JEWISH IDENTITY, CONTINUITY, AND OUTREACH
Some Theoretical and Personal Reflections

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Jewish continuity and outreach cannot be understood without a clarification of the term "Jewish identity," which can be seen as a struggle for inner coherence and wholeness in the face of the fragmentation imposed by modernity. The concept of Jewish identity can best be understood by a qualitative approach that incorporates values and world view. This article presents such a framework for Jewish identity.

Throughout my professional career, both as a Jewish Community Center professional and before as an educator, I have struggled more with the question of why we do something than how we respond to a particular situation. All too often the underlying rationale of our work becomes cloudy or lost in the hectic pace of daily work. We often underestimate the need to take the time and invest the effort to reflect on, refine, and clarify the fundamental purposes and goals of our work. Yet, it is this question of rationale that guides what we do, not just ideally, but practically as well.

My overall intention in this article is to raise some key questions that I hope will stimulate an honest and serious dialogue. In this way, we in the field can grow together and gain a better understanding of our practice.

REVIEW AND CRITIQUE OF THE LITERATURE

In our current vocabulary, Jewish identity has become a cliche, an overused term that usually refers to "feeling good about being Jewish." This description is inadequate, confusing, and often demeaning. Because of its vagueness, it means all things to all people. There is no difference between a Jew for Jesus, a Bratzlaver Hasid, or Annie Hall at the Stage Delicatessen. It tells us nothing about the content or concept of being Jewish. Without clarification of content, without a shared meaning for discussion, without guidelines to understand the language we use, any effort to discuss continuity and outreach is of little practical value to our professional practice. For the meaning of the terms "continuity" and "outreach" depends on the meaning of the term "Jewish identity": There can be no Jewish continuity, if I do not explain what I am continuing and why. Likewise, if I cannot point to and describe clearly the destination—where I am bringing people to—and why, I cannot plan outreach intelligently.

Jewish identity has been discussed widely in the academic literature, and many efforts have been made to define its parameters. The most recent, relevant, and comprehensive effort at definition is the 1990 work, *Psychology and Jewish Identity Education,* by Perry London and Barry Chazan. In this work, London and Chazan summarize the literature of Jewish identity and analyze several studies on the general concept of identity. Their study discusses both the secular use of the term and efforts to translate identity into Jewish terms.

London and Chazan suggest that treat-

Presented as the Max Tasgal Lecture at the Annual Meeting of the Conference of Jewish Communal Service, Montreal, June 3, 1991.

ments of Jewish identity generally remain at the most surface level of understanding. They remind us that it is inadequate to define Jewish identity only in sociological terms, to quantify its existence, and to measure behavior according to this or that index. The frustration with this approach is that it does not address the qualitative nature of Jewish identity. Its focus is limited to external patterns of behavior or abstractly defined "identity groups." It never offers a conceptual framework in which we can pull the discussion together or delve more deeply into some of the below-the-surface issues.

London and Chazan argue that a more theoretical approach and overall framework for discussion of Jewish identity are much needed, and have begun this discussion in this work. They point to psychological frameworks from Erikson and other psychologists who describe identity in developmental terms. They remind us that identity is developed in stages of human growth and continues to evolve throughout our lifetimes. Our ability to relate to groups in our society is essential in the transmission of values and culture. Further, they tell us that identifying with kinship groups, such as Israel, and other cultural and religious traits are all components of Jewish identity. Ultimately, they point to the concept of "civil religion" (Woocher, 1986) as an appropriate index of Jewish identity.

The very content of Jewish identity then becomes identified with what Jonathan Woocher (1986) has described as Jewish "civil religion." Thus, the components of Jewish identity are all expressions of a public performance, of communal rituals, to be measured without a full understanding of their inner meaning or primary intentions. Yet, civil religion offers no coherent world view that can hold together the various Jewish values and behaviors that Jonathan Woocher identifies. There lies its primary weakness. Woocher himself notes this limitation. He tells us that civil religion "seeks to embrace only that part of life which is public (Woocher, 1986, p. 17). Civil religion, he tells us, cannot anchor itself convincingly within an "all embracing world view." And lacking such a worldview, civil religion rarely develops an elaborate or systematic theology. In Woocher's language, in civil religion "at most, one can expect to find a few theological tropes; often civil religion is theoretically mute" (Woocher, 1986, p. 18).

Thus, the measure of Jewish identity today, whether we call it civil religion, "consensus Judaism," or "federation Judaism" yields only an external understanding; that is, "a set of actions or activities by which we measure our connection with the organized Jewish world in public places by public actions" (Woocher, 1986, p. 18). We evaluate our successes by the numbers attending a particular set of activities, and the frequency of their attendance. We glorify the number of children who attend our educational programs. We sanctify the number of times people come to the synagogue, and by taking a census we establish the strength of one's Jewish identity. The frustration rests with our inability or unwillingness to engage seriously in an understanding of *why* people take part in these activities and *why* they seek to engage in these public experiences. What is their world view? What is their anchor within the Jewish universe? These questions remain dangling.

Ultimately, Chazan and London challenge us to develop a theoretical response to the topic of Jewish identity and Jewish education. They remind us that the sociology of identity has been studied much more than the inner meaning and values that are at the heart of Jewish identity. In their words, "the acts and behaviors indicative of Jewish identification have received more attention that the values, attitudes, and meanings behind them" (London & Chazan, 1990, p. 1).

It is those inner meanings and values that serve as my focus. What does Jewish identity mean in terms of Jewish values? What theoretical frameworks can help clarify the relationship of identity to values?

As practitioners engaged in important Jewish communal work, we are devoted to Jewish values and therefore have the responsibility to address the contemporary crisis of Jewish identity.

THE PROBLEM OF JEWISH IDENTITY

History and Fragmentation

The problem of identity is new. For Western Jewry, it begins with the emancipation of Jews during the French Revolution in 1791; for most North American Jews, it dates from the beginning of this century when Jews emigrated from Eastern Europe to this continent.

In both cases, Jews for the first time were given the option to live in two separate worlds: the world of Jewish tradition and the world of Western culture. For the first time Jews could *choose whether* to be Jewish at all and, more problematically, *choose how* to be Jews. The burden of choosing should never be underestimated. It demands of each individual a high degree of self-consciousness and cultural awareness. The problem of Jewish identity can only be addressed once we understand that history and culture have an important impact on our psychological inner selves.

In brief, Jews now face the dilemma of how to put together two distinctive worlds into a coherent identity. The tensions of this process are highlighted clearly by the words of Tonnere on the emancipation of the Jews in 1791. "To the Jews as individuals everything, to the Jews as a nation, nothing: we cannot tolerate a nation within a nation" (Prinz, 1962, p. 5). Modern Jews are therefore forced to divide themselves into two artificial components: an individual human being and a part of a people. These two components have conflicting, often opposite demands, for the values derived from a universal secular framework and a particularistic Jewish framework do not necessarily overlap and may even be antagonistic. To resolve or even to understand this problem means to appreciate how these two worlds are in tension and the implications of this tension on our identity processes. Thus, with the onset of modernity the problem of Jewish identity begins clearly as a problem of fragmentation that is culturally imposed.

The Struggle for Coherence

Identity, the sense of self, depends on several fundamental senses of continuity and coherence. When any of these break down, there exists an identity problem. Identity can thus be seen as a struggle for inner coherence and wholeness. The following paradigm applies to both personal and Jewish identity. The problem of fragmentation directly affects three critical aspects of identity:

1. *Continuity with the past;* that is, memory is the medium of identity
2. *Coherence with the present;* that is, confirmation of the self by peers and the external environment
3. *Sense of who I am to be in the future;* that is, what is my life-project about

When forged together, these three components provide us with a coherent and whole sense of self; when they are fragmented, a feeling of inner dissonance and alienation results. In either case, the difficulty of quantifying Jewish identity is obvious in light of this paradigm. In fact, the paradigm suggests a qualitative approach.

In this section, I illustrate the paradigm by my own struggle against fragmentation as I have sought to define my Jewish identity. In real life terms, my sense of self is composed of several partial identities. I am a father, husband, active member of my synagogue, and executive of a major communal organization. The central question I struggle with is: What is the overarching sense of self that ties these various life experiences together? How do I pull myself together so that I understand my own identity as a whole person? How can I experience myself in continuity with my past, my present, and my future?

The first part of the paradigm, *memory,*

has become for me the most exciting part of my search for self-understanding. David Hartman (1976, p. 81) teaches that the "Jew's first task as a parent is to bear witness to an identity beyond the chemical and the physical. . . . The family is not only a biological survival unit, but also a framework of developing identity grounded in the covenantal aspirations of Judaism." It then becomes the task of the parent, suggests Hartman, to expose the child to a part of the world reaching beyond his or her own. That is, we must provide our children with a frame of reference "rooted in the memories and history of the covenantal community of Israel" (Hartman, 1978, p. 79).

Hartman informs us that a sense of historical memory provides us with a filter through which we can evaluate our own experiences and, moreover, that historical memory sharpens and develops a critical posture toward modernity.

Sometimes this task of expanded memory feels overwhelming. I feel the threat of a black hole into which I am being invited to fall—a black hole created by thousands of volumes written by Jewish prophets, commentators, and scholars. The weight of such words can feel like an overwhelming burden of responsibility. How do I then engage in that arena? What do I have to offer to this transmission of history? What is the value of my role?

I have had several important learning opportunities to discuss these questions with David Hartman. Hartman taught me that each of us is intrinsically worthy to engage in that historical process. The challenge before us is not *how much* of the history can we master nor *how much* of the knowledge can we possess, but rather, how we relate to Jewish history in a qualitative sense. We must first appreciate that we are an inherent part of the story of a people rich in memories, that the story is ongoing, and that the story is ours.

Our responsibility therefore is to prepare ourselves to tell our story, to participate personally in its current development, and then to pass it on to our children. We must especially convey the message that the story is never ending. Since the story is always in the process of being told, our children too have a responsibility to attach themselves to the historical discourse and continue on to the next generation as well.

For me, the "black hole" now becomes an adventure that is fully understandable and is one in which I find great meaning. I am, in fact, deeply connected to the history of a people that existed before, extends beyond the emancipation to the present, and will continue on into the future. It is history that we can understand, touch, and articulate. We can give it value without mysticism or without conjuring up the generations before us in ways that could easily immobilize us from pursuing a dialogue that cuts through the generations.

The second component of the paradigm suggests that we need to be *confirmed* by our peers and by our environment. The astute reader might note that this component is similar to the formulation of Jewish identity put forth by Chazan and London (1990). Without support from my environment and validation from peers, I enter into a state of anomie and will not be able to satisfy myself or others as I pursue my work and life's ambitions.

Yet, Chazan and London's formulation of identity needs to be placed in a much broader context. Who are our peers? Our true peers share a self-conscious effort to overcome the dilemma of fragmented Jewish identity. Our true peers are those professionals, lay people, neighbors, friends and family who share our concern to tell the story. Many Jews do not possess such self-consciousness nor share this concern. And there are many Jewish environments—physical, professional, and cultural—that do not support the struggle for a coherent Jewish identity.

The third component of the paradigm—the life-project—seeks to integrate my engagement with the past and the present by providing future direction and purpose. As I suggested previously, I experience several partial identities, yet I seek to see myself as a single, whole self. My life-

project functions to provide this total sense of identity. Colored by my memories and a connection with the present, how do I frame and connect my various activities and roles within the broader context of a lifetime? What is my work about? What is the overall purpose of what I do with my energy? How do I prioritize the conflicting demands of home and the workplace? What central values infuse both? What do I hope to accomplish in my lifetime? Our life-project provides the necessary perspective to see ourselves as coherent personalities who live unified lives. It is a perspective that enables us to overcome the fragmentation imposed on us by modernity.

For me, the fragmentation of my identity has been made easier by an accident of history that permitted me to pursue my professional career as a Jewish communal professional. I have been offered an unusual opportunity: to forge through the three forms of identity fragmentation as a Jew in both personal and public terms. This integration of professional and personal Jewish identity makes me feel whole and gives great comfort to my self-understanding.

Identity and Value Choices

Each component of the above paradigm assumes choices, and these choices are based on values. I select memories on the basis of what is significant to me. For example, as I tell the story to my children of who I am as a Jew, I recall specific moments vividly and others fade rapidly from memory. I choose to recall from my history those moments when I sat in synagogue with my grandfather in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn. The service was conducted either in Hebrew or in Yiddish; I had no way of understanding either the language or the practice. But I do recall those moments fondly and with great warmth, and they motivated me to continue attendance at synagogues for years. I recall with vivid memory the smells of Shabbat in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, and in my home in particular. I can recall from my history images of preparation for all the major holidays. I gain from my history a sense of warmth, comfort, and a feeling of belonging that have allowed me to face the spiritual issues of my life. I am sure there are other memories that I cannot easily bring back that have also helped shape my Jewish identity. From time to time I struggle to bring them to the forefront of my senses.

In the second component—coherence with the present—I choose peers, friends, and neighborhood, again on the basis of values. Issues of quality of life have become dominant to me. Those issues are defined in terms of a value system that I self-consciously formulate and that is shared by the significant others in my public and private life. Very recently I had a tempting opportunity to change professional positions and community. As a family we decided to remain where we are, because of what we considered to be our current quality of life. More specifically, we recognized the importance of friends, colleagues, and support systems, all of which reflected and reinforced our values. We were not prepared to change that environment and to risk losing confirmation of our identities.

The final component, the life-project, demands that each of us, in effect, write our own life-script. We must decide how to portray ourselves as heroes in our own drama. This decision will be shaped by what we select of significance from the past and the present and by what we envision to be the desired outcome. Our story will be tied together by central themes, those value-laden messages of our life experience. Ultimately, our story reflects what we choose to do with our lives and how we articulate to ourselves the meaning of this choice. If we are lucky and I underline luck, *mazel,* the life-script that we write will give us satisfaction and fulfillment—a good ending to a meaningful story.

Charles Taylor, author of a new major work, *Sources of The Self: The Making of*

Modern Identity (1989), tells us that one's whole identity ultimately rests on such central questions as what kind of life is worth living or what kind of life would ultimately fulfill the promise of a particular set of talents. To Taylor, these large questions of world view inevitably determine our value-choices, actions, and lifestyles.

Since choices based on values inevitably inform and shape our identities, we now need a specifically Jewish framework by which we can evaluate and make choices. Such a framework is provided in the concluding section of this article.

A JEWISH FRAMEWORK OF IDENTITY

In the first part of this article, I presented a critique of approaches to Jewish identity. I challenged conventional definitions that are too vague to be useful, as well as academic, especially sociological, studies that specify atomic actions for measurement, but that do not place these actions within a coherent theoretical framework. In the second part, I suggested a qualitative description of Jewish identity. This description characterizes the problem that American Jews have with their identity as one of fragmentation and outlines a paradigm of components that are necessary for identity coherence. In this third section, I present a framework to discuss the Jewish content of identity. This framework does not claim original language, but rather uses language that is common in our professional and personal conversations—language that is rooted in our Jewish values and our Jewish psyche.

My framework for Jewish identity uses the traditional categories of "God," "Torah," and "Israel." However, *the use of these categories is neither descriptive or normative, but rather provides functional definitions.* That is, I use these terms to delineate how central categories *function* to shape Jewish identity. Each of these three components lives together in a dynamic set of tensions. At different moments in our lives, each of them will have greater or lesser influence than the others on our own sense of Jewish identity. Therefore, these concepts must be viewed as dynamic, changing, and integrative.

God

In the framework of Jewish identity, *God refers to the necessary function that world views and fundamental life assumptions have in the formation of Jewish identity.* World views and fundamental assumptions can neither be proved nor disproved; they may be explicit or implicit in our minds. Yet, all our value-choices presuppose the existence of a world view and are grounded in such fundamental assumptions. Some fundamental assumptions of Judaism include (1) that God created the world and human beings as an act of free will and love, (2) that the world is a meaningful place, and (3) that humans are potentially good and have the power to make free choices. Within Jewish tradition there is more than one way to interpret these assumptions: Maimonides discovers God in the patterns of nature, Nachmanides in the dramatic events of Jewish history. They can disagree because they have something about which to disagree: fundamental assumptions that themselves are a given. These assumptions provide a shared framework for discussion and interpretation.

As I indicated earlier, the three components of Jewish identity clearly depend on value-choices. In particular, I suggested that my life-project is a key way by which I am able to integrate the multiple identity roles that I must assume. World views and fundamental assumptions then are necessary for identity. The question remains how self-consciously each of us chooses to "write our own script" and how rich are the materials we use to create our story.

The category of God provides the ground and the background of Jewish identity and thereby infuses and informs the other two categories of this framework: it is the foun-

dation. Without world view, the other parts are not sufficient to hold the pieces together and therefore could not serve as a realistic framework for Jewish identity.

Torah

World views and fundamental assumptions are abstract and therefore need to be concretized. *Torah functions to concretize and translate fundamental world views into specific actions.* In the Jewish tradition, Torah is both a Book (or Books) and an intellectual process. It is both a written text and oral teaching. Both written and oral Torah serve to concretize world views by demanding ongoing interpretation *(midrash);* that is, practical applications as well as guidelines for concrete actions *(halacha).* These actions or norms of behavior affect all aspects of our lives: who we live with, our lifestyle, etc. In this framework, Torah then represents the activities I perform as a direct expression of my world view. This latter point is what distinguishes my approach from approaches based on civil religion or behavior models. *Jewish identity must include, but cannot be based on actions.* Actions are no longer left on a surface level of quantitative assessment. Rather, they are now rooted in a set of assumptions that give inner coherence and meaning to these public actions.

Israel

The category Israel refers to the people of Israel. *Functionally, Israel serves as my significant other.* Through Israel I am able to extend my identity geographically and culturally. My own identity is thereby expanded to include Jews who live in Ethiopia or Chile. The people of Israel also refers to a group of Jews who no longer exist in a physical sense, but can actually become part of my consciousness now. Jewish history and text—if personalized and made alive—serve the purpose of extending my identity backward in time. Israel is also the physical space of the Jewish people where the total environment can confirm my identity in the present. Taken together—a place, a people, a smell, a feeling—Israel as a significant social group functions to ratify and validate my beliefs and actions and to fuel my Jewish identity. Israel becomes the core Jewish social context for me.

God, Torah, and Israel then serve as three interactive functional components necessary for Jewish identity. With this framework in mind, we can now briefly consider some broad implications for programs of Jewish continuity and outreach. We now must seriously ask ourselves: What are the implications of a particular program or activity on Jewish identity? For example, consider outreach to intermarrieds. Does the role of peoplehood serve an equivalent function in the world view of the non-Jew as for the Jew? Is a Christian non-Jew the same as a Muslim in this regard? Are the Jewish partners sufficiently aware of fundamental differences of world view, lifestyle, and peoplehood? Are we going to ask the non-Jewish partners to give up their world view, their primary assumptions about life, their "Torah," and their peoplehood to accommodate themselves to our belief, our sense of Jewish purpose and Jewish continuity? Is this a realistic charge for us to accept? Is it a desirable charge? Maybe yes, maybe no. The point is we cannot answer these questions unless we have explored the terms of God, Torah, and Israel in some depth.

These are just a small sample of the kinds of questions that our framework raises. Our outreach and continuity programs must be based on a clearer understanding of what to expect from others—both those who design and those who participate in our programs. In short, do we frame, shape, and focus our continuity and outreach programs in light of an intellectually honest and thoughtful understanding of the complexity of Jewish identity? There is no manual; there is no table of organization capable of giving us the answer. I certainly do not presume to possess easy answers. In

fact, I offer this article in an attempt to raise one central question: Are we asking the right questions?

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to acknowledge with deep affection first the energizing words of David Hartman, who has become my rebbe and to whom I owe my heightened sense of Jewish identity. I treasure each opportunity to be with him, and he is now part of my memory and has become a critical part of my world view.

In addition, I wish to acknowledge, with respect and affection, my colleague and mentor, Dr. Bernard Steinberg, who serves as Assistant Executive Director and Director of Judaica of the JCC of Cleveland. Bernie has challenged and engaged with me to pursue my own understanding of Jewish knowledge and history in a way that has made me feel valued and respected. He has taken on this responsibility because his own Jewish identity leads him to want to provoke others to struggle with the difficult questions of how we live our lives and how we really do write our own script. His warmth, caring, and depth of knowledge are beyond my ability to describe. My affection and respect for him knows no bounds.

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