

# THE PRESENT STATE OF JEWISH IDENTITY

## IN ISRAEL AND THE UNITED STATES

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THE QUESTION OF JEWISH IDENTITY is a complex one. We are handicapped by the absence of good theoretical and empirical material; which means that we not only lack authoritative answers to questions concerning Jewish identity, we don't even have agreement on the proper questions.

There are those who discuss Jewish identity, like every other question of contemporary Jewish concern, from the background of European Jewish enlightenment and emancipation of the 18th and 19th centuries. Others see it in the context of the general problem of identity which confronts contemporary man. Man, in their view, is perplexed by modern society—a technological, bureaucratic, impersonal society which prescribes a variety of different roles for him and challenges the possibility of any meaningful identity.

Without minimizing the importance of these approaches in increasing our general understanding of the problem of Jewish

identity, I don't think they take us very far. The problem is not so much their highly conjectural nature. Many of the assertions in this essay are no less conjectural. The problem is the broadness of these approaches. To rephrase the metaphor, they hide the trees by focussing on the forest. Jewish scholars, in general, might be better advised to pay more attention to trees and less to the forest. This essay will focus on the trees. But this is an intellectual limitation which must be acknowledged.

The empirical assertions in this essay are based primarily on my own observations. Some of these observations are confirmed in the best empirical study of Israeli Jewish identity, Simon Herman's *Israelis and Jews: Continuity of an Identity*<sup>1</sup> as well as in Herman's forthcoming study on the social psychology of Jewish identity. I utilize data from my own forthcoming study of civil religion in Israel which is based in part on a random sample of adult Israeli Jews conducted in December, 1975.<sup>2</sup> My observations con-

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<sup>1</sup> Simon Herman, *Israelis and Jews: Continuity of an Identity* (New York City: Random House, 1970; co-published with the Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia).

<sup>2</sup> The study was made possible by a grant from the Ford Foundation.

form, in part, to some of the empirical studies of American Jews. But I do not pretend that most of what I have to say is grounded in solid empirical findings. Most of my observations have not been tested empirically. Indeed, some of the things I have to say may elude empirical confirmation. A few observations are inconsistent with my own previous contribution to the subject<sup>3</sup> and with the findings of Marshall Sklare in one of the very best studies of Jewish identity in the United States.<sup>4</sup> This troubles me less than a disagreement with Sklare ordinarily would since his study confines itself to a very special group of American Jews.

A second caveat is in order. I am necessarily speaking in generalities. When I talk about Jews in Israel or in the United States I cannot include all Jews. The problem is twofold. First, my statements about Jews are not accurate for every individual who falls into the category "Jew", or in talking about sub-groups of Jews, for every member of the sub-group. Secondly, I have a tendency, like every other writer who discusses a large group of people, to have a certain type in mind who represents a prototype of the whole. The kind of Jew to whom I refer, unless otherwise noted, is of East European origin. If he lives in the United States he is second or third generation American and if he lives in Israel he arrived there by the early 1950's. He is not rigorously observant of traditional

Jewish law. In other words, if he lives in Israel he would not call himself or be called by others a *dati* (religious) although he may identify himself as a traditional Jew, and if he lives in the United States he would not be described as an orthodox Jew.

### Basic Questions of Jewish Identity

There are two questions which I take to be central to the subject of Jewish identity. First of all, how does one define Judaism? What does one mean when one says, "I am a Jew"? What is the subject's understanding of Judaism? To borrow a term from Arnold Dashefsky, this is the question of Jewish self conception.<sup>5</sup> It would be interesting and useful to pose this at the communal as well as the individual level. In other words, how does the activity of the Jewish community or of Jewish organizations express perceptions of what it means to be Jewish? However, I confine myself in this essay to the question of the self conception of the individual Jew.

The second question of central importance is: how intense is the individual's sense of Jewish identity? How important is Judaism to him? What part does the individual's Jewish identity play in his total self-identity?

The two questions are related but not identical. Obviously if one person defines Judaism as a pattern of consumptive preferences, in other words, he conceives of himself as a Jew because he prefers certain kinds of foods, or a certain type of home, or certain social amenities, and another

<sup>3</sup> Charles S. Liebman, "American Jewry: Identity and Affiliation," David Sidorsky (ed.), *The Future of the Jewish Community in America* (New York City: Basic Books, 1973).

<sup>4</sup> Marshall Sklare and Joseph Greenblum, *Jewish Identity on the Suburban Frontier* (New York City: Basic Books, 1967).

<sup>5</sup> Arnold Dashefsky, "Being Jewish: An Approach to Conceptualization and Operationalization," *Gratz College Anniversary Volume* (Philadelphia: Gratz College, 1970), pp. 35-46.

person conceives of Judaism as encompassing his historical, national, ethnic, religious, political, social and ethical self-identity, then it stands to reason that the former will be less intensely Jewish than the latter. But two Jews may each agree that being Jewish is in essence the identification with a group of common symbols pointing to a relationship with the transcendent, or that being Jewish entails a sense of kinship with those who identify themselves as Jews, but to one this is a matter of intense concern and involvement whereas for the other it is a matter of relative indifference. In addition, as our phrasing of the second question suggests, the intensity of one's Jewish identity is also a function of one's other identities and the amount of life space which they occupy. Intense involvement in and the derivation of a sense of personal meaning from Jewishly neutral activity and associations, whether they are of an occupational, political, social or any other nature probably means a diminution of one's Jewish identity regardless of what one's conception of Judaism might be.

### **Jewish Identity in Israel**

Our discussion will focus on the non-*datiim* (plural of *dati*). They constitute the vast majority of the population. Nevertheless, roughly 20 percent of the population do define themselves as *dati* and despite their relative social isolation they have, in recent years, played an increasingly important role in Israeli public life, exercising an influence on many non-*datiim*. Various sample surveys have asked Israelis to identify themselves as religious (*dati*), traditional (*masorati*) or non-religious (non-*dati*) sometimes labeled secular (*chiloni*). As a general rule these sample surveys

have found that somewhat less than 20 percent of the population define themselves as *dati*, about 40 percent as traditional and about the same proportion as non-*dati*.<sup>6</sup>

The category "traditional" includes a variety of types, from those who observe most religious practices to those who observe very little. That which distinguishes the traditionalists from the *datiim* is the fact that the former do not perceive their observance of Jewish law as fulfilling God's commands. The non-*datiim* in turn, are not distinguishable from the traditionalists by complete lack of observance. Indeed, a recent survey showed that 38 percent of the non-*datiim* reported that they attend a synagogue on the High Holy days, 43 percent reported they kept a kosher home, 17 percent that they observed the laws of kashrut outside the home and 80 percent that they celebrated the Sabbath in some way. Instead, traditionalists and non-*datiim* are distinguishable from one another by the rigor with which the traditionalists observe whatever it is they do observe, and the fact that their observance is not simply a matter of personal preference or family style but is related to a more general conception of how a Jew ought to behave.

The Israeli Jews upon whom we choose to focus are, by and large, conscious of

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<sup>6</sup> Whereas *dati* literally means "religious," in Israel it connotes a Jew who observes the religious commandments. Since the term "religious" means something else to American Jews, we will use the Hebrew term *dati* to denote an observant Israeli Jew. The American counterpart of the Israeli *dati* is an Orthodox Jew although there are some American Jews who define themselves as Conservative rather than Orthodox but are quite observant of Jewish law and would, were they to be in Israel, fall into the category *dati*.

what religious observance is, observe at least some of the religious commands but don't view the religious commandments as personally binding or lack of observance as "sin" in the same way as is characteristic of the *datiim*. Ultimately, the distinction rests on the different conception that each group has of God and ritual. The vast majority of non-*dati* Israelis do affirm a relationship between Judaism and religion. But unlike the *datiim*, religion doesn't have an intense personal meaning for them. On the contrary, their religious identity is increasingly expressed in the public domain, and its meaning is increasingly associated with public rather than private life.

The day has passed when Zionism was a surrogate for religion. The radical secularists who argued that religious symbols had to be transformed and transvalued to serve the needs of the Jewish people and the Jewish State no longer dominate the cultural and political life of the society. The voice of those who would sever all connection between contemporary Judaism and the religious tradition of the past has certainly been silenced. In view of the fact, therefore, that 93 percent of the adult Jewish population, according to a survey conducted in December of 1975 feel that Israel must be a Jewish state it follows that the majority of Israelis favor some reflection of the religious tradition in Israel's public life. Indeed, as many as 77 percent feel that there ought to be some relationship between religion and State in Israel.

A Jewish identity to the vast majority of Israelis encompasses something besides a religious identity. To most Israelis, religion is an aspect and may even provide a form and expression of Judaism but does not represent its basic content. Most Israelis

conceive of the Jews as a nation. The sense of Jewish nationality which entails the obligations and responsibilities that Jews have toward one another is, for many Israelis, the critical aspect of their Jewish identity. Of all the obligations incumbent upon Israel as a Jewish state, more respondents (83%) affirmed Israel's special obligation to diaspora Jewry, than any other obligation.

There is an increasing tendency for the Israeli identity and Jewish identity of Israelis to overlap and for religious symbols to play an increasingly prominent role in the expression of this identity. Simon Herman, in the study referred to above, has found that the stronger one's sense of Jewish identity the stronger is one's sense of Israeli identity. In part this is the natural outcome of the national sense of crises. There is no question that it is further reinforced by Arab opposition to Israel as a Jewish state and their opposition to a Jewish majority in the Land of Israel. It also helps explain why the more nationalistic and militant elements in the Jewish population have increasingly accepted a religious definition of the Jewish right to the Land and why religious symbols play an increasingly prominent role in their assertions of national identity.

### **Jewish Identity and Israeli Identity**

The past few years have seen a change in Jewish identity among Israelis in a direction that few would have predicted. There were those who at one time believed that Israelis were developing an identity totally divorced from their sense of Jewishness. Whereas, it was felt, Israeli youth in particular, had developed a strong Israeli identity, their Jewish identity was

atrophying. George Friedman's, *The End of the Jewish People*, first published in 1965, is the best example of this type of thinking.<sup>7</sup> Israelis themselves were fearful of the spread of Canaanism, an ideology which was particularly attractive to young intellectuals in the early years of the State. The Canaanites argued that Israelis must seek their cultural and historical roots among the peoples and civilizations which had lived in the Land. The Israeli, they asserted, was not a Jew but the successor to the ancient Semitic, Canaanite and Hebrew cultures. They favored the dissolution of ties to the diaspora and diaspora history. The Canaanites were always a peripheral group with a numerically insignificant set of adherents. But the thrust of their cultural and political program—the dissociation of Israelis from the Jewish tradition and the Jewish people and the substitution of a new Israeli identity was shared, in varying degrees, by many Israeli youth, educators, Army officers, intellectuals and in modified form by Ben Gurion himself. Ben Gurion articulated a Statist ideology. He stressed the biblical as opposed to the diasporic roots of modern Israel and questioned the Zionist, and by implication the Jewish commitment of those who chose to remain in the diaspora rather than come to Israel. Canaanism and Statism converged in an attitude of contempt for the non-Israeli Jew and non-Israeli Jewish culture; an attitude which might have ultimately severed the Israeli Jew from his identity with the diaspora Jew and Israeli culture from Jewish culture.

This tendency is probably endemic to Israel but it no longer dominates any of the institutions of the society. There is no better evidence of its failure than the enormous importance accorded by Israeli society, its schools, the mass media and the army to the holocaust. Israelis view the State as linked emotionally and spiritually to the holocaust. Jewish suffering is seen in repeated opinion polls as the greatest legitimation of Jewish rights to the Land of Israel. The Israeli's perception of the holocaust strengthens his sense of continuity with historical Judaism and reinforces the feeling that Israelis, like the victims of the holocaust, are isolated and beleaguered because they are Jewish. Israelis also see their condition as symbolized in the biblical phrase "a people that dwelleth alone" (*Numbers 23: 9*). The myth (no pejorative meaning is intended in the use of this term) of the Jewish condition seems particularly apt to the present condition of Israel but the biblical symbol also serves to shape Israelis' perception of that condition. The Jewish tradition then is reinforced by Israel's experience, but the tradition also serves to shape the Israelis' perception of their condition and helps them come to terms with it.

Obviously, Israelis also recognize the uniqueness of their condition. They do distinguish, for example, between the condition of the holocaust victims and their own condition. Many Israelis still harbor the feeling that the holocaust victims were too passive. Israelis share a belief that if there had been a State there would not have been a holocaust. But even the distinctions, in this case, contribute to a sense of historical continuity.

What has been taking place among Is-

<sup>7</sup> George Friedman, *The End of the Jewish People?* (New York: Doubleday and Co. 1967).

raelis in the last few years is, as we suggested, an increasing overlap in their Israeli and Jewish identity. But whereas religious symbols play an increasingly important role in Israeli life they point to the public or collective life of the Jewish nation in Israel. Judaism has no great meaning in the private life of the individual in his spiritual and personal self-definition or in its consequences for his behavior. There is no evidence, for example, that the level of religious observance has increased, that more people refrain from violating the Sabbath or eating bread on Passover, or that more people pray. But there is evidence of a growing respect for the religious tradition and an increased stress on the inter-relationship between Israel and the diaspora. In a forthcoming study on the social psychology of Jewish identity Simon Herman reports on a survey of Israeli high school youth in which he sought to compare the relative potency of Israeliness and Jewishness. In 1965 and 1974 he asked students to mark their position on an Israeli-Jewish scale ranged from one to seven where the closer the student is to one the more Israeli he feels himself and the closer to the number seven—the more Jewish. In 1965 the mean position of the entire sample was 3.5—, in other words, on the Israeli side. In 1974 it shifted to 4.2 or just beyond the midpoint (4.0) and to the Jewish side. Among those students who defined themselves as *dati* the shift was from 5.1 to 5.4, among those who defined themselves as traditionalists from 3.6 to 4.4 and among those who defined themselves as non-*dati* from 2.6 to 3.1. Herman's new data also support his earlier finding that Jewish and Israeli identities are mutually reinforcing. Where "they are separated and compart-

mentalized, the result is a weaker Jewishness and a less rooted Israeliness".<sup>8</sup> Hence, as might be expected, those who define themselves as religious have both a stronger Israeli and a stronger Jewish identity than those who define themselves as non-religious. The decline of Jewish identity from the older to the younger generation, which Herman and others have noted, is not unrelated to and bodes poorly for the future of Israeli identity. Indeed, to the extent that an identity crisis exists in Israel today it is a crisis of Israeli, not Jewish identity; the secular elite looks to the Jewish tradition to reinforce loyalty and commitment to the State.

### The Intensity of Jewish Identity in Israel

The fusion of Israeli and Jewish identity (a fusion that is not complete nor may it ever necessarily be complete) means that an Israeli identity is not the same as national identities are to the citizens of European countries, and being Jewish is different to Israeli than to diaspora Jews.

There are contrary trends which find their most dramatic expression within the non-religious kibbutzim. One does find young people who look to religion and the Jewish tradition to help them find personal meaning, to find guidance in their personal lives, to help them relate to the ultimate conditions of their existence. Not all non-*dati* Israelis have abandoned the spiritual quest or the hope of finding answers in Judaism. But for the majority, Judaism increasingly touches only the public aspects of their lives.

Our identity determines our relationship to others (who I am tells me who the "other"

<sup>8</sup> Herman, *op. cit.*

is and hence what my relationship ought to be with him) but our relationship to others also contributes to our identity (how others behave towards me defines how others see me which in turn helps determine how I see myself). The outstanding characteristic of Jewish identity in Israel is that precisely because the vast majority of Jews mix only with other Jews and they do constitute 85 percent of the society, their Jewish identity is taken very matter-of-factly. Israeli Jews cannot conceive of themselves as anything other than Jews. As one Israeli youth speaking of herself and her friends once said to me, "my Jewish identity is as much a part of me as my name—but really of no greater consequence." This 22 year old girl was responding to her experiences with American Jewish youth in Israel whose Jewish concern and commitment quite overwhelmed her. She knew she was Jewish. She would not think of denying her Jewish identity but most significantly she never really thought about her Jewishness. This is, I believe, characteristic of most Israeli born Jews.

Israelis sometimes use the expression "this Jew" as synonymous not only with "Israeli" but with "man". The expression entered the Hebrew vocabulary from the Yiddish. But in East Europe it had a specific connotation—"one of us." In Israel it loses all its emotional overtones. In other words, the term "Jew" is increasingly devoid of expressive symbolic meaning which it still possesses in the diaspora. This phenomenon is to be expected in a State where being Jewish is the natural state of affairs. But the process leads to trivialization of one's Jewishness. No doubt many of Israel's founders would have been pleased

by this. It does represent a normalization of Judaism for which some early Zionist leaders devoutly wished. It is significant therefore, that this is a cause of concern to many Israelis, particularly its political and educational leaders.

The overlap between Jewish and Israeli identity does, however, mean that there is an increasing self-consciousness about being Jewish. Even non-*datim* are interested in Jewish history and in learning more about Judaism and they do, as we noted, feel a sense of kinship with other Jews.

Our discussion has not distinguished among Israelis by socio-demographic groups. Herman has found that youth have a less intense Jewish identity than their parents. My impression is that occupation, education and income are not critical factors which distinguish Israelis in the intensity of their Jewish identity. Ethnic origin, (Ashkenazi or Oriental) is a critical factor. Although there is an absence of empirical data, many Israeli educators are of the opinion that there has been a serious disintegration in both the Jewish and Israeli identity of Oriental Jews. This may yet be stabilized. But at the present time it is of serious concern to Israelis.

### **Jewish Identity in the United States**

Most American Jews, under the impact of the American environment, conceive of Judaism primarily in religious terms. This was less true at some times than at others. It is less true today than 20 years ago, but by and large most American Jews and most non-Jews think of Judaism as a religion, distinct from but structurally comparable to Catholicism and Protestantism. Indeed, until very recently, it was only by defining themselves as a religion that Jews could

legitimate their separate social and cultural existence.

The assertion that the self-conception of American Jews is primarily of Judaism as a religion requires some qualification. First of all, this is not true of all Jews. There have always been those who defined their Jewish identity in cultural, ethnic and even national terms. It is true that they represent a distinct minority of American Jews, but contrary to what one might have suspected twenty years ago, there is no evidence that they are disappearing. Indeed, in the last decade, ethnic distinctiveness has been legitimized in the United States largely through the struggles of the Blacks. This has, in turn, legitimated an ethnic Jewish identity. How widespread this is, how consequential it is, or how permanent it is, remains to be seen.

Secondly, we must be very careful in explicating what Jews mean by a religious self-conception. Paradoxically, the religious definition tends to be more inclusive than an ethnic or cultural one. Those Jews who define themselves as something other than religious tend to do so because they are *not* religious; Jews whose self-conception is religious do not exclude cultural, ethnic or even national aspects from their self-conception. This was not true in the past. Reform Judaism in the United States was at one time rather exclusivistic in defining the meaning of Judaism. But this is no longer true nor has it been the case for the past forty years and longer.

The greater the religious commitment of the Jew (measured by his religious observance) the higher he tends to score on such measures of Jewish identity as Zionism, traditional belief, Jewish organizational affiliation and Jewish education. The only

measure of Jewish identity that does not correlate well with traditional observance is Jewish associationalism—the number of close Jewish friends one has or the frequency of visiting Jews as compared to non-Jews.<sup>9</sup>

It is rather difficult to specify what precisely the American Jew means when he calls himself or thinks of himself as a religious Jew. Only about half of all American Jews are even affiliated with a synagogue. To most American Jews synagogue affiliation symbolizes a minimal act of religious identification. Less than a quarter of all American Jews participate regularly in synagogue services, and beyond some form of Passover and Channukah celebration, which the vast majority of American Jews observe, only about half of them have some regular pattern of Jewish observance. We do not mean the rigorous pattern of orthodox observance of Jewish law. This probably involves no more than five percent of American Jews. We are talking about any regularized pattern of

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<sup>9</sup> On the correlation of religious identity with other measures of Jewish identity see Sklare and Greenblum, *op. cit.*

The significance of religious commitment for a whole host of other indicators of Jewish identity is documented in almost every empirical study of Jewish identity. A recent study of great interest because of its implications for Jewish education is Arnold Lasker, "What Parents Want from the Jewish Education of their Children," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, LII (Summer, 1976), pp. 393-403. The most detailed study is Bernard Lazerwitz, "Religious Identification and its Ethnic Correlates," *Social Forces*, 52 (Dec. 1973), pp. 204-220. See also Lazerwitz' other studies cited there and his forthcoming study of Jewish identity based on the National Jewish Population Study.



observance such as candle lighting on Friday evening or some pattern of living which recognizes the Sabbath as a distinctive day.

The continued nominal adherence of American Jews to a religious self-conception coupled with their particular behavior patterns suggests that while American Jews may conceive of Judaism as a religion, the content of that religion is the obligation and responsibility that one Jew has for another. Jewish identity seems to mean above all else membership in the Jewish people and a sense of kinship with other Jews. This sense of kinship finds sharpest public expression when Jews are in trouble. Jews find philanthropic and more recently political activity on behalf of other Jews more engaging than any other kind of Jewish activity not only because it is what they do best, not only because it is what they feel most comfortable doing (Jews are not even particularly comfortable pursuing political goals), but rather because this activity is directed toward goals which American Jews consider of primary Jewish importance. They are far more likely to contribute money than to pray or read a Jewish book because, in good measure, helping other Jews by contributing money comes closest to their notion of what Judaism is all about.

Both the holocaust and the creation of Israel have intensified the American Jews' sense of kinship with other Jews because they have reminded them of the special condition and special interests of all Jews. The State of Israel does mean more to American Jews than helping other Jews in distress. But American Jewish assistance and support for Israel certainly does not stem from a sense of national affiliation

or identity. Rather it increasingly represents the content of the Jewish religion. And for the most part, though less true today, it is religion which still provides the nominal façade and legitimation for the Jewish sense of peoplehood and the political, philanthropic and organizational activity which is the concomitant of this sense of peoplehood.

While it would be misleading to overestimate the significance of the American Jewish self-conception of Judaism as a religion, it does have some significance. It has many implications for Jewish organizational life that are beyond the purview of this study. With respect to the question of Jewish identity it does mean that American Jews take "religion" *per se* seriously. The non-observant American Jew is far more likely to seek personal and spiritual meaning in religion than is his Israeli counterpart. In fact, he is far more likely to view his own lack of religious observance with a sense of guilt than is true of the non-observant Israeli. Furthermore, it is significant that activity on behalf of other Jews has attracted many younger activists into a closer identification with Judaism, which leads to a more serious consideration of what meaning, if any, Judaism can have in their personal lives. In other words, fund raising and political action which in the abstract appear to be highly instrumental, goal oriented activities, when conducted on behalf of Jewish causes, are not only the expression of deeply held emotional and expressive commitments, but lead the activist to the search for spiritual and personal meaning in Judaism. This has certainly been the experience of many young leadership groups involved in fund raising for Israel and local Jewish needs.

### The Intensity of Jewish Identity in America

How important a role does their Jewish identity play in the self-identity of American Jews? One might expect that since the typical American Jew can, with relative ease abandon his Jewish identity, those who continue to identify as Jews would be more self-consciously Jewish than the typical Israeli Jew. Through a process of self-selection, by having had to wrestle with the choice of identity one might expect the American Jew to sense his Jewish identity more intensely than the Israeli. This, one might expect, would be reinforced by the minority status of the Jew which should serve as a continual reminder of his Jewishness.

Although there is much truth in the foregoing, and it is applicable to many Jews, matters are not quite so simple. On the one hand, one is impressed in seeing so many young Jews, whose Jewish identity is a central fact of their lives. But in the absence of reliable data the observer must ask himself if he really isn't more impressed by the presence of such youth rather than their absolute number. The number of American Jews who remain rather casual about their Jewishness runs into the millions. In the absence of antisemitism or an overtly Christian presence in public life, Jews can continue identifying as Jews out of familial loyalty, childhood associations, life style preferences or a sense of comfort in the presence of other Jews, without any sense of commitment. Only Israel serves to remind them that Jewish life throughout the world is not uniformly peaceful. The condition of Jews in other countries does not receive enough sustained attention in the American mass media to

provoke a continued awareness of the problematics of being Jewish in other parts of the world.

American Jews can be ranged along a continuum of identity and participation in Jewish life. Daniel Elazar has suggested seven categories into which American Jews may be fitted.<sup>10</sup> He estimates that from five to eight percent of American Jews (300,000–500,000 Jews) can be identified as Integral Jews—those whose Jewishness is a central concern of their lives whether expressed in traditionally religious terms or through intensive involvement in Jewish affairs. For these Jews, “every day is lived by a substantially Jewish rhythm.”<sup>11</sup> He calls the second category Participants and estimates their number at from ten to twelve percent of the American Jewish population (600,000–700,000 Jews). The Participants take part in Jewish life in a regular way, are more than casually active in Jewish affairs but their “rhythm of life is essentially that of the larger society.”<sup>12</sup> Judaism to them is a major avocational interest.

Elazar calls the third category Associated Jews and estimates their number at roughly two million or 30 to 35 percent of the American Jewish population. These are Jews who are affiliated but not active in synagogues or mass membership organizations like Hadassah or B'nai B'rith. They utilize the synagogue for Jewish rites of passage or High Holy day services but have no sustained interest in synagogue life.

<sup>10</sup> Daniel J. Elazar, *Community and Polity: The Organizational Dynamics of American Jewry* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1976).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

Their membership “reflects primarily private social interests rather than a concern for the public purposes of Jewish life.”<sup>13</sup>

His fourth category, Contributors and Consumers number 25 to 30 percent or between 1.5 and 1.8 million Jews. They give money to Jewish causes from time to time and may periodically utilize the services of a synagogue for a marriage or a barmitzva of their children or for burial. They identify as Jews but their communal association is minimal.

Some 15 percent or roughly 900,000 Jews fall into the category of Peripherals. They identify as Jews but are totally uninvolved in Jewish life. Elazar also estimates that less than five percent of the Jewish community (roughly 200,000 Jews) are Repudiators—people who deny their Jewishness. This group has declined in number nor are they as hostile as they once were to things Jewish. Finally, he estimates that from five to ten percent of the total estimated Jewish population are Quasi-Jews. These people, mostly intermarried, are “assimilated to a point where the fact of their Jewish birth is incidental in every respect.”<sup>14</sup>

If one wishes to evaluate the intensity of the American Jews’ identity, particularly if one wishes to compare it with the Jewish identity of Israeli Jews one must be clear about the definition of membership in the Jewish community. If we visualize a community of six million American Jews, the general estimate of the total number of American Jews, then it is clear that the majority are marginal or at best peripheral Jews, far more ignorant and indifferent to

Judaism than is true of the vast majority of Israelis. These are Jews by accident of birth. They do not choose to deny their Jewish identity because there is no benefit in the denial or cost in the affirmation of Jewishness. But if we visualize the Jewish community as composed of those Jews who are identified with the community as such, we are in fact talking about those who have chosen to identify as Jews. Among them there is an intensity and seriousness of Jewish commitment which is quite remarkable because it is so very different from the intensity and seriousness with which comparable groups of non-Jews assume their religious or ethnic identity.

The condition of American orthodoxy, the loosely organized community of religiously observant Jews, while comprising only a small minority of American Jews, sheds light on the intensity of Jewish identity in the community at large. The capacity of the orthodox to more or less stabilize the number of their adherents after a long period of attrition, suggests that American environmental pressures need not necessarily destroy Jewish life. The move on the part of the orthodox Jewish community toward stricter, more rigorous observance which has characterized them in the last twenty years despite their growing affluence and secular education suggests that, at least in some respects, Jewish institutions can not only resist but even overcome environmental pressures. Finally, the increased role and status of orthodox Jews within the American Jewish community reflects a recognition by the non-orthodox that intense Jewish commitment is to be admired, not denigrated. While this last point may seem self-evident, this was not the case until the last twenty or thirty years. Until then,

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

American Jews including those active and involved in Jewish life were concerned that they not seem too parochial and provincial. Good Jewish parents worried about broadening their children's horizons and life experiences at the expense of deepening their Jewish perspectives and experiences.

### **Jewish Identity in Israel and America**

We have observed that in both Israel and the United States Jewish self-conceptions contain a mix of religious and ethnic-national elements. But the mix is not the same and even the labels don't mean the same thing to Jews in Israel and the United States. Israelis stress the national element of Jewishness, American Jews stress a religious self-conception with a more recent increase in ethnic feeling. The Israeli national definition implies obligations and responsibilities which American Jews do not accept. But whether the Israeli Jew conceives of his Judaism in primarily national terms or the American Jew in primarily religious or ethnic terms, all acknowledge that an obligation and responsibility for other Jews is a consequence of their identity.

Both sides agree that religion is an important component of Judaism. But the term "religion" means something different to each side. Religion to the Israeli Jew means orthodox Judaism—strict observance of Jewish law. Observance of Jewish law is the base line by which the Israeli measures how "religious" one is. However, because the religious element is a less vital component in the Israeli's Jewish self-conception, he does not feel a sense of Jewish guilt in not being himself religiously observant. American Jews, have a more diffuse standard of religion. Religion means

being a good person and living according to the ethical precepts of Judaism. Now this definition of a religious person conforms to American Protestant notions and it is possible that Jews pay more lip service to this concept than true belief. Furthermore, there is evidence that American Jews increasingly define proper religious behavior as at least a minimal observance of Jewish law. The pendulum has been swinging toward an affirmation of the importance of religious observance in the proper behavior of a Jew but there still remains a vast difference in the Israeli and American Jewish definition of what it means to be a religious Jew.

The chief differences in the meaning of Judaism is not so much in the definition of a religious Jew but in Judaism's role in one's life. As we noted, for most Israelis, Judaism points to the public aspect of their lives whereas for American Jews it points to the private one. To phrase this somewhat differently—the test of Judaism in Israel is what it has to say to the civil aspects of the society. It is conceivable that Israelis might conclude that whereas Judaism has very little to say of political and social significance it does provide a vehicle for personal expression, it does help in confronting problems of ultimate meaning, in relating to questions of "who am I?" "what is my purpose in life," "what is death?" "why do I suffer?" or in expressing the joy and wonderment of life or the awe of the ineffable.

While this is conceivable I find it unlikely. If most Israeli Jews find that Judaism is not an integrating symbol system, cannot provide legitimacy for the social order, has nothing meaningful to say about the use of power or the purposes of the

civil order, they are likely to turn away from a meaningful Jewish identity and their personal spiritual quests will move in other directions. This does not mean that Israeli Jews will no longer call themselves Jews. It does mean, especially in the event of peace in the area, that the Israeli's Jewishness will mean no more than the Anglicanism of the Englishman or the Protestantism of the American.

To many, perhaps to most Jewishly concerned Israelis, Judaism today is seen as facing competition from alternate systems of social order and political values, not from alternate systems of personal meaning. This does not mean that Judaism must necessarily juxtapose itself to alternate social and political systems but it must at least show its contemporary relevance to them.

In the United States Judaism's ultimate test is in the private domain. Although the sense of kinship and peoplehood provides the major focus of Jewish identity that feeling will inevitably atrophy if American Jews feel that Judaism has nothing to say to them at the level of personal meaning. The major Jewish organizations, the local Federations of Jewish Philanthropy in particular, may be the scenes of Jewish action today because of Israel's immediate needs, the concern for Soviet Jews and the necessity for communal institutions to organize political and philanthropic activity. But it is the fate of the synagogue which will determine the ultimate fate of American Judaism because American Jews, unlike

Israeli Jews, may realistically opt out of Judaism. The condition of Israel, or Soviet Jewry, reminds American Jews of their kinship with others because American Jews *choose* to identify themselves as Jews. The current legitimacy of ethnic pluralism in the United States supports the assertion of a distinctive Jewish identity but it would be a mistake to exaggerate the lasting significance of what is more than likely only a passing phase.

The sense of Jewish identity, internalized through familial, peer group and educational experiences depends, in the absence of perceived antisemitism, on the Jew's sense that he shares a universe of meaning with other Jews. In this sense, therefore, American Judaism is in competition with alternative meaning systems which might appeal to American Jews. It is in competition with professional associations, private non-sectarian groups, and threatened by technological society which denies the validity of any total meaning system. The Jewish strategy may be to incorporate alternate meaning systems, to concentrate on specific aspects of the individuals' spiritual needs and withdraw from any claim to providing a total meaning system, or to boldly challenge all competitors, or some combination of the above. But, in the last analysis, the future of American Judaism depends on its capacity to engage the individual Jews at the personal and private level. This is a function which no Jewish organization or institution except a distinctly religious one is able to perform.