of Jews is a cause of higher rates of intermarriage is something of a double-edged sword when it comes to the future of the institutions of the Jewish community and support of the policies that the community feels are crucial. That acceptance, after all, while involving elements of appreciation of different ethnic and religious heritages, is not as sympathetic to the notion of the maintenance over time of ethnic separateness. “Separatism” is not a positive term in the United States; “integration” certainly is, as “assimilation” used to be. Jews, in their resistance to the prospect of assimilation while insisting on integration, can find little solace in the attitudes of their fellow Americans, despite the ethnic revival and the rise of ethnic studies. White American groups are not expected to worry about intermarriage; they are expected to welcome it. It may be an issue for an individual first- or second-generation parent, but it is not an issue for any white ethnic community. There are no studies sponsored by the community, and for the sake of the community, of intermarriage among Italians, or Greeks, or Poles. If we turn around the identity question and say the Jewish concern is for the religion, Judaism, we again find no equivalent: Catholics want their children to be raised as Catholics, but they are so far from an ethnic definition of Catholicism that

converts and children raised as Catholics have no problem, I believe, within the Catholic Church, regardless of ethnic background. Jews have not been interested in conversion—indeed have resisted it—for a thousand years or more. They convert now not to demonstrate the glory or superiority of Judaism or to increase the number of Jews as such, but to retain the number of Jews there might have been in the absence of intermarriage. Conversion exists almost solely in the context of intermarriage.

The point of these reflections is that while we can understand why the rate of intermarriage goes up, and can expect it to continue to go up—what after all would restrain it in view of the educational level, occupations, and activities of Jews?—we can also expect it to be a problem for American Jews, and one that their fellow citizens will not find easy to understand. The dilemma is that the kind of life Jews wish to lead in America, and the one that their fellow Americans would not seek to begrudge them—one in which they are free from prejudice and discrimination and free to pursue whatever education and careers they wish—will inevitably undermine a community committed to particularistic practices, institutions, and policies.

The argument of the “assimilationists” is that the strongest basis for Jewish commitment is given by birth within the community. American Jews are not, and, I believe, cannot be, a community of choice. As such, Judaism and Jewishness would have no more force than Unitarianism. A minority of Jews, in fact, takes the position that birth alone makes a Jew, and takes it so strongly that it is suspicious of most conversions. There are directly religious—*halakhic*—grounds for this suspicion, but it may well be that wrapped up in that unreasoning, and to my mind unenlightened, view is a piece of unexplicated basic sociological wisdom: the community of birth is stronger than the community of choice.

The “transformationists,” of course, do not dispute that wisdom. They are aware that depth of Jewish commitment can range from the deep to the barely perceptible, and much of their work has been devoted to studying that commitment and how it varies by age, generation, education, and class. They maintain that the level of commitment is enough to sustain the Jewish community, with its manifold institutions and varied activities. But the question of what is enough is another issue that divides the two schools.

IV

With regard to the question of commitment, the “assimilationists” point to the decline of traditional observances and practices and to the growing acceptance of intermarriage. The “transformationists” respond to this by arguing that the content of Judaism and Jewishness is changing in America,

but that this does not constitute a threat to the continuity of the community and the maintenance of a vital Jewish life within it. Recent books by Goldscheider²⁰ and Cohen²¹ offer the strongest statements of this point of view, which finds popular expression in Silberman's *A Certain People*. It is challenged by Silberman's critics, Arthur Hertzberg,²² Samuel Heilman,²³ and Ruth R. Wisse,²⁴ and to a somewhat lesser degree the author of the present essay,²⁵ but the strongest proponents of an alternative view within the field of American Jewish sociology have been Sklare²⁶ and Charles Liebman.²⁷ Herbert Gans makes a similar but more general argument, not from the perspective of one committed to the maintenance of a strong Jewish life but as a sociologist of ethnicity who sees all groups in the United States ending up with a purely "symbolic" ethnicity, one which provides an identity perhaps, but one without any specific content that meaningfully separates those who maintain an ethnic identity from other Americans.²⁸ This position is familiar, which is not to say it is not persuasive. We have heard it since St. John de Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer*, Israel Zangwill's *The Melting Pot*, and the writings of Robert E. Park and his school. So let us put forth the "transformationist" case, which is newer, having been formulated only in recent years.

The "transformationists"—I draw this summary account from Goldscheider and Cohen, without any claim that they subscribe to every element of the synthetic position I present—point out that American Jews remain different in family structure, occupations, education, political values, and social behavior from non-Jewish Americans. They argue that these differences have nothing to do with discrimination or the failure of American Jews to integrate. Indeed, some of these differences—as in the greater amount of education and the concentration in the professions—are due to the very openness of American society. The ability to integrate leads, paradoxically, not to American Jews paralleling American educational achievement and occupational structure, but to their diverging on the basis of open opportunity. Furthermore, these differences are sustained by and help to sustain a pattern of social life in which Jews interact for the most part with

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Cohen, *op. cit.*

²²*New York Review of Books*, Nov. 21, 1985, pp. 18–21.

²³*New Yorker*, Oct. 7, 1985, pp. 16–19.

²⁴*Commentary*, Nov. 1985, pp. 108–114.

²⁵*New York Times Book Review*, *op. cit.*

²⁶Sklare and Greenblum, *op. cit.*; Sklare, *op. cit.*

²⁷Charles Liebman, *The Ambivalent American Jew* (Philadelphia, 1973).

²⁸Herbert Gans, "Symbolic Ethnicity: The Future of Ethnic Groups and Cultures in America," in Herbert Gans et al. (eds.), *On the Making of Americans: Essays in Honor of David Riesman* (Philadelphia, 1979), pp. 193–220.

other Jews. Once again this should not be seen as a product of exclusion. The "transformationists" no longer speak, as the American Jewish Committee once did, of the "five o'clock shadow," the separation of Jews from non-Jews at the end of the business day, as a problem. Rather, this separation is the product of the social life Jews choose for themselves, which is with other Jews.

But while social life sustains Jewish community cohesion and occupational concentration, that is not the whole story. The Jewish religion and the commitment to the State of Israel—an expression of unity with the Jewish people—are the two pillars of Jewish communal life. We see a near universal commitment to Israel²⁹ and the emergence of a common norm of practice that selects some Jewish customs and rituals, some almost universally. The two most frequent such observances are the Passover seder and lighting candles on Hanukkah.³⁰ The second generation showed a strong decline in ritual observance from the first, but in the third the decline is moderated, and between third and fourth there are no indications of continued decline.

Combined measures of Jewish identification show that the fourth generation is not falling away. Indeed, an error can be made in evaluating the observances of later generations—who are of course young—because involvement in the Jewish community, identification with it, and the practice of what has become the norm of Judaism and Jewishness for the majority of Jewish Americans are all related to family life-cycle stage. One may think that the third or fourth generation is assimilating, failing to take into account that much of it consists of young people in college or beginning their careers, who are as yet without families or children. But if we divide the Jewish group by life-cycle stages, we see an inverted U-shaped curve, with ritual observance and affiliation rising when children reach school age, and declining somewhat in later stages of the life cycle.

Sklare is skeptical. As far back as his Lakeville study, he pointed to the rather instrumental character of the religious observances that are retained: "Five criteria emerge as important in explaining retention of specific home rituals. Thus, the highest retention will occur when a ritual (1) is capable of effective redefinition in modern terms, (2) does not demand social isolation or the adoption of a unique life style, (3) accords with the religious culture of the larger community and provides a 'Jewish' alternative when such is felt to be needed, (4) is centered on the child, and (5) is performed annually or infrequently."³¹

My impression is that Sklare does not consider this to be enough. Neither does Liebman, who pointed out in the preface to *The Ambivalent American*

²⁹Cohen, op. cit., pp. 154–170.

³⁰Ibid., p. 56.

³¹Sklare and Greenblum, op. cit., p. 57.

Jew: "The American Jew is torn between two sets of values—those of integration and acceptance into American society and those of Jewish group survival. These values appear to me to be incompatible. But most American Jews do not view them in this way."³² Liebman's observations are sharp and incisive. For him the undoubted reality of a continuing Jewish identity in the third and fourth generations—and beyond—but one that is maintained by means of a much reduced norm of some Jewish practices combined with a political commitment to Israel, is not enough.

We may now ask, enough for what? It is enough to maintain a Jewish identity and community in the United States for a long time. Of that I am convinced. The "assimilationists" have been somewhat hasty in telescoping a process that undoubtedly occurs: distancing from historical origins and adoption of new practices that reduce the differences between Jews and non-Jews. Perhaps that ultimately will assimilate Jews, making them indistinguishable from others, whether in their own consciousness or in that of others. That may yet happen. But on the basis of present social trends it is hard to see *how* it will happen. One reason is that in the United States ethnic identity and religious identification have become in large part expected norms of individual identification. To be an "unhyphenated American"—the term is Stanley Lieberson's—is somewhat exceptional, despite the enormous mixture of backgrounds. It is revealing that only in 1980, some 50 years after the end of mass immigration, was a question on ancestry—in effect, ethnicity—added to the census. I suspect that we will keep and refine this question. And it is further revealing that the overwhelming majority of white Americans answer it, perhaps with some prodding from the census-taker, and do so by (necessarily) putting together a few different ancestries.

As Daniel Bell asks in a perceptive essay³³ in which he argues against the expectation of assimilation in America, "What is there to assimilate to?" He observes: "For better or worse, the very breakup of the cultural hegemony of the WASPs and the growth of ethnicity as a legitimate dimension of American life have forced the *politicization* of group identity. To the extent that government becomes the source of group rights and protections, . . . ethnic-group identity becomes salient in the competition for place and privilege in the society. In that sense, Jews are 'forced' to maintain an identity, and to define themselves in ethnic terms." That goes some way toward explaining what is happening. While Jews do not seek group privileges from the government in the same sense that blacks and Hispanics do, they do ask for active governmental aid for Israel, and they do need to be organized in order to make certain that the group rights of others do not affect their own ability to obtain access to education and the professions.

³²Liebman, *op. cit.*, p. vii.

³³Daniel Bell, "Where Are We?" *Moment*, May 1986, pp. 15-22.

But this is only part of the story, of course, and the “transformationists” are right to point to more. There is among most Jews a real desire to maintain identity and continuity. It is not a very strong desire, however, and it adapts itself to the needs of integration in the United States, as Liebman points out. It makes few demands and is largely cut off from historic Judaism³⁴ in terms of belief and practice. And now those who claim to be the heirs to historic Judaism—the small minority of Orthodox Jews in the United States—are engaged in an offensive, not only pointing out all these shortcomings but asserting that the unity of the Jewish people will be broken if this form of adaptive Jewishness and Judaism remains the norm for American Jews. The “transformationists” have had little to say about this prediction as they meticulously describe the Judaism and Jewishness of the overwhelming majority of American Jews. But those who decry adaptive Judaism as a betrayal—as not enough—will not be content to stay on the sidelines and accept a role as simply another wing of Judaism in America. I believe that this development will have a powerful impact on the evolution of Judaism.

Just how it will work out I do not know. Yet I think the surprising aggressiveness of the Orthodox group, the strength given it by the official position Orthodoxy holds in Israel, perhaps the additional factor of a new historical context in which Christian fundamentalism—not to mention various kinds of self-confident sectarianism—has developed surprising strength in the United States, all suggest that the transformational implication—I do not say assertion—that Judaism and Jewishness have reached a stable and reproducible form in the United States is premature.

My reference to the split that may be created by Orthodoxy’s refusal to accept the legitimacy of the two major branches of American Judaism is not for the purpose of suggesting that Orthodoxy will win in America, or be crushed, or that American Jews and Israelis will be divided by the inability

³⁴In another essay (“On Jewish Forebodings,” *Commentary*, August 1985, pp. 32–36) I used the term “historic Judaism” to refer to Orthodox Judaism—as I do here—and was properly reminded by a correspondent that Solomon Schechter applied that term to Conservative Judaism. In an essay in *Moment* (May 1986), Nathan Rotenstreich again uses “historic Judaism” to refer to a Judaism that adapts itself to historic change, whereas “ahistoric Judaism” applies to an unadapting Orthodoxy! Still, Orthodox Judaism, I believe, has a claim to this description because it is most closely linked to the Judaism that developed historically and that was the only Judaism before the spread of Enlightenment and the impact of modernity. I fully understand the argument which maintains that Orthodoxy’s refusal to adapt to changing history makes it different from the Judaism to which it claims direct connection; that in refusing to change, its essence changes. Nevertheless, Orthodoxy puts forth a claim that no other variant can maintain. And its claim seems to be able to find substantial reverberation among Jews today, giving Orthodoxy greater vitality than one would have guessed possible 30 years ago. It is no mere fossil, as it would have been reasonable to consider it a few decades ago.

to define a common peoplehood. It is rather to note—and this is important for both sides in the dispute—how unfinished the story is, how unclear it is what may yet happen. What we have seen thus far, as Cohen, for one, perceptively points out, is already the result of history, that is, of specific shaping and shaking events, as well as simply the result of the passing of the generations. Thus, the sharp drop in ritual observance between the first and second generations resulted not only from the impact of a new land but also from the impact of the specific historical context in which the second generation was being raised. It is the case that specific historical events have tended to affect one American Jewish generation more than another, simply because the American Jewish community is today overwhelmingly descended from one major wave of immigration that lasted from the 1880s to the 1920s. As a result, the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s had their most marked impact on the second generation, while the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s had it on the third generation. It is not yet clear what will be the shaping historical events for the fourth generation.

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If I have wavered between the two sides in the debate between “assimilationists” and “transformationists”—and for the purposes of exposition I may well have exaggerated the polarization—it is because I find much merit in both. It is hard to see how Judaism and Jewishness of most Americans connects with the Judaism and Jewishness of their grandfathers and great-grandfathers. At the same time, what has been achieved so far is remarkable, and was hardly expected in, let us say, the 1940s and 1950s. There have been some surprises, such as the remarkable growth of Jewish studies on university campuses and the stabilization in identity, affiliation, and ritual practice that seems to have occurred in the fourth generation. There is no reason to believe there will not be further surprises in the future. In the meantime, the development of the controversy between optimists and pessimists is forcing us to consider and sharpen questions to which we perhaps gave too easy answers in the past.