TOWARD A PSYCHOLOGY OF JEWISH IDENTITY
A Multidimensional Approach

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This article provides a psychological approach to answering these two questions: (1) What is Jewish identity and (2) How is it developed and shaped? Four basic psychological constructs — psychodynamics, function, structure, and development — are explored to illuminate different aspects of Jewish identity.

It has been said that "Jewish identity is both a great obsession and a great ambiguity of American Jewish life" (London & Chazan, 1990, p. 1). The discovery by the 1990 CJF National Jewish Population Survey that 52% of American Jews marrying after 1985 had intermarried has understandably fueled that obsession. Indeed, enhancing Jewish identity has emerged as one of the prime keys to continuity. The only catch, of course, is that securing continuity through strengthening identity makes a fine slogan, but a meaningless prescription. The great ambiguity remains. What, after all, is Jewish identity?

This article provides a psychological approach to answering that question. In the process several practical implications emerge that may be useful to those working within a variety of settings and disciplines to strengthen Jewish identity.

WHAT IS JEWISH IDENTITY?

Why does Jewish identity remain a great ambiguity? In part, the concept is ambiguous because of its inherent subtlety and complexity but also because it has been defined in so many ways. Scholars have traditionally distinguished between Jewish identification and Jewish identity. Harold Himmelfarb (1982, p. 57) one of the real pioneers in this area, wrote as follows:

> Jewish identification is the process of thinking and acting in a manner that indicates involvement with and attachment to Jewish life. Jewish identity is one's sense of self with regard to being Jewish....Operationally, identification studies seek to discover the extent to which the behavior and attitudes of Jews are oriented Jewishly. Identification studies ask questions about ritual observance, Jewish organizational involvement, attitudes toward Israel, intermarriage, and other matters related to Jewish life. Identity studies are concerned with what being Jewish means to individuals and the extent to which it is an important part of the way they view themselves in relation to others. These studies ask questions such as whether one considers oneself first a Jew and then an American or vice versa, the extent to which one is proud or embarrassed about being Jewish, the extent to which one is aware of being Jewish, and the extent to which one thinks such awareness affects his behavior and attitudes.

Although it is useful to bear Himmelfarb's differentiation in mind, it only takes us so far. The distinction between Jewish identification and Jewish identity begins to break down as soon as one recognizes the natural reciprocal interaction between behavior and affect. In a healthy Jewish context, for example, ritual can evoke a powerful emotional sense of relatedness — both to a contemporary local community and to a worldwide community that stretches backward

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and forward across time. And, of course, these profound feelings of connection often prompt further ritual observance. Because "doing Jewish" and "feeling Jewish" rarely come in separate experiential packages, they cannot long be studied as discrete phenomena nor even as two independent sides of a single coin. For these reasons, other researchers have viewed the definition of identity in a more holistic way. Simon Herman (1989, p. 30) speaks of "the relationship of the individual to the group and the reflection in him or her of its attributes." London and Chazan (1990) define identity as the point of intersection between the individual and other people, the sense of self simultaneously as an individual and as a member of a social group. Identity is a synthesis of cognitive, affective, and behavioral elements.

Meyer (1990) adds an important reminder that individual Jewish identity needs to be understood in the context of potent historical forces. In the modern era, these forces are principally the ongoing process of enlightenment, anti-Semitism, and the sense of peoplehood represented by Israel.

> Enlightenment beneficently drew Jews to identify with a larger world beyond the boundaries of Judaism. Anti-Semitism, in rejecting the Jews, acted ambiguously, both strengthening and weakening Jewish ties. Zion, although it has also had divisive effects, drew modern Jews together in support of a common goal. In varying combinations, these three forces compelled Jews to rethink and re-evaluate their Jewish self-definition and the role of Jewishness in their lives. While each of them is linked to particular historical events, none has ceased to be influential (Meyer, 1990, p. 8).

With these perspectives in mind, we can define Jewish identity as *the inner experience of the self in relationship to the religious, political, ethnic, and/or cultural elements of Judaism, the Jewish people, and Israel.* It is the reflection within an individual of this experience as expressed in thought, feelings, and behavior.

HOW IS JEWISH IDENTITY DEVELOPED AND SHAPED?

Because no single explanatory framework provides an exhaustive answer to that question, I propose a multidimensional psychological approach to understanding Jewish identity. Four basic psychological constructs — psychodynamics, function, structure, and development — illuminate different aspects of Jewish identity. Rather than representing discrete components of identity, these four constructs supply us with different lenses, each of which brings one or another element of this multifaceted and ambiguous concept into better focus.

Pyschodynamic Approach

The psychodynamic reconstructive approach analyzes the formative relationships and ethnocultural and religious experiences within the family that shape an individual's Jewish identity. The process of identity formation begins early, "somewhere," as Eric Erikson (1968, p. 23) nicely put it, "in the first meeting of mother [parent] and baby as two persons who can touch and recognize each other." Even in this early "touch" the trained observer can already discern the fingerprints of ethnicity as they inform differential practices of child rearing that leave unmistakable, although largely unconscious, marks on the developing child.

Clinical research confirms what we easily observe — that Jewish parents strongly encourage verbal and intellectual achievement. The expression of pain and anger is particularly valued in Jewish families (Herz and Rosen, 1982). In addition, the Jewish family is generally described as "permissive" and rather democratic in comparison with the families of other ethnic groups. Through these and other aspects of child rearing, a youngster comes to manifest certain characteristics of his or her group. These characteristics tend to be taken for granted, until they are thrown into relief

through encounters with non-Jewish "others" at school, through the media, and so forth.

Along with these ethnocultural influences, the psychodynamic approach also interprets the cumulative impact of early experiences that are more overtly associated with Jewish traditional practice. These are embedded in early memories that reflect subtle but critical formative impressions about what it means and feels like to be Jewish.

To get a feel for the significance of such memories, think back to some of your earliest Jewish recollections. Are you active or passive? What is the overall feeling tone associated with the memory? Are you alone? Which and how many senses are involved? What are your first memories of the Holocaust? Of Israel? What are your happiest and unhappiest Jewish memories? Do your memories include implicit comparisons between Jews and others? How do your early Jewish memories make you feel about yourself and about being Jewish? In assessing the impact of early experience on Jewish identity formation, it is useful to consider three broad themes: the presence of early feelings of collective vulnerability, the nature of the role played by parents as transmitters of Jewish identity, and where experiences tend to cluster on a continuum ranging from mastery and competence to shame and doubt.

The dominant Jewish concerns of parents color the general emotional atmosphere in which a child's identity develops. In view of Jewish history, however, this atmosphere is bound to include not only sunshine, but some rather threatening clouds as well. For example, research has found (Cohen, 1991, p. 57) that when a representative sample of Jewish adults was asked if they felt proud to be Jewish, 96% agreed, and 66% agreed strongly. The same study also discovered something rather striking about the relative significance that adults attribute to various Jewish symbols and concepts in their sense of being Jewish. The most important symbols were as follows (with percentages indicating those saying an item was either extremely or very important): the Holocaust, 85%; Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, 79%; American anti-Semitism, 77%; the Torah, 76%; Israel, 67%; and the Sabbath, 45% (Cohen, 1991, p. 65). Indeed, the symbolic importance of anti-Semitism is so widespread that it is one of the few measures that cuts equally across religious denomination or level of affiliation. Hence, together with transmitting to their children a sense of pride in being Jewish, parents are also likely to create a link, albeit not always intentionally, between Jewishness and collective vulnerability.

In societies with limited possibilities for assimilation, a sense of collective vulnerability may augment feelings of group solidarity. In a truly open society, the same message often has the opposite effect, weakening the younger generation's ties to a group that perceives itself as vulnerable. These dynamics bring to mind Salo Baron's (1960) insightful warning against inculcating what he called a "lachrymose view of Jewish history," a view that he felt to be both historically unjustified and psychologically bound to erode, rather than strengthen Jewish identity.

The next important issue involves the way in which an individual recalls the role played by parents in the process of identity building. Were parents serious for example, about the holidays they observed, or did they mockingly comply with certain minimal expectations of their own parents? Did parents convey deeply held convictions of why Jewish tradition was worth passing down and learning about? Or was Jewish education simply a painfully protracted but meaningless rite of passage ambivalently inflicted by one generation on the next?

Children easily detect parental ambivalence, and it immeasurably confuses their own emerging Jewish identity. Vast numbers of Jewish parents say that "being Jewish" is important — maybe even enough so to learn about in Hebrew or Sunday School — but not sufficiently valuable to regularly bring into the home. The child

who only tasted challah or hamentashen in the classroom or learned a kiddush in school never heard at home has probably developed a bad case of cognitive dissonance, rather than a strong Jewish identity. And the easiest way to reduce the dissonance is to devalue what has been taught at school. It should come as no surprise that these familiar dynamics mark Jewish identity as a chronic battlefield. Mixed parental messages make for painful Jewish memories.

The impact of competence and the sense of mastery upon identity development is rather straightforward. Feeling that one is good at some activity, from baseball or reading or math, to reading Hebrew or interpreting Bible stories, influences the extent to which it becomes a significant component of one's emerging self-definition. Hence, the early and frequent opportunity to see oneself shine in a Jewish context and to see that gleam reflected in one's parents' eyes both adds dramatically to the core of positive Jewish memories and to the motivation for seeking out subsequent achievements and rewards. Similarly, the early taste of failure or the absence of an affirming parental echo dims the prospect for further efforts in an arena already shrouded with shame and doubt. In sum, a critical mass of affirming memories, messages, and experiences sustains the core of positive Jewish identity and sets the stage for openness later in life to an array of encounters around which it will further develop.

It is important to bear in mind that, although an individual's early Jewish experience sheds a great deal of light on the process of identity formation, these experiences (and how they are remembered) are also shaped by other dimensions of the parent-child relationship independent of those specifically involving Jewish content. Jewish identity therefore can easily become an arena for expressing or displacing a wide variety of difficulties and conflicts ranging from low self-esteem and sibling rivalry to struggles with parents over power and autonomy. For instance, quite apart from the matter of reinforcement at home, the child's need to fight about Hebrew school can derive from low self-esteem that creates excessive sensitivity to peer pressure according to which the slightest hint of enjoying Hebrew school sets one apart from the peer group. And we all know families in which an adolescent's drive for individuation leads to an apparent rejection of Jewish identification.

Even parents who take their Jewishness and that of their children with the greatest seriousness cannot be assured that it will not become an arena of conflict. Indeed, precisely because of its special importance to parents, Jewish identity can become the battleground for struggles that in reality are rooted in other concerns. The good news is that Jewish identity can also be an arena through which to heal some of these old wounds. For an insecure or temperamental child, long and careful preparation for the Bar or Bat Mitzvah, particularly if it involves a dedicated parent, can raise self-esteem, linking the sense of mastery with Jewish practice, while strengthening a bond between parent and child that will better endure the inevitable storms of adolescence. Later, when those storms have begun to subside, the opportunity to come back home for a seder can provide a safe channel to begin the process of reconnecting with family at a stage of development when other opportunities might still feel too threatening. Either way, the psychodynamic approach reminds us that Jewish identity cannot be understood without ongoing reference to the family matrix in which the lives of Jewish children unfold.

Functional Approach

A statement by Daniel Bell (as quoted in Novak, 1980, p. 775) offers a useful orientation to the functional analysis of Jewish identity: "Cultural systems are variant solutions to fundamental and common human perplexities, such as birth, suffering, love, moral consciousness and death." The list could easily be lengthened to include the

need for ritual, role models, ideals, for a sense of roots and community, political empowerment, etc.

From the perspective of Jewish identity, the question is how much the Jewish ethnoreligious and cultural system contributes to meeting one's basic needs. The more these needs are satisfied by distinctively Jewish sources, the more one's Jewish identity is strengthened. Conversely, an individual with a weak Jewish identity is unlikely to perceive the Jewish world as an important resource and will more likely turn to other sources. This will, in turn, only further reduce the salience of his or her Jewish identity.

Although the functional approach sheds some light on the development of Jewish identity of young children, it is particularly useful for understanding adults whose Jewish identities are as yet rather weak. Such individuals "feel Jewish," but those feelings have not yet led to a life of meaningful Jewish engagement, nor do they occupy a particularly prominent place in their overall self-definition. These are the potential "customers" of traditional Jewish institutions, as well as a myriad of programs geared to enhance Jewish identity. Sooner or later, they will experience one of Bell's inevitable fundamental human perplexities, and in seeking out meaningful solutions, they may well turn to the Jewish ethnocultural or religious world. Given the right experiences, their Jewish identity can grow dramatically. Providers or gatekeepers to the Jewish world of resources — lay people and professionals — clearly have a vital role to play in these potentially identity-enhancing encounters.

The functional perspective, with the notion of a critical encounter (or series of encounters) between customer/seekers and provider/gatekeepers, highlights two basic issues: (1) the importance of creating an atmosphere that inspires a sense of confidence and security and (2) a nonjudgmental response to the customer/seeker's expressed needs. Although very obvious, providing that atmosphere and response is much more difficult than it would appear. Just as the dominant concerns of parents inevitably color the emotional atmosphere in the home, the concerns of those working in our Jewish institutions — teachers, rabbis, outreach workers, or volunteers — influence their encounters with seekers. Ironically, among the most relevant of such concerns is the provider's level of anxiety concerning the issue of Jewish continuity itself. Many of those most deeply committed to this issue describe a community that is either in the midst of a "raging plague" or a "silent holocaust," in the process of committing "collective suicide," or on the verge of becoming an "endangered species." The near panic accompanying such declarations is only matched by the certainty that the speaker's solutions are the only ones that can succeed, that to do anything less or different is to fiddle while Rome burns. In discussions about programs to promote Jewish identity one hears much about "hooking" people or "plugging" them in and relatively little about exploring and responding to the needs expressed by customer/seekers. These are exactly the anxieties and attitudes that in effect close rather than open the door with a potential new congregant or an individual who has dropped in for an adult education lecture on contemporary American Jewry. The "customer" who may have just moved into town and tentatively sought a connection with the Jewish community has instead received an invitation to climb aboard a sinking ship — a ship that is sure to go under unless he or she jumps on immediately. A peculiar invitation to say the least! The fearful desperation of the Jewish community's current rhetoric about continuity may not change, but those working as providers and gatekeepers to the Jewish world cannot afford to let it frighten away the very people we seek to reach.

It is also important to recognize the significance of a particular gap between the kind of seeker described above and the typical gatekeeper. In contrast to the seeker, most gatekeepers in Jewish settings have come to terms with the elements of com-

mandment inherent in Judaism and already feel a high degree of responsibility for the Jewish people's future. These fundamental differences can make for a difficult encounter. For example, in a collection of essays on the philosophy of Jewish identity, Zeemach (1993) implies that unaffiliated Jews must be confronted with the "duty of kinship. We are in immediate proximity to a culture in danger of imminent drowning. History defines the parameter within which freedom of the individual is limited by ethical obligations; we are not free not to right those wrongs that history has put in our lap" (p. 127). Alas, however forceful, arguments of this sort rarely persuade those who are not already convinced. To the contrary, they turn them off. By contrast, Putnam's (1993, p. 115) recommendation can help create a mindset for practitioners that is far more likely to result in a positive encounter: "There is something in Judaism that is spiritually enriching, something such that if a Jew rejects or ignores it, he or she is the loser, and not the Jewish people." Although there is no need in these encounters to dwell on what an individual may lose by not becoming involved Jewishly, the second approach crucially shifts the emphasis from the concerns of the gatekeeper/provider to those of the customer/seeker. For most marginally identified Jews, the sense of commandment and collective responsibility can only develop after they have discovered that the Jewish world indeed has something enriching to offer.

The challenge is to ensure that Jewish ethnoreligious and cultural resources are experienced as attractive and relevant to an individual's needs. Gatekeepers to the world of Jewish resources must understand the importance of flexibility, warmth, and acceptance. Especially for those who have intentionally stayed away, coming back home may not be easy. Guilt trips at the front door or lectures about duty to a community at risk will be of little interest to the Jew for whom the sense of commandment, or even of Jewish community, remains remote.

Structural Approach

From here we move on to the structural approach, which assesses various formal characteristics of an individual's Jewish identity. Jewish identity can range on a continuum from the diffuse to the highly articulated. For example, to the extent that a parent's Jewish identity constitutes a diffuse conglomeration of emotions, memories, and impressions, that parent may have difficulty helping a child develop a coherent sense of Jewish self. A diffuse sense of identity may be powerful, but it is difficult to hand down, because it provides a weak basis for communicating basic answers to the deeper questions about what it means to be Jewish.

Another critical structural variable involves the prominence of Jewish identity within the hierarchy of an individual's subidentities. To understand this concept, try ranking in order of importance the following three components of your identity: American, Jew, and human being. Next, consider the relationship among these and other facets (parent, spouse, professional, etc.) of your identity. Do they conflict or enrich one another? Is your Jewish identity integrated with other elements of who you are, or is your sense of Jewishness generally compartmentalized — experienced only at specific times, places, or occasions (Kelman, 1976)?

In view of the American Jewish community's concern with continuity, at this juncture the question of structural conflict between components of identity is particularly relevant. The challenge of continuity may well precipitate a level of conflict between Jewish and American identity that is alien to most Jews. Looking back to the 1950s, Will Herberg's (1955) astute and rather optimistic analysis suggested that for most Americans religious identity was primarily an expression of American values — the brotherhood of humanity, equality, human dignity, and so forth. Religious and American identity harmonized so well because religion had become a central pillar of what Herberg called "the American way of

life. Not to be — that is not to identify oneself and be identified as either a Protestant, Catholic, or a Jew is somehow not to be an American" (p. 255).

This harmonious relationship was strengthened by the evolution of civil Judaism based on a rich array of potent symbols, including the Holocaust, anti-Semitism, and Israel (Woocher, 1986). At the heart of civil Judaism lay the faith that American Jewry could not only survive but could also flourish in "American society without disabilities, just as Israel seeks to be a 'nation like all the nations' at the same time as it remains a singular Jewish State" (p. 101). There was therefore no need to choose between survival and integration because the two mutually reinforced one another.

As both Herberg and Woocher suspected, these foundations for Jewish identity could not, over the long term, provide sufficiently compelling answers to the question, "Why continue to be Jewish?" Both recognized the weakness of building Jewish identity on values and practices that were not more closely rooted in a more serious expression of Jewish religious practice. The alarming intermarriage rates of the 1980s have begun to bring to the surface what Charles Liebman (1973) presciently described as a latent or repressed conflict between Jewish and American identity. As Liebman starkly put it, "The American Jew is torn [unconsciously] 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" (p. vi). Evidence of a greater capacity to acknowledge this conflict is reflected not only by more discussion of it today but also by hints of reassessments of long-held communal positions: a growing willingness to consider day school as one of the most viable approaches to building Jewish identity; increased funding by federations of day schools; and, at least among neoconservatives, some Orthodox, and other serious Jews, a desire to stem the tide of secularism in America — which they perceive as ultimately inimical to Jewish interests — by lowering the wall between church and state. Although it is far too soon to predict how these structural conflicts will be resolved or even how widespread and deep they will become, it is clear that the nature of the relationship between Jewish and American identity has returned to the Jewish agenda. How this conflict develops will exert a major influence on Jewish identity for successive generations.

Developmental Approach

The developmental perspective analyzes the changing nature of Jewish identity over the life cycle. The psychodynamic, functional, and structural issues shift in response to specific challenges and tasks at different stages of life. In childhood, Jewish identity tends to be diffuse and is sustained by the child's wishes to imitate parents and, in the process, to be loved for identifying with them. During adolescence, struggles over Jewish practice or interdating may express a teenager's need to defy parental authority and may signify a struggle that ultimately serves mature separation and continued individuation. Later, a more articulated Jewish identity can become a relatively self-sustaining core element of an individual's self-definition. Compare the nature of your Jewish identity now and 20 years ago, and you will readily understand the importance of a developmental approach.

The developmental perspective reminds us that Jewish identity can and should continue to grow throughout life. Yet, it also highlights the fact that in the course of normal development healthy growth in one stage facilitates healthy growth in subsequent stages, just as normal childhood may not guarantee, but lays the foundation for normal adulthood. Examples of discontinuity are certainly available: the child from an assimilated home may become a *baalai tshuva* (a newly observant Jew), but these are exceptions, not the rule. From a practical point of view, therefore, the developmental perspective would argue strongly for concentrating resources on building Jewish identity in childhood and adolescence. Fos-

tering the development of a strong sense of Jewish identity early on will maximize openness to subsequent interventions and will enhance their impact. Among other things this approach requires giving parents the tools and the motivation they need to become empowered transmitters of Jewish identity, rather than the missing link in this process.

CONCLUSION

Strengthening Jewish identity is a laudable endeavor *l'shma* (for its own sake), a better end than a means. To view Jewish identity as an inoculation in the community's fight against intermarriage is both to fundamentally misunderstand the concept and to begin a vital undertaking with the wrong spirit and expectations. Jewish identity is not an "achievement," accomplished at a fixed point in time and then simply carried along unchanged from one period of life to the next. Neither is it a layer of armor that, once worn, will ever protect against "foreign entanglements."

As professionals, volunteers, parents, and communal leaders ponder how to strengthen Jewish identity, we might keep in mind an insight from an admittedly remote source — the early 19th-century French poet and diplomat, Chateaubriand: "Every man carries within himself a world made up of all that he has seen and loved; and it is to this world that he returns, incessantly, though he may pass through, and seem to inhabit, a world quite foreign to it."

Building Jewish identity requires exposing Jews to the riches of our ethnocultural and religious world, and doing it in such a way so that world is not just seen, but loved.

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