

THE CHANGING NATURE OF JEWISH IDENTITY

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Three concepts contribute to an understanding of the changing nature of Jewish identity: boundaries, dissonance, and choice. Policies that establish more impermeable boundaries are needed to entice Jews to remain within the fold, to foster a greater sense of dissonance between Jewish and American values, and to encourage limited choices. Strengthening Jewish identity requires a return to Torah study and the performance of mitzvot.

Jewish identity is an issue that has never been finally resolved, but rears its head in every generation in different forms. Its complexity stems from the fact that identity is determined by the interface of religion, ethnicity, psychology, politics, and nationality in the context of social change. This article explores the changing nature of modern Jewish identity and its ramifications for the organized Jewish community.

Three concepts contribute to an understanding of the changing nature of Jewish identity: boundaries, dissonance, and choice. Boundaries refer to the physical and cultural separation between one ethnic group and another. The ethnic group that lowers its boundaries to permit members to leave and non-members to enter endangers its continuity as a viable group. Dissonance is necessary to preserve the distinctiveness of the group. If group members do not value their difference from others, the group will soon disappear. Choice of identity is a modern ubiquitous phenomenon that is difficult for traditionalists to grasp. Identity is no longer perceived as ascribed but achieved; choices abound for the expression of Jewish identity. Traditionalists regard the tampering with traditional notions of Jewish identity as threatening the continuity of the Jewish community.

When boundaries become permeable, when Jews do not experience dissonance from the values and culture of the greater society, when they express their autonomy in choosing to be Jewish, the consequences for the Jewish community are dire. The in-

terrelated concepts of boundaries, dissonance, and choice comprise this analysis of modern Jewish identity.

JEWISH IDENTITY

"Jewish identity is both a great obsession and a great ambiguity in American Jewish life" (London & Chazan, 1990). It is a great obsession because there is grave concern about the diminution of Jewish behaviors, in-marriages, and family size in the Jewish community (Kosmin et al., 1991). The drive to preserve the Jewish community in the face of assimilationist forces is fueled by the weakening of Jewish identity across the age spectrum, particularly among the young.

Jewish identity refers to Jewish feelings and affiliative behaviors. The call for strengthening Jewish identity is an exhortation to lead a life more committed to Jewish acts and community. Jewish identity is a function of inwardness, a choice to focus on one's community, one's spiritual process, and the love of fellow Jews (Margolis, 1995, p. 8).

Jewish identity, according to Jewish law, is conferred through matrilineal descent or through conversion sanctioned by the Code of Jewish Law. The Reform and Reconstructionist movements have adopted the policy of patrilineal descent, which has conferred the status of Jew on the children of mixed-married spouses, and has caused severe rents in their relationship with the Orthodox and Conservative movements.

An important feature of Jewish identity can be traced to the Jews' otherness—"Behold, this is a nation that lives alone and is not reckoned among the nations" (Numbers 23:9). Historically, the Jews' separateness was self-imposed, but was reinforced by the nations among whom they lived. This separateness has been diminished in modern times with the Jewish community's greater acceptance into the mainstream of Western society.

Identity cannot long survive intact unless it is expressed through concrete behaviors. Levitz (1995), who distinguishes between identity and identification, defines identity as involving "a complex integration of values, attitudes, knowledge, content, skills, and beliefs that inform specific behaviors," which then reinforce those values and beliefs. Identification involves "taking on the admired attributes of another individual or idealized person whose characteristics are especially admired" (p. 78). Identification is superficial; identity is deep. The focus in this article is on Jewish identity.

Components of Identity

According to Erikson (1974), identity is a "sense of being at one with oneself as one grows and develops, and a sense of affinity with a community's sense of being at one with its future, as well as its history or mythology" (pp. 27-28). The self-concept includes belonging to a larger group.

The group has been identified as the "plausibility structure" (Berger & Kellner, 1972) that is indispensable for identity formation and continuity. Thus, the presence of significant others with whom one interacts in a social setting is required. Parents require interaction with the child to make the parental identity plausible. Jews require interaction with other Jews to make Jewish identity plausible. All people who occupy various roles need to confirm them socially in order for them to be incorporated into their total identity configuration. Consequently, Jews who are unaffiliated and who lack significant communication with other

Jews would find it more difficult to maintain their Jewish identity over long periods of time.

The plausibility structure that most strengthens people's identity is the ethnic group to which they belong. The essential characteristic of ethnicity is the boundaries that separate one group from another, implied in the *we-they* phenomenon (Pinderhughes, 1989; Vincent, 1974). When the *we* is uttered by the ethnic group, the *they* implies boundaries and power.

THE FUNCTIONS OF BOUNDARIES

Boundaries have two essential functions: they keep members of the group in, and they keep non-members out. They thereby maintain the viability and distinctiveness of the group.

Boundaries may take several forms. An obvious boundary is self-imposed geographic separation from other groups as practiced by the Mennonites and the Amish, and, among the Hasidim, the Skver and Satmar. When an ethnic group closes its doors to the outside world and does not permit access to outsiders, it strives to *isolate* its members from external influences and preserve its unique culture. Geographic isolation is reinforced by prohibitions against television, movies, and newspapers. With geographic boundaries, ethnic identity tends to be solidly confirmed for group members.

A parallel boundary is social *insulation*. Though the group presides in a multiethnic urban environment, it stakes out a particular community that it saturates with the artifacts of its culture and religion. Social contacts are made almost exclusively with members of the ethnic group in the local community. Groups practicing social insulation include the Chinese in Chinatown, Muslims who have moved into Boro Park, and, among Hasidim, the Lubavitch, the Satmar, the Bobover, and other Hasidic groups in Brooklyn.

Another boundary is language. When the ethnic group speaks its native dialect in public, it maintains cohesion within the

group and excludes outsiders. Ritual and dress can also function in ways similar to language. These components of culture maintain the group's distinctiveness from other groups.

Some members of ethnic groups, however, wish to lower boundaries in the hope of reaping societal benefits. Yet, groups who lower boundaries and appear no different from other groups pay a price for acceptance by the larger society—the loss of a distinctive identity.

The higher, more impermeable the boundary, the greater the chance of preserving separateness and continuity. The lower, more permeable the boundary, the greater the chance for eliminating separateness and increasing assimilation.

Illustrations of lowered boundaries in the Jewish community abound, but they can be encapsulated in two statistics reported in the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey: the conversion of 210,000 Jews to other faiths and the 52% intermarriage rate (Kosmin et al., 1991). Conversion to other faiths and intermarriage with Gentiles reflect the ease with which Jews can leave the group and the ineffectiveness of the socialization industry—the federations, JCCs, Jewish schools and camps (Mason, 1991). Intermarriage also permits Gentiles to traverse the boundary of the Jewish community. Since only a small percentage of mixed-marrieds affiliate with the Jewish community, the loss of Jews outweighs the gain of Gentiles.

Outreach to mixed marrieds conveys the message that Gentiles can now be members and assume leadership roles in synagogues. Thus, the success of outreach can make it more difficult to discourage interfaith marriage by blurring the distinction between Jew and Gentile. The importance of conversion is de-emphasized.

Jews require much greater distinctiveness from American culture in order for Jewish identity to flourish. As long as the boundaries remain low and porous, Jews will exit the Jewish community and permit Gentiles to enter. The ebb and flow of the

human traffic does not augur well for the continuity of a community whose existence was predicated on being "a nation that dwells alone."

Socializing Institutions

For a group to maintain boundaries and foster identity, it needs to develop and sustain socializing institutions. In the Jewish community, the family, religion, education, and social welfare are the major institutions through which young and old are socialized into the traditions and culture of the Jewish people. Among the major socializing agencies are the federations, synagogues, Jewish schools and camps, Jewish family services, and Jewish Community Centers. Each is involved in reaffirming its mission to perpetuate the Jewish community through particular policies and programs. Except for the family, each institution is represented by lay and professional leaders who are presumably knowledgeable of, and committed to, transmitting Jewish culture and traditions. Ideally, when the institution's values and concerns are in tandem with those of their representatives, they deepen members' Jewish identity through shared study and practice.

Several social patterns threaten the successful performance of these socializing institutions. Jews reside in diverse rather than self-contained communities and are highly acculturated to American society. The high cost of living Jewishly excludes many individuals and families from participating in Jewish communal life. Jewish distinctiveness is no longer valued as a viable alternative to assimilation. When Jews want to be like everyone else both in public and in private, socializing agencies struggle to maintain high boundaries and prevent the erosion of Jewish identity.

THE DECLINE OF DISSONANCE

A consequence of having permeable boundaries that permit easy access and egress is the decline of dissonance. Dissonance is the state of discomfort that results from the

experience of difference. Throughout their history until the modern era, Jews experienced dissonance in the expression of their Jewish identity. Dissonance was both a burden and an opportunity—a burden due to prejudice and persecution and an opportunity for spiritual and intellectual growth through Torah study and the performance of *mitzvot*.

With large-scale acculturation and marital assimilation, dissonance has declined and is almost nonexistent in many sectors of Jewish society. On many levels, Jews are not distinguishable from Gentiles, nor do they want to be. There are many Jews today who are both proud of their heritage and who feel integrated in the American mainstream. One such group consists of young adults who experience the antithesis of dissonance, as they see no real conflict between their American and Jewish identities.

Dual Jewish Identity

Jewish young adults in America today are thoroughly acculturated to the American way of life and values. Eight were recently interviewed by the American Jewish Committee (AJC) to ascertain how they expressed their Jewish identities (Meir, 1993). The survey concluded that their Jewish identity is intertwined with their American identity. Neither excludes the other. If this group is paradigmatic of acculturated young American Jews who have opted to actively pursue meaning in their Jewish identity, then being Jewish and American are not seen as contradictory.

The study did not posit the necessity for dissonance in order for Jewishness to be salient. Neither did it ask about the primacy of American or Jewish identity. The likelihood is that for these young adults Jewish identity was secondary, but that seemed immaterial to the respondents. Their emphasis was on the importance of Jewishness in their lives, which makes them a growing minority in the Jewish community.

Klagsbrun (1995) corroborates this trend. She describes the hunger for spiritu-

ality and the study of Jewish texts by intelligent, educated men and women in their thirties, even as they pursue secular culture.

Dual identity was not the historic norm. In the traditional Jewish community—the East European shtetl, for example—the primary and exclusive identity was Jewish. Excluded from dual citizenship, Jews sought the certainty of a Jewish identity through Torah study and *mitzvah* performance, buttressed by tradition, history, and community. Jewish identity was not a matter of choice but of birth, reinforced by the institutions of religion, family, education, law, and social welfare.

In America today, while some Jews can synthesize the duality of an American Jewish identity, some will not, as with Hasidim; others cannot and become marginal to Jewish life. Factors conducive to marginality include the paucity of Jewish education, role models, ritual observance, and a Jewish ambiance in the home. Assimilated peers play a significant role, as does the college environment.

The eight young adults in the AJC study, even those brought up in highly identified Jewish homes, see themselves as full participants in American society. They view their Jewish identity as a fulfillment of their American identity, rather than as a source of conflict (Meir, 1993).

When many in his generation were choosing not to be Jewish at all, one respondent attributes his decision to remain Jewish to his parents' decision to send their children to Jewish schools and provide a Jewish ambiance at home. He learned that being Jewish and being American are not mutually exclusive, though they conflict in fundamental values. "Judaism emphasizes community and belonging; America extols individuality.... In America, the freedom to choose often operates to the detriment of the Jewish community" (Meir, 1993, p. 42). His dilemma was that "in San Francisco I had to choose to be Jewish or choose to let it go; there was no Judaism by diffusion" (Meir, 1993, p. 58). This statement reflects a general trend that Jewish identity "is fully

self-chosen, both in terms of the range of viable options available in American society and of the psychological autonomy of today's young Jews" (Reisman, 1992, p. 354).

In addition to a conscious choice of a Jewish identity, the young adults felt a strong need for religious/spiritual teachings and study, greater involvement in the Jewish community, a pluralistic approach to Judaism, and sharing the values of *tikkun olam*, *chesed*, family and community.

The young adults' apparent integration of American and Jewish identities—their choice to be Jewish and to strengthen that identity through study and involvement in the community—seems to be a model for a distinctive American-Jewish identity that experiences no dissonance. The lack of dissonance flies in the face of traditional conceptions and experiences of identity. Dissonance has served as the spring of creativity in defining the Jewish experience, in searching for roots and uniqueness, and in relating Torah and *mitzvot* to the everyday life of Jews. Will the integrated identity survive the enticements of assimilation? Will it contribute to Jewish continuity? Does this new, modern form of identity bode well for the Jewish future? One wonders whether this group of eight young adults is representative of the Jewish young adult population at large.

JEWISH IDENTITY BY CHOICE

A dual Jewish identity reflects a high degree of comfort with being both a Jew and an American. To attain inner compatibility, the individual must be selective in adopting values and behaviors from both systems that are compatible. This requires choosing among a plethora of ideologies that would fit the individual's personality and way of life—choosing who one wants to be.

Choosing an identity is a modern Western phenomenon. Traditionally, identity was ascribed to an individual at birth. It was then developed throughout the lifetime, but the core within was believed to be un-

changeable. Jewish children were socialized into Jewish life by their parents, teachers, and rabbis, thus confirming their innate Jewish identities. "The community of belief constituted a *total system* (*italics added*), that controlled the individual's environment with a detailed pattern of prescribed actions and fixed roles. Group membership was thus clearly defined" (Medding et al., 1992, p. 16).

The total system was dominated by Judaism, which had the moral power to coerce individuals to follow certain patterns of prescribed behavior. Living in an institutionalized world with clearly prescribed norms of behavior enabled Jews to accept their clearly defined roles without having to think about what was expected of them. Hence they could be creative and turn their attention to other pursuits (Berger & Luckmann, 1967).

In the modern world everything that was formerly in the institutionalized background is shifted into the deinstitutionalized foreground (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). The traditional answer to the question, Why must we do it this way?—because "We always did it this way—no longer suffices. Traditional ways of doing things are no longer normative simply because they are traditional. The authority of tradition has waned (Linzer, 1984; Shils, 1981).

The contemporary community of shared individual feelings (*italics added*) is a voluntary and partial community of personal choice, with unclear boundaries and undefined membership. It is characterized by emotions and attachments that, while often deep, are not always clearly articulated (Medding et al., 1992, p. 16).

Group membership in the traditional Jewish community is different from a "community of shared individual feelings." The contrast is analogous to the difference between a group *qua* group and a group as an aggregate of individuals. In the former, members identify with the group as a whole and defer their individual needs for the welfare of the

group. The group transcends the individuals. In the latter, the group has not yet formed because the individuals do not share a common purpose; it is not an entity unto itself.

Being a member of the traditional Jewish community meant that individual Jews identified with the goals and aspirations, the joys and travails, of the Jewish community as a whole. The success and failures of the community were felt by the members themselves. The destinies of individuals and the community were intertwined (Zborowsky & Herzog, 1964).

To be a Jew means to belong to a very special family within the family of nations, to relive that family's joys and tragedies, and to build one's future upon the experiences of the past. To be a Jew means to be together even in a society where so many are alone, to derive security from deep roots even in a society where so many are struggling merely to remain afloat (Introduction to the Passover Haggadah).

The metaphor of family is an apt description of the traditional Jewish community because it denotes a primary group in which membership is involuntary and relationships are intense, emotional, and interdependent.

In the modern community, relationships are tenuous, superficial, and partial, and membership is undefined. The community resembles Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik's natural community—a community bent on biological survival and “doing,” rather than a covenantal faith community bent on spirituality and “being” (Soloveitchik, 1992). Today one chooses to belong, for ascribed belonging is devoid of meaning.

To the traditional Jew, choosing to belong is a puzzlement. How can one choose an identity that was already conferred at birth?

As our society becomes more and more multiethnic, we have reached an era of choices. We no longer define ourselves by

what we are not, but by what we are....The real choice is only in *how* we identify, how creatively, how whole or half-heartedly, how much weight in our self-concept we give our ethnicity (Klein, 1989, pp. 5–6).

Although Jewish identity may be conferred at birth, it no longer suffices for many, nor does it inform their future behaviors. The “contemporary community of shared individual feelings” (Medding et al., 1992) consists of isolated individuals who choose to express their Jewish identity in varying degrees of intensity and involvement. “Being a Jew is no longer settled by the fact of being born a Jew; Jewish identity now confers a range of choices and, consequently, confusion” (Klein, 1989, pp. 7–8). Jewishness in America has become less a phenomenon defined by others through anti-Semitism and more of a subjective personal act. If identity requires an act of choice, empirically many assimilated and unaffiliated Jews have chosen *not* to belong.

In a pluralistic situation, the variety is there for the choosing. Choice is supported by the democratic ethos of autonomy, rights, and individualism. In the process, the individual is thrust back upon him- or herself to decide how to live. Confusion ensues when knowledge and support are lacking, and there is uncertainty about the validity and meaning of the choice. Yet, choosing a particular form of Jewish identity from among an array of available options may only be a pattern among a minority of highly educated American Jews. It seems to be a non-issue for a majority of Jews.

Illustrations of such options abound. Under what circumstances would one choose to send one's child to a day school or to a public school? to Israel or to summer camp? to affiliate with a synagogue? to light candles on Friday night? to permit one's daughter to date a non-Jew? to give to UJA or to the American Cancer Society? to postpone having children for the sake of a career? These questions evoke conflicting values. They challenge the individual to

decide where his or her priorities are—in Jewish identity, commitment, continuity and distinctiveness or in American identity, commitment, equality, and integration. The resolution of this dilemma reveals the individual's confusion or clarity in ordering Jewish and American values. Since choosing a Jewish identity seems to be widespread, it behooves the socializing agents in the Jewish community to influence choices and strengthen commitment.

JEWISH COMMUNAL RESPONSES

The issue of Jewish identity will not go away. As long as Jews struggle to reconcile conflicts between American and Jewish values and act them out in different ways, the organized Jewish community will need to confront this elusive issue and devise approaches to strengthen Jewish identity. A variety of efforts are already underway.

Commission on Continuity

In November, 1992, at its General Assembly, the Council of Jewish Federations established a Commission on Jewish Identity and Continuity to help reverse the trend of assimilation and intermarriage. The ultimate goal of the Commission is "to make Judaism more central in the lives of more Jews, to nurture the desire and commitment to make Jewish choices and to live by Jewish values, to foster vibrant Jewish homes and families" (*Jewish Week*, 1993, p. 26). As a result, a large number of communities have undertaken various projects to deal with the issues of identity, continuity, and education.

The very nature of such a Commission, however, will prevent it from taking the bold steps that need to be taken. This is because the problem of Jewish survival cannot be addressed without dealing with Judaism. Federation vocabulary speaks of committee, process, and consensus, rather than Torah, covenant, and *mitzvot*. It is in the *mitzvot*—the repeated concrete behaviors of daily Jewish living—that the tradition is perpetuated from parent to child, teacher to stu-

dent, generation to generation.

Until Jews are ready to commit themselves to performing *mitzvot* on a daily basis, their Jewish identity will suffer from the infusion of secular culture. The continuity programs are valid in attracting the unaffiliated or marginally unaffiliated, but they only partially succeed in strengthening Jewish identity.

Programs and Services

In recent years, federations have allocated considerable resources to both formal and informal Jewish education in Jewish schools and Jewish Community Centers. Federations and synagogues have been urged to co-sponsor imaginative programs to combat the erosion of distinctive boundaries (Shrage, 1992).

Synagogues have instituted "Turn Friday Night into Shabbos" programs by which individuals and families can experience a traditional Shabbat. The concept is designed to convert a secular time frame into a meaningful, religious experience.

A recent survey of day school graduates across denominational lines documents the value of a day school education. Jewish education was seen to have an overwhelmingly positive impact on adult Jewish identity and behavior, particularly on intermarriage rates. Only 4.5% of the respondents married non-Jews. The report reaffirms the need for Jewish communal agencies to support and provide opportunities for continued Jewish education (Schiff & Schneider, 1994).

At the 1994 General Assembly, the call went forth to establish a new Jewish continuity agenda that would include increased funding for (1) Hillels on college campuses, (2) sending 50,000 Jewish teenagers to Israel annually, and (3) seeing to it "that every Jewish child who wants a Jewish education can get one regardless of ability to pay" (*Jewish Week*, 1994, p. 28).

Boards of Jewish Education have established the annual "March of the Living" trip where thousands of teenagers visit the

concentration camps in Poland during *Yom Hashoa*—Holocaust Remembrance Day—and then travel to Israel to celebrate *Yom Ha'Atzmaut*, Israel Independence Day. The scenes create indelible images and memories and serve to strengthen Jewish identity through the two most significant Jewish events in this century.

The buzzword of the nineties is outreach. Jewish educational institutions have mounted extensive *kiruv*—outreach—activities to bring alienated Jews back into the Jewish community. The National Jewish Outreach Program is but one of the more prominent institutions that have concentrated mainly on teaching Jews to read Hebrew and become more literate in the language of the *Siddur*. In addition, Jewish family education programs have invited entire families to participate in synagogue or school-sponsored educational activities.

In recent years, upon the recommendations of the Mandell Commission (Chazan & Charendoff, 1994; Maximizing, 1984; Task Force, 1995), there has been a growing trend for JCCs to hire Jewish educational specialists to provide formal Jewish educational activities for all ages.

Religious institutions have taken up the cause of outreach in trying to combat interfaith marriages. Reform, Reconstructionist, and Conservative religious leaders have placed great faith in outreach to intermarried couples to stem the erosion of Jews from the Jewish community and to keep the children of these unions connected to Jewish life. One of the latent functions of these outreach policies is to maintain the fiscal viability of synagogues and temples through increased membership rolls. Outreach efforts continue, despite Cohen's prediction that "by the year 2050, the American Jewish community may shrink numerically but be stronger qualitatively (1994, p. 95).

Serious questions have been raised regarding outreach efforts to mixed-marrieds. Does outreach make it difficult to discourage interfaith dating and marriage? Can Jewish identity be maintained in a home where one parent is a Gentile? Should

funds for outreach be diverted from programs that serve active and involved Jews? (Bayme, 1992).

CONCLUSIONS

The complexity of defining modern Jewish identity is a function of its myriad expressions and the multiple factors that comprise its definition. Because Jews are a religious and ethnic group who are attempting to preserve their culture amidst threatening assimilatory forces, Jewish identity is a dynamic phenomenon that is threatened by social change.

Three factors underlie the Jewish community's struggle to strengthen Jewish identity. Policies that establish more impermeable boundaries are needed to entice Jews to remain within the fold, to foster a greater sense of dissonance between Jewish and American values, and to encourage limited choices. These are difficult to implement, but indispensable if Jews are to remain a distinct group that is not swallowed by the forces of assimilation.

The perceived weakening of Jewish identity, as indicated by rates of intermarriage, synagogue attendance, Jewish education, ritual observance, fertility, philanthropy to Jewish causes, and visitations to Israel, has alarmed lay and professional leaders in the organized Jewish community. Although these trends have been known for many years, they were highlighted by the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey. Serving American Jewish youth and their parents constitutes a priority in preventing the further erosion of Jewish identity and identification.

There are no quick solutions. The process is long and arduous. Ideologically, it requires a return to the study of ancient and contemporary Jewish texts—formal Torah study—and the performance of distinct Jewish behaviors, *mitzvot*. Jews have survived only because there were those who devoted their lives to Torah and *mitzvot* and taught them to their children. The Jewish community possesses the knowledge, talents, and

resources to return to the old formula for survival, but how feasible is it? How serious are we about perpetuating Judaism and the Jewish community?

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