

**Response to Charles S. Liebman
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I'd like to begin by expressing my deep appreciation for several selected contributions by Charles S. Liebman, over the years, that I have found especially useful and influential in my own scholarship and, I know, beneficial to that of many others in our profession.

First, I cite the notion, elaborated in *The Ambivalent American Jew*, that modern American integration and Jewish survival are in tension, if not, as Liebman seems to argue deeply incompatible.

Second, and following upon this notion, is the Liebman's admonition that social science research on American Jews needs to focus, ultimately, upon questions of integration and survival, and such related topics as acculturation, assimilation, persistence, innovation, community, identity, and social structural distinctiveness.

Third, is his arresting observation that American Jewish attachment to Israel is far from a given, an observation he made repeatedly even in the heyday of American Jewish pro-Israel mobilization in the late 1960s and 1970s. Perhaps only in the 1990s did we generally become aware of the prescience of his observations.

Fourth, I cite Charles' essentialist conception of Judaism, Jewishness, and Jewish identity, one that, given the current intellectual climate, I find remarkably persuasive. As he has written and spoken repeatedly, Judaism isn't anything Jews say that it is. Change, interpretation, and innovation are inevitable and even healthy. But such changes need to be judged against a standard of long-standing cultural elements that connect contemporary Jewish understandings and constructs with its predecessors, its contemporaneous counterparts in other places and societies, and presumably with the Jewish future as well.

Here I must note how closely Liebman's thinking corresponds with that of Marshall Sklare. Sklare's *Jewish Identity on the Suburban Frontier* (of which Joseph Greenblum was co-author) is replete with such remarks as:

“Observance of the *mitzvot* is pleasing to God.”

“The synagogue has always occupied a central position in the Jewish community.”

“The importance of the [Jewish] organization derives from the contribution it makes to Jewish survival.”

“The Jewish friendship group can work indirectly but nevertheless effectively to preserve group identity.”

For Sklare as for Liebman, the essence of Judaism and the survival of Jewishness are inextricably intertwined with and dependent upon the performance of certain concrete, normative and authentic Jewish behaviors. These include observing rituals, involvement in a synagogue, belonging to organizations, maintaining Jewish friendship circles, supporting Israel, and, certainly, marrying Jews.

A corollary of this view is that if certain behaviors conform with this essentialist view, other behaviors run contrary to prevailing notions of Judaism and Jewishness. Accordingly, when I once wrote that we need to judge intermarriage by its consequences, which are fateful enough for maintaining Jewish cohesiveness, Charles corrected me by noting the inherent violation of historic Jewish norms and patterns embodied inherently in the very act of marrying out of the group. In-marriage must not be construed instrumentally, or as a convenient social indicator of Jewish vitality, but as part and parcel of the complex of Jewish involvement that has been important for Jewish distinctiveness, both historically and contemporaneously.

Fifth, I cite his contribution in elaborating upon and filling out the notion of Jewish personalism, first briefly mentioned by Sklare when he wrote, "The modern Jew selects from the vast storehouse of the past what is not only objectively possible for him to practice but subjectively possible for him to identify with." Liebman's subsequent elaboration would find further confirmation and expansion in *The Jew Within*, that Arnold Eisen and I just completed.

Sixth, as another personal debt to Charles, I want to thank him for teaching me (and I presume many others in this room) of the value of systematic and theoretically informed use of observation, anecdote, and insight. Charles has observed that if one's inferences are correct, their evidence should emerge in plain sight, in numerous venues and arenas. For me, working with him on *Two Worlds of Judaism: The Israeli and American Experiences* significantly expanded my conceptual and methodological repertoire, a gift for which I will be forever grateful.

Seventh, I want to praise his courage and dedication to scholarly excellence as demonstrated by his readiness to criticize both trends in Jewish life, and the work of his colleagues. No one has been more critical of our work in print than Charles Liebman. I say this with profound admiration for his thick skin and tough thinking, characteristics that are hard to come by in this ideologically charged, and intimate community of scholars, many of whom have known each other for decades.

And now to the central argument Charles makes in the remarks he has just delivered. Re-framing his thesis, if I may, here are its central points:

1) There is, indeed, an authentic Judaism, one whose key elements connect it with the past, the present, and future. Not all innovations are consistent with that authenticity, although we cannot know for sure which innovations are ultimately consistent or inconsistent. For example, from the perspective of the nineteenth century, one could regard the Zionist movement as innovative; traditional rabbis could argue it was inauthentic and heretical. Thus, some innovations' value emerges only with time, and their putative authenticity is established only after the fact.

2) Contemporary trends in American life and American Jewish life threaten authentic Judaism. Among these are what Wade Clark Roof recently termed (in *Spiritual Marketplace*), religious individualism, and what Robert Putnam (in *Bowling Alone*) declared the decline of community in the United States. This trend is related to the de-institutionalization of American society, the blurring of all sorts of once formidable social boundaries, and the emergence of what Robert Wuthnow terms, "porous institutions" (in *Loose Connections*).

3) In particular, the Jewish community, and most critically its organized leadership, is increasingly given to individualism, voluntarism, and personalism, to the extent that Jewish group distinctiveness, or Jewish ethnicity, is in decline. In broad strokes, the personal, private, and religious features of American Jewish identity seem to be holding their own, while their counterparts—the communal, public, and ethnic dimensions—seem to be in contraction.

4) Social scientists, in their professional roles, have an intellectual and ideological responsibility to Jewish life. Their work, as diverse and rich as it may become, needs ultimately to tackle questions of Jewish survival, or more precisely, the survival of authentic features of Jewishness and Judaism.

Of course, all these thoughts depend ultimately upon an understanding of how we measure, or ought to measure, what has been alternately and imprecisely termed, Jewish identity, Jewish involvement, Jewish vitality, or cognate terms. Liebman continues and elaborates upon a simmering debate within our profession over the social scientific and ideological import of our measures. I'd like to make a small contribution to this conversation with some thoughts on conceptualizing social scientific measures of Jewish identity and related

concepts. I want to suggest that measures of Jewish identity may be classified three ways, namely as:

measures of Jewish authenticity;
measures of Jewish subjectivity; and
measures of Jewish continuity.

Jewish authenticity can embrace an ideologically wide range of ideas, including ritual practice, text study, and a Jewishly informed social justice advocacy. The determination of the boundaries of Jewish authenticity is heavily informed by ideological considerations. However, this determination is not entirely ideological. One can analyze a historic culture and its development and declare that certain innovations so radically depart from their cultural predecessors that they lack any reasonable claim to authenticity and continuity. The actors, of course, may feel otherwise.

Jewish subjectivity refers to the sorts of things rank-and-file Jews define as Jewishly meaningful, be they music, food, comedy, or putative traditions of Jewish intellectualism and philanthropy. If measures of authenticity embody the prescriptive pole of the prescriptive-descriptive debate, measures of Jewish subjectivity embody the descriptive. Part of the role of the social science of contemporary Jewry is to measure compliance with subjectively determined definitions of Jewish identity, even if they radically depart from those used in the past, or those use contemporaneously in other places or by other movements in Jewish life.

Jewish continuity measures, in my mind, are best embraced in the approach offered in the work of Calvin Goldscheider (as in *Jewish Continuity and Change*), one that emphasize the measure of Jewish social structural distinctiveness, the frequency of harmonious intra-group interaction, and the persistence of group cohesiveness. The maintenance of group ties (in-marriage, in-group friendship, neighborhoods, occupational concentration, institutional belonging) will guarantee Jewish continuity, even if (and when) Jews decide to define their being Jewish in ways that some might find innovative, heretical, strange, or inauthentic.

As should by now be clear, I share with Charles, and I am sure with Marshall Sklare, the sense that whatever directions we may take in the direction of exploring Jewish subjectivity and Jewish continuity, we ought not abandon, nor treat lightly the matter of Jewish authenticity. We may differ among ourselves as to what we regard as Jewishly authentic. We may differ over which concrete behaviors express the numerous, but not infinite, authentic models of Judaism. But we cannot allow our fascination with the current turn toward personalism and subjectivity to lead us to ignore the Jewishly

authentic, whatever that may be. And whatever it is, I am sure it contains an emphasis on concrete behavior, connection to the past, a regard for group persistence in the future, and avid attention to collective identity, familism, institutions, community, and peoplehood, in short, the ethnic dimension to Jewish life.

Where Charles and I may differ is over the question of the current conduct of the social science community. I don't believe, and I'm not sure that Charles believes, that current research in our field has so strongly emphasized the subjective to the near-exclusion of the authentic. Nor do I believe, as I think he does, that the agenda, admonitions or aspirations of communal leadership have significantly affected the analysis, conceptualizations, findings, or published scholarly conclusions of the major researchers in our field. The influence of the organized community pales in comparison with other influences: scholarship in cognate fields, personal ideology, and competitiveness and positioning within the field.

And last, we also do not concur on our outlook for American Jewry. For years, Charles has been downbeat on cultural and social trends among the masses of American Jews. For years, I have been upbeat on the political, cultural, and religious productivity of the minority of highly involved Jews. I have long evaluated American Jewish vitality not so much in terms of aggregate measures of Jewish identity, but in terms of its collective achievement in political, religious, and cultural spheres. And here, the record of achievement is prodigious. Politically, American Jews in the latter third of the twentieth century achieved every one of their major goals: bipartisan support for Israel, freedom for Soviet (and other endangered) Jewry, public recognition of the Holocaust, and an end to systematic, institutionalized antisemitic discrimination. In the religious sphere, the Orthodox have become more independent and self-reliant, the Conservative movement more learned and pious, and the Reform movement more traditional; American Jews also pioneered the enormously significant and influential Jewish feminist movement. In the cultural sphere, American Jews have expanded Jewish educational involvement at almost all levels: pre-school; elementary day schools; full-time high schools; university studies; and most recently adult Jewish education. They have also produced an impressive scholarship and array of popular books.

All this leaves me quite convinced of the vitality of American Jewry, and leaves Charles unpersuaded. We have here a debate based on cognitive agreement and value disagreement. But that debate is one in which we can engage at a different time.