

# The Secret of Jewish Continuity

*Jonathan D. Sarna*

“IT’s continuity, stupid.” So reads a sign prominently displayed in the office of a Jewish community agency in a major American city. Jewish continuity, indeed, is the current rallying cry in all circles of American Jewry. According to the *Long Island Jewish World*, “Virtually every organization and academic program on the communal map has announced new studies or programs involving their particular search for the alchemy of continuity.”

And so it has been. During the past year, continuity has dominated the program of the General Assembly of the Council of Jewish Federations, the largest annual gathering of Jewish communal leaders in North America, and was a national priority of the American Jewish Committee. Each of the major rabbinical organizations discussed it, and a special issue of *Hadassah* magazine was devoted to it. An official of JESNA, a national organization that services the field of Jewish education, described the “continuity agenda” as “the most complex and far-reaching that the North American Jewish community has ever taken on.”

The issue of continuity burst upon the American Jewish community in the wake of the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS). This statistical study, based on interviews with 2,441 “qualified respondents,” portrayed the American Jewish condition in terms calculated to shock. “In recent years,” the survey revealed,

just over half of born Jews who married, at any age, whether for the first time or not, chose a spouse who was born a Gentile and has remained so, while less than 5 percent of these marriages include a non-Jewish partner who became a Jew by choice.

As for the children of mixed couples, the survey found that only 28 percent, or slightly better than one in four, were being raised as Jews.

Although some scholars consider the NJPS findings methodologically flawed and its conclusions overstated, the study itself has taken on a life of its own in the years since its release. In the

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world of American Jewish symbols, NJPS now stands for the challenge posed by assimilation and rampant intermarriage. Thanks to its clarion call, the eyes of American Jews have been opened. Where for three decades the attention of the community had been focused on the dangers faced by Jews in the Middle East and Eastern Europe, and on the question of whether “they” would survive, today attention is being paid to the dangers Jews face within their own communities, and the wonder is whether “we” will survive.

ALL this is a far cry from the mood just under a decade ago, when Charles Silberman’s best-seller, *A Certain People: American Jews and Their Lives Today*, reassured Jews that fears of intermarriage were greatly exaggerated. Insisting that the true intermarriage rate was 24-28 percent, Silberman forecast that it would probably stabilize at that level, and might even “decline somewhat over the next decade or two.” He also claimed that “a significant minority of born-Gentile spouses—approximately 20 percent—convert to Judaism,” and with respect to the children of mixed marriages he asserted that, since many were allegedly being raised Jewish, “intermarriage would lead not to a reduction in the number of Jews but to a gain.”

The optimism generated by these glad tidings has since fully dissipated. Silberman himself has grown more pessimistic in the face of recent findings, and so, as we have seen, have the majority of community leaders. Revealingly, three new scholarly surveys of recent developments on the American Jewish scene reinforce their pessimism. Edward S. Shapiro in *A Time for Healing: American Jewry Since World War II* entitles his final chapter “The Question of Survival,” and to that question—whether American Jews will continue to flourish amid the freedom and prosperity of America—he answers, warily, “perhaps.” Howard M. Sachar closes his mammoth *A History of the Jews in America* with an intimation that the future rests far more securely with Israel. And Arthur Hertzberg, in *The Jews in America*, is the most pessimistic of all; barring a spiritual revival, Hertzberg warns, “American Jewish history will soon end, and become a part of American memory as a whole.”

Of course, prophecies of gloom and doom have been ever with us, and the record of the past suggests that it is wise to treat them with a certain degree of skepticism. Previous predictions of American Jewish decline and demise have proved utterly wrong—just as wrong as their opposites, the glowing prophecies of a new “Zion in America” dispensed by uncritical optimists.

In 1818, for example, one of the wisest men in America, Attorney General William Wirt, forecast that in the absence of persecution, American Jews at the end of a century-and-a-half would have lost their identity and ceased to exist as a separate people. Today it is William Wirt who has lost his identity and is long forgotten. In 1872, one W. M. Rosenblatt, writing in the *Galaxy*, a well-respected American journal, stated that “within 50 years” Jews would abandon circumcision and commence intermarrying. “The grandchildren, at the latest,” he foresaw, “will be undistinguishable from the mass of humanity which surrounds them.” Again, it is Rosenblatt who is today “undistinguishable.” Most famously of all, *Look* magazine dedicated a widely-discussed cover story in 1964 to “The Vanishing American Jew.” Today, *Look* itself has vanished—not just once but twice—while the Jewish people lives on.

Does this mean that today’s prophets are equally misguided, and can therefore be ignored? Not exactly. Certainly the issues pointed to by those who raise the banner of Jewish continuity are real enough, and need to be addressed. And prophets of doom, even when their fears prove exaggerated, serve a vital function, alerting a community to danger and thus provoking it to mobilize its energies. By predicting that Jews will not survive, the prophets of doom may help ensure that they do.

**B**UT what exactly *are* the dangers facing the Jewish community? And is “continuity” the right medicine for them?

Ironically, in worrying about intermarriage, loss of Jewish identity, and related demographic challenges, American Jewish leaders may well be underestimating what they are up against. For it is not only Jewish life in the United States that is being buffeted by change, but the larger American social environment as well. Four great developments are particularly significant for their impact on American Jewish “continuity.”

**Transformation #1: Ethnicity.** From their earliest days on earth, Jews have been considered and have considered themselves a separate people, different from their neighbors. “There is a people that dwells apart, not reckoned among the nations,” Balaam sang out back in the wilderness, and so Jews remained for millennia. In America today, however, the claim that Jews are a separate people, a minority dwelling apart, seems increasingly dubious.

This is due not just to the geographic dispersion of Jews, or to assimilation—although it is well known that Jews have spread out, and have assimilated. More significant still is the fact that peoplehood itself—ethnicity—is no longer a recognized or meaningful category in the United States. Where only a few years ago the central differences among Americans were said to be rooted in their ethnic particularities—Italian, Irish, Polish, Jewish—today the emphasis everywhere is increasingly upon race: white, black, Hispanic, Asian American, Native American. The United States Census and the Department of Labor classify Americans for the most part by race rather than ethnicity, and programs of multiculturalism in schools and universities also place primary emphasis on race (as well as sex).

As one consequence of this shift, the lines dividing European white ethnic groups from one another in America have blurred. What we are witnessing, according to the sociologist Richard Alba, is the “erosion of ethnic differentiation.” Increasingly, white ethnics in the United States are distinguished from one another by only a few outward symbols and rituals. “A new ethnic group is forming,” Alba writes, “one based on ancestry from *anywhere* on the European continent,” and this “ethnic group” is simply the white counterpart to the African American.

Viewed through the prism of color, Jewish Americans are no different from Irish or Italian Americans: they are just so many white males and females. Thus, when Stephen G. Breyer, a Jew, was nominated by President Clinton to serve on the Supreme Court, most observers did not regard his selection as a bid for ethnic diversity but as a “safe choice”: Breyer was a white male, not a member of a minority group.

For Jews, nonrecognition of Jewish ethnic separateness poses a dramatic challenge, unprecedented in Diaspora history. How *does* one maintain Jewish distinctiveness in a society that scarcely considers Jews, as a people, distinctive at all? If ethnic differences between Jews and their white neighbors are primarily symbolic, and are anyway fast disappearing, can American Jews stave off invisibility?

**Transformation #2: Religion.** The world of American religion is also undergoing vast change. The model that most Americans grew up with, the famous triad celebrated in a 1955 book by Will Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*, is on the decline. By some estimates, as many as 20 percent of all Americans now consider themselves neither Protestant nor Catholic nor Jewish: this marks a fourfold increase since 1967.

More and more of these outsiders adhere to Islam, reputedly the nation’s fastest-growing faith. In 1991, the researcher Carol Stone estimated the

number of American Muslims at over four million; while the exact figure is a matter of dispute, in all likelihood there will be more Muslims than Jews in the United States in the 21st century.

But we do not have to wait that long to see some of the effects of these shifts. Even now, Jews are experiencing a decline in their *status* in the world of American religion. The days when Jews could pretend that they comprised, as it were, a third of religious America are over. From the nation's "third faith" they have, increasingly, been relegated to the position of one of many "minority faiths."

A revealing indicator of these trends can be seen in J. Gordon Melton's widely praised *Encyclopedia of American Religions*. The 1989 edition of this work divides the country's 1,588 primary religious bodies into nineteen "families," only ten of which follow Christian beliefs and practices. Remarkably, Judaism does not even rate a religious family of its own; instead, it is grouped along with Islam, Sufism, Zoroastrianism, and Baha'i as part of the "Middle Eastern Family."

Here, then, is another problem for those concerned about Jewish continuity. How should Jews maintain their status in this new world of American religion? How can they ensure that Judaism is not lost amid the welter of contemporary religious options?

**Transformation #3: Marital Patterns.** Well into the 1960's, interethnic and interreligious marriages of any kind were comparatively rare in the United States; endogamy—in-marriage—was the rule. Now, among white European ethnic groups, intermarriage has become the norm rather than the exception. Swedes, Norwegians, Germans, Italians, Irish, Poles—individuals in each of these nationalities, according to the 1980 census, marry individuals of different ancestry more often than they marry within their own group.

Interreligious marriages are almost as common. About half of young Catholics now intermarry, many without the conversion of their spouses; 69 percent of young Methodists marry non-Methodists; 70 percent of young Lutherans marry non-Lutherans; and 75 percent of young Presbyterians marry non-Presbyterians. All studies indicate that intermarriage today is the American way: bonds of love take precedence over bonds of faith, bonds of ethnicity, and occasionally even bonds of color.\*

Does this cause any consternation among the leaders of the communities concerned? Apparently not. According to a 1987 study by Yisrael Ellman:

Apart from Jews, no ethnic group or institution carries out any sort of educational work designed to limit ethnic out-marriage. They accept it as a foregone conclusion. The subject

is not even mentioned in the ethnic press or publications. Parents, even if actively involved in the affairs of their ethnic group, rarely show great remorse when their children marry members of other ethnic groups. Religious groups have also, to a very large extent, made peace with religiously-based intermarriage.

As for the Jews, once upon a time their views were congruent with those of other Americans: that is, strongly supportive of endogamy. Today, Jewish behavior again tends increasingly to the American norm, while Jewish leaders are virtually alone in continuing to call for in-group marriage.

The question, from the point of view of continuity, is how Jewish leaders can justify setting themselves apart from the American cultural mainstream on this issue. Or, to put it another way, how are they to succeed in their opposition to intermarriage when those among whom they live look upon it as perfectly normative behavior?

**Transformation #4: Identity Patterns.** Once upon a time, most people in this country adhered to the faith and ethnicity of their parents; their cultural identity was determined largely by their *descent*. Now, religious and ethnic loyalties are more commonly matters of choice; identity, to a considerable degree, is based upon *consent*.

According to George Gallup, about one American adult in four has changed faiths or denominations at least once. About one American adult in three, a study by Mary Waters discovered, has changed *ethnic* identity at least once. Individuals of mixed ancestry who have been in the United States for several generations are particularly prone to such identity transformations.

This shift from descent to consent has enormous implications for Jewish continuity. To list just a handful: Jews who accept the notion of descent think of their Jewishness as something irrevocable, as much a part of them as their blood type; Jewishness by consent, by contrast, is something completely revocable, purely a matter of choice. Jewishness by descent suggests a genealogical metaphor: Jews are related to one another through ties of blood. Jewishness by consent implies a marital metaphor: committed today, perhaps divorced tomorrow. Jewishness by descent ties the future of Jewry largely to kinship and propinquity, the number of children that Jews give birth to. Jewishness by consent links the Jewish future to conversion and adhesion, the ability to attract newcomers and hold on to them.

Can Judaism, not to mention the traditional conception of the peoplehood of the Jews, be maintained in a world where consent has replaced descent?

\* See my article, "Interreligious Marriage in America," in *The Intermarriage Crisis: Jewish Communal Perspectives and Responses*, American Jewish Committee, 1991.

OURS, then, is a moment of great transformation: of *discontinuity*. It is no wonder that Jewish communal leaders are distraught, or that many of them have been calling for a renewed emphasis on the tried and the true in Jewish life as a means of fighting discontinuity with continuity. But while many of their proposals are thoughtful, and some of them may even have some prospect of modest success, a general caveat is in order.

For this is hardly the first crisis of continuity the Jews have faced in their history. In the past, when Jewish life has been threatened by similar circumstances, the forces of recovery have come not just from those desperate to hold fast to the familiar but in addition—and most paradoxically—from those willing, or eager, to try a little discontinuity of their own.

Take, for example, the divisive 18th-century Jewish religious movement known as Hasidism. Cruel massacres, external political changes, crushing religious disappointments occasioned by the false messiahships of Shabbetai Zevi and Jacob Frank, and a profound crisis of leadership within the mainstream community were some of the factors that spawned this new socioreligious movement. Its emphasis on charismatic leadership and mystical fellowship stirred up intense opposition—but also proved immensely attractive to Jews who might otherwise have opted out.

In the 19th century, crises of continuity stimulated by emancipation, Enlightenment, and renewed anti-Semitism engendered such diverse

religious and political movements as Reform Judaism, Conservative Judaism, and Zionism. Once again, these were movements that broke with key assumptions of an earlier day, creating enormous divisions and provoking charges that they were inimical to Judaism. Yet each in its own way powerfully strengthened the fabric of Judaism and in the end promoted Jewish continuity.

In still more recent times, and in the United States, we have the much less cataclysmic example of the Jewish day-school movement. Day schools, established for the most part within the last 50 years, generated fierce internal opposition because they challenged a basic assumption among American Jews concerning the sacrosanct nature of public education. Yet today most would agree that these schools have played a central role in promoting American Jewish continuity and keeping assimilation at bay.

In short, just as external discontinuities challenge Jewish stability, so internal discontinuities (at least of the right sort) may promote Jewish revitalization. No one can say, as yet, what today's or tomorrow's saving discontinuities will look like, but in a general way Jewish history offers grounds for optimism. Over the centuries, Jews have survived one doomsayer after another—not by ignoring or belittling predictions of gloom, or by succumbing to despair, but by instituting selective discontinuities that have, in the end, proved the predictions wrong. There, perhaps, lies the real secret of Jewish continuity in the Diaspora.