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### **THE SOVEREIGN SELF: JEWISH IDENTITY IN POST-MODERN AMERICA**

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*The Importance of Childhood  
Memories / A Personal Journey /  
Another Journey / Choosing Judaism /  
The Roots of Traditional Jewish Identity  
/ The Challenge of Modernity / A  
Generation Seeking Acceptance / The  
Postmodern Jewish Self*

#### **The Importance of Childhood Memories**

I remember at my bat mitzvah having a thought, a prayer, and saying: Let me never leave this. I also remember being

6/10/2009

"The Sovereign Self: Jewish Identi...

surprised, because that was a time when I couldn't imagine Judaism not being important to me--it was almost like knowing what was coming. I remember thinking it and being surprised I was thinking it.

--Molly

Molly is a physician in her forties who lives in suburban Boston: thoughtful, soft-spoken, and extremely articulate--reason enough to take careful note of what she has to say about the formative experiences which led to her current commitments as a Jew. There is another reason as well: because the key words in this passage from our conversation, "I remember," are repeated no less than three times. *What* Molly and the other Jews we interviewed remember of their Jewish journeys, and--more importantly-- *how* they remember it, provide the clues to a new sort of Jewish self emerging in the United States in recent decades.

Her bat mitzvah is still vivid in her mind despite the passage of three decades. Similar events or experiences from childhood or adolescence figured prominently in almost every interview we conducted. Time and again we heard details of family gatherings decades earlier, or reports of conversations with a grandparent long since departed, or descriptions of a moment of high emotion that proved formative of later growth. The Judaism practiced by adult American Jews is almost always bound up in key family relationships and rites of passage, nourished by a stock of memories which are marked by passion and ambivalence. Our subjects did not offer us dry "remembrances of things past" tucked safely away. Rather, their memories were tokens of present commitments and signals of the future they hoped to build. The individuals we met all care deeply about their Jewishness--even when, or perhaps especially when, they are rejecting it. Indifference concerning

Jewish identity was nonexistent. The memories associated with the fact of being Jewish are far too precious for indifference, too powerful, too charged.

Strongly Jewish childhoods are a very good predictor of actively Jewish adulthoods. The memories of those childhoods, and in particular of observant parents, grandparents, or teachers, are crucial to the beliefs and behavior adopted later in life. Molly has returned to a Jewish commitment that is very different in its content from the one she knew as a child. She does not believe or practice as her parents did. But the salience and intensity of that commitment are very similar to the Judaism in which she was raised.

Molly took pains to stress the degree to which she had stepped out of any path prepared for her by parents and teachers. Like other American Jews of her generation, Molly has had to make a great many choices concerning Jewish belief and practice along the way. The Judaism to which she is currently attached is not one that she has simply grown into or inherited, but one that she herself has fashioned from the large repertoire of possibilities available.

For virtually every one of the Jews we interviewed, we could not get at what matters to them about Judaism by simply marking organizational affiliations or counting charitable donations or ticking off synagogue visits. Only by hearing personal stories can one comprehend the Judaism wrapped up in those stories. That is so in part because Jews such as Molly, compared to predecessors a generation or two ago, define themselves far less by denominational boundaries (Reform, Conservative, Orthodox) or institutional loyalties (Hadassah, Jewish community centers, synagogues). Their Jewish identities are not constituted by organizational activity, do not center on concern for the State of Israel, and do not arise out of anxiety about anti-Semitism.

What matters to the Jews we interviewed, rather, are powerful individual memories and experiences. Personal journeys and experiences, especially if shared with other family members, are the stuff out of which their Judaism is now imagined and enacted, a Judaism constructed and performed one individual at a time.

## **A Personal Journey**

David is an administrator and faculty member at a major West Coast university. He reads widely on politics, history, Jewish issues, and science fiction. His politics are liberal. Are his political convictions linked to his Judaism? "I never really thought of the origins of it. I was clearly brought up in a liberal agnostic Jewish family where I was aware of being Jewish but without Jewishness being an issue very much, in fact not at all, but where sympathy for the underdog [was expected]." David's maternal grandfather, descended from a long line of rabbis in Prague and Berlin, was born in Palestine; his father's family was Orthodox until his father's generation.

Judaism did not figure prominently in David's home as a child, though Jewish ethnic consciousness was strong: his father served for many years on the medical staff at a Jewish-sponsored hospital, and his mother worked as a volunteer for the local Jewish Federation. But there was "no Hebrew school, no Sunday school," and there was a tree at home every Christmas. His brother requested a bar mitzvah, which took place at the largest Reform temple in San Francisco, but David was not interested in having one, and his parents did not care.

David said that he first became acutely aware of being Jewish at the New England prep school he

attended during high school. However, the truly transformative events came later, beginning with a trip to Germany in the context of overseas study during college. "I went to Munich. I didn't know quite why, what I was supposed to see or what I was supposed to do. I didn't speak German, I needed to go to Dachau. I didn't know anything about Dachau....I didn't know the word for concentration camp. People pointed me in the right direction. It blew my mind. It absolutely blew my mind. Not that I learned something factually...but just the experience of seeing it...that really affected me. I came back and I now knew I was Jewish. I was connected to that part of modern Jewish history in some way." The "next significant event" was the Six-Day War. "I remember watching the news and seeing those arrows sweeping through [a map of] the Sinai, and those arrows were my arrows."

At his wife's insistence, his wedding was performed by a rabbi. "I could've married a non-Jew very easily. The fact that M was Jewish, however, by that time was an appealing feature, though I didn't know much about what that meant, to be Jewish." The couple's Jewish observance was at first limited to attending Passover seders to which they had been invited and going to High Holiday services at the campus Hillel Foundation. "I liked seders. The seder was my introduction to Judaism as a tradition. It didn't involve a profession of faith." At the time, David's father-in-law, a committed Reform Jew, complained that "I wasn't Jewish enough and that didn't appeal to me." Synagogue did not appeal to him then either. The couple eventually joined the local Reform temple, when their older daughter turned five. That affiliation, David said, was "the key thing" in his adult Jewish identity. "It gave me a formal membership in the Jewish community. It was a public statement of being a Jew. Slipping in and out of a Jewish service on High Holidays was not. My body could be there but not my heart. Now I was paying good money to do this."

David still has trouble finding meaning in the liturgy, but over the years he has grown more and more involved in Jewish life. He serves on the boards of the local Jewish Community Relations Council and of Hillel, takes classes on various aspects of Jewish history and thought, and finds meaning in holiday and life-cycle rituals, particularly when they involve his family.

What does David want Jewishly for his children? Had we asked a few years ago whether it mattered to him that his children marry Jews, David replied that he would have said, "All I want is for them to be happy." Now, he is not certain about his indifference to the religion of their spouses, though he knows he would object to an intermarriage with a "religious Christian." David draws lines between Jews and non-Jews in other ways as well, sometimes unequivocally. For example, David reacts differently toward the persecution of Jews than toward the persecution of other groups. "Those are my people. Those killed in Argentina [in a bombing of the Jewish community center]: those are my people." David has never been to Israel, though he has thought about going. He follows news reports about it carefully. The only thing he dislikes about being Jewish is the internal borders erected by Jews who insist that there is only one right way to be Jewish. "The notion that there is a good Jew and a bad Jew...the fact that people would judge other people and use Judaism as a boundary line or something is...threatening to me."

## **Another Journey**

Most of Molly's time at present is taken up by work and family. Her volunteer activity is focused on her children's school and on their (Reform) synagogue. Molly was born in Ohio, went to public school, and moved to Michigan for college and medical school.

Her parents belonged to a Conservative synagogue, and their home was kosher and "reasonably observant." Education was a very important value in her home. It was clear all along that Molly would go to college, though the point as far as her parents were concerned might well have been "to meet a guy."

Molly remembers her parents as being inconsistent where Jewish practice was concerned. She was not allowed to color or to play solitaire or pick-up baseball on the Sabbath, but her mother and aunt often spent the day shopping. "I had difficulty with what my parents would and would not tolerate." The family went to synagogue every Friday night, but on Saturdays, when Molly attended services even after her bat mitzvah, her parents did not. Molly was active as a teenager in United Synagogue Youth, the youth group of Conservative Judaism. The Jewish figure Molly remembers most fondly from childhood is her maternal grandfather. He was "probably the biggest influence in terms of what I wanted to be, the sweetest, kindest person I have ever met, very insightful but very nonjudgmental." Her father's father died in a transit camp in Vichy France during the Holocaust. It was clear to her as a child that "this was something we did not talk about." The story emerged, she says, only gradually.

In high school, several years after the bat mitzvah memory, Molly unexpectedly fell in love with a non-Jewish boy. It provoked the "rote response" from her parents that "you can't do this, you can't see him, we don't approve." She is "not sure that conversation about this changed anything, but it meant I had to choose, I could be Jewish or care for him, and that was a point where I was going to care for him." The relationship precipitated further rejection of involvement with Judaism. She quit USY as well as a Jewish high school sorority. This made her mother more upset. At the same time, the Jewish teenagers of her acquaintance, who had

once run around the synagogue together and noticed each other skipping the "Christ our Lord" lines when singing Christmas carols in public school, now stopped being engaged in Jewish activities. One by one they dropped out of Hebrew school and synagogue life, and drifted apart. Later in the interview we learned that Molly's grandfather also died around this time. When that happened, Molly "seriously questioned the existence of God, and no one around me was able to help me through that period."

A few years later Molly fell in love with and eventually married a man who was not Jewish. This was "a really big deal for me then." Religion was not very important to her at that point, Molly recalls, but being Jewish was. She made it clear to S before they decided to marry that she "could not deal with Christmas trees and the kids had to be Jewish." But at the same time she "could not ask S to convert, because that was important to my parents." The latter were very upset at the prospect of an intermarriage. "My mother's first comment was 'who will marry you?'" (They found a rabbi who agreed to do the ceremony.) It took five years for her parents to accept S, Molly reports, and when he converted to Judaism a few years ago "my parents went crazy in the opposite direction. They were thrilled beyond belief."

The conversion took Molly completely by surprise. Her husband "just announced it, it was not something we discussed." S had been doing a lot of reading about Judaism, had taken courses in Jewish history and thought along with Molly in the context of Me'ah, a high-level adult Jewish education program held at their local Reform synagogue, and had enjoyed ritual activities with the family.

The adult education program had another impact as well. A year before, Molly reported, S had been



unwilling to consider sending their children to a Jewish day school. He was not interested in private schools of any kind. After a year of Me'ah, S went to see a nearby Reform day school and was impressed. Molly feels good about the way Judaism is now infusing her children's lives. They are in a Jewish environment all day long at school and feel very good about that. This year her sons were far more involved in the family seder than ever before. They wrote stories which the adults read. Molly and her family not only celebrate Passover ("my favorite") but also the High Holidays, Hanukkah, and Purim, as well as Shabbat. Friday night is a family time together at home, with occasional synagogue attendance. Saturday mornings Molly goes to services by herself. She once found the experience incredibly lonely. Now she enjoys the time it furnishes for peaceful introspection.

What does Molly like about being Jewish? Feeling part of a community, the structure given her year by the Jewish calendar, feeling the continuity of history over thousands of years, the relationship with writings that have been studied for generations "and I can read them and think about them as well." What does she not like? Intolerance toward diversity. "I feel bad for people who don't think there's anything for them in Judaism and who have let their bad experiences of Sunday school or whatever drive them away. I'm not so far from that place." What does she want for her children Jewishly? "I'd love to see them marry Jewish people because I'd like their Jewishness to stay important in their lives. But it would be hypocritical to demand it, because I didn't do it. Our lives have taken a turn in terms of depth and breadth of Jewishness [since S's conversion, but before that] it was still a Jewish household. It matters to me more that they continue to live as Jews and their children be Jews."

The most important thing a Jew should do as a Jew, Molly concluded, is to study. "In whatever way. As

the rabbis said, from study comes everything else. I don't profess to know enormous amounts, I just started studying a year and a half ago, but I see the effect it's had on my life. The rabbis hit it on this one. It gave me a sense of belonging and of why being Jewish does and can fill your life with meaning."

## Choosing Judaism

Both Molly and David are fully aware of (and happy with) the fact that they have chosen Judaism, but believe nonetheless that it was theirs all along. It is a birthright which they have voluntarily claimed, a given which they have autonomously elected to receive.

We heard this sentiment time and again from our respondents. They do not seem bothered by the paradox involved in what some American Jewish religious thinkers have called "choosing chosenness"--freely deciding to take on commitments which one could have rejected, and yet which define the person one is and always was. Fully 94 percent of those we surveyed concurred with the simple declaration, "Jews are my people, the people of my ancestors"--this, despite the fact that they jealously guarded their right to choose or reject this legacy as they pleased.

Joshua is a young artist who lives in Berkeley, a single man who has never dated a Jewish woman and is only marginally involved with the Jewish community. But he said, "I think I identify very strongly with Judaism. I mean I always thought of myself as a Jew as something very central to who I was." The minute he is introduced to people for the first time, Joshua reported, his obviously Jewish first and last names broadcast his identity.

The simultaneous conviction held by Joshua, and

many others, is that Judaism is (1) a *given* from birth, identity in the strict sense of total overlap with who one is as a person, and (2) a *choice* one makes, and is entitled to make, even if one chooses not to choose it. Because Judaism is a given, it is fully possessed no matter what one elects to make of it. One cannot become more Jewish by opting for greater Jewish involvement, and cannot become less Jewish by opting for less. No Jews are more Jewish than other Jews. One does not sacrifice any quotient of Jewishness by marrying a non-Jew, because the identity resides in the self and is independent of the course one's life takes.

This rather tribalist conception of identity goes along with beliefs and practices that are profoundly universalist and personalist. Our subjects almost all believe in God, but not in a God who exercises special providence for, or gives special revelations to, Jews or any other group. Some confess to greater concern for Jewish suffering than for suffering inflicted on other human beings--but they are almost always uneasy with this sentiment. Almost all have been touched by the Holocaust directly or indirectly, but many--unlike Molly and David--see no specifically Jewish meaning in the event, no significance to their lives as Jews, and no lessons for Jewish history. Even the most observant and active of our interviewees expressed discomfort with the idea of commandment, all the more so with the notion of particular commandments issued by God (or assigned by Jewish groups) to Jews alone.

At the same time, they maintain a shared definition of Judaism that is tribal despite their own misgivings about tribalism, one that holds that a Jew who does not convert to another faith is always a Jew and is always the parent of Jewish children, assuming they do not convert either. Such are the complexities of choice and birthright in late-twentieth-century America.

## The Roots of Traditional Jewish Identity

These dilemmas, we believe, are new. American Jews have begun to face these only in the current generation, a sign, perhaps, of a significant shift in the understanding of Jewish selfhood.

Before the modern period, Jews took for granted a conviction of *essential Jewish difference* from non-Jews. Both Jewish doctrine and Jewish ritual posited an axiomatic and dichotomous view of self and other, a distinction between "Israel" and "the nations of the world" as fundamental and self-evident as the difference between day and night. The Torah (in Exodus 19) declares the Israelites gathered at Sinai to be God's "kingdom of priests and holy nation." God had redeemed them from Egyptian bondage in order to set them apart as a "peculiar treasure," thereby making them (and only them) a party to a unique covenant that, according to the Torah, would remain in force forever. When the Israelites were exiled to Babylonia in 586 B.C.E., the prophets interpreted the debacle as confirming rather than disconfirming the people's status as God's elect. Exile was God's punishment for their misdeeds. God took special note of their wrongdoing, and would give them a chance to make amends. Their return to the land decades later was taken as a sign of God's forgiveness, and proof that the prophetic account of God's relation with them was correct.

This self-understanding apparently remained in place during the historical vicissitudes of the centuries which followed. It survived intact the challenge posed by the second exile, this time by the Romans in 70 C.E.--a tragedy interpreted by the founders of Christianity as proof that God had abandoned the old partner to the covenant and

elected a new one. The teachers and jurists who assumed national leadership in the wake of defeat by the Romans, known to us as "the rabbis," provided rites and forms which countered that thrust. Jews survived as "a people dwelling alone" for nearly two millennia, secure in the framework of Judaism still practiced by many Jews today. The covenant remained in force, despite Christian (and, later, Muslim) claims to the contrary and the periodic miseries of Jewish history. Teachings and rites encompassed nearly every aspect of daily existence with instruction in the nature of Jewish selfhood. Jews *were* a people apart, scattered among the nations. Each individual Jew came into this inheritance at birth as a member of the covenant people.

Three basic component elements constituted the view of self and world put forward in the doctrine of election, all three evident in the Torah and reiterated in the countless texts which reinforced it over the centuries. *Exclusivity* was one: the basic and inevitable apartness of Jews from non-Jews. The character of daily Jewish interactions with non-Jews (or the lack of interactions) confirmed a distinction as basic as the difference between Sabbath and weekday. *Covenant* was a second component: Jews were bound not only to fellow Jews but to God—and bound to each of these covenant partners by the tie binding them to the other. Religion was inseparable from nationhood. A Jew was born simultaneously into a people and a faith, both of which entailed a regimen of lifelong obligation. Third, however, chosenness involved *mission*; the separation of Jews from non-Jews served a divine purpose that would one day bring the entire human race to the worship of the one true God. Jewish particularity, then, was meant for a universal end. Universalism and particularism stood in perpetual tension. At the end of days, when the messiah came, Jewish and non-Jewish selves might not be essentially different. All would worship the same

God, though they would perhaps do so in different ways.

In the meantime, however, the difference between Jews and all others was pronounced. The result of teachings and historical experience alike was a notion of the Jewish collective that we might term "historical familism." *Historical* expresses the extent to which the religion, the culture, the myths, and the symbols of Judaism centered on the historical memory of one particular people. *Familism* points to the several senses in which this people regards itself as united by ties of blood, with far-reaching consequences that extend from the most abstract theological speculation to the most mundane everyday behavior.

Jews were family. They were all born into the same covenant with each other and with God. If--as occurred in rare cases--they had converted into the faith, they were known in the Jewish community as "children of Abraham and Sarah," adopting at the moment of conversion not only a religion but a family, a tribe. Non-Jews, unwilling to intermarry with Jews over the centuries, lent still more meaning to the association between religion and family. So did religiously based notions of mutual responsibility and assistance among Jews. The simple fact that Jews felt more comfortable in each other's presence than in the company of non-Jews was due in part to safety from anti-Semitism and in part to shared experience nurtured by immersion in the beliefs and customs of their tradition.

## **The Challenge of Modernity**

Modernity constituted a grave challenge to this conception of the personal and collective Jewish self. Emancipation--the opening of Western societies to Jewish participation on a formally equal

footing, or the promise of that opening--meant the sudden or gradual end to many elements of the social segregation that undergirded Jewish tribalism. Even before the granting of civil rights, the politically autonomous Jewish communities (*kehillot*) which had governed daily Jewish life for centuries had lost much of their authority, ceding effective control to emerging state and national governments. Over time Jews dispersed to non-Jewish towns, cities, and neighborhoods and integrated in lesser or greater degree into the surrounding non-Jewish societies.

Historians of the period have demonstrated that Emancipation entailed a contractual quid pro quo in which Jews agreed to sacrifice exclusivity in return for civil rights and economic opportunities. Sabbath observance, a bar to employment opportunities as well as to leisure activities, atrophied. Dietary laws, a barrier to social relations with non-Jews and so to acceptance in their society, were relaxed or abandoned. Jews increasingly worked side by side with non-Jews. Indeed, beginning with Moses Mendelssohn, arguments on behalf of Judaism itself had to be couched in the language of the non-Jewish culture which Jews had begun to internalize. The Enlightenment, unlike Christianity before it, was not seen as an opposing religion to be resisted but as an achievement of human culture, a vehicle of truth and human dignity, which many Jews sought to make their own.

How then could they make the case for chosenness? Jews could no longer deny that other peoples too, personal friends and neighbors now among them, possessed equal access to divine truth. Nor could Jews propound a distinctiveness at odds with their aspirations to civic equality. The prayer book adopted for use by the Reform congregation in Berlin in 1844 noted in its introduction that changes had been made in all prayers mentioning the chosenness of Israel.

Reform Jewish writings in particular, but not only these, played down the exclusivity inherent in the chosen people idea, re-interpreted covenant to stress the autonomy of human beings in general and of each individual vis-a-vis God, and placed more emphasis upon Israel's "mission" to bring the highest knowledge of "ethical monotheism" to all humankind.

The existence of Reform Jewish prayer books and writings signals another dramatic change in the understanding of Jewish selfhood: the need to qualify it with an adjective such as "Reform" or "Orthodox" or, later, "secular." One could now choose what sort of Jew to be, and could in some cases choose--by conversion or assimilation--not to be any sort of Jew at all. The two parts of the Sinaitic covenant, faith and peoplehood, were no longer inseverable. One could be a Jew by religion but of German or French nationality; one could regard oneself as a part of the Jewish people and profess no religious faith.

## **A Generation Seeking Acceptance**

Nowhere was this challenge to traditional selfhood more apparent than in the United States during the decades of the "second generation" (ca. 1925-1950), a period shaped by children of immigrants who sought to take advantage of political and economic opportunities that promised unparalleled acceptance by the surrounding non-Jewish society. How could such Jews proclaim their essential apartness at the very same moment when they were working so hard to become a part of an ethnically and religiously diverse America? This was played out in re-interpretations of the doctrine of chosenness. On the one hand, the aim was to preserve Jewish particularity, and in some cases to make sense of the singling out of Jews by anti-



Semites in America and by the Nazis overseas. On the other hand, the concept was stripped of any vestiges of exclusivity or superiority.

The sociological dilemma was straightforward. Jews who were at home in America, or wished to be, could not affirm either to themselves or to others that they were essentially "strangers in a strange land," exiles awaiting a return to Palestine, or God's one true chosen people. America was, after all, a society embarked on a providential mission involving all humanity. Zionism was for this reason embraced by American Jews only after Louis Brandeis and others had made it clear that the movement, in the U.S. at least, aimed only at providing a home for Jews who lacked one--and no American Jew did. Two centuries of experience with modernity had long since eroded belief by many in a God active enough in history to choose any people, and undemocratic enough to choose only one. Shorn of its theological base, chosenness seemed ethnic chauvinism. Jews were not comfortable with that. Yet if one abandoned the claim to election, what reason was there for continued apartness?

In the years prior to World War II, still vividly recalled by many older American Jews, apartness was in many respects the dominant experience, and integration a promise yet to be realized. Occupational and residential discrimination were commonplace. Jews were denied admission to elite colleges and country clubs. Anti-Semitic attitudes were widespread in the United States as the specter of Nazism hovered across the ocean. Even after the war, when barriers in America began to fall and social acceptance became more and more a reality, a degree of mutual suspicion remained.

According to author Philip Roth, writing in 1963, one was special, but did not know how or why. So "one had to invent a Jew....here was a sense of specialness and from then on it was up to you to

invent your specialness; to invent, as it were, your betterness." His inheritance, Roth said, was a "psychology without a content, or with only the remains of a content." The psychology was perhaps no less powerful for that, and perhaps all the more so.

Elements of this psychology remain in place even today, at century's end, although Jews are strikingly different from those growing up four decades ago. Back then, Jews were just making the move from urban neighborhoods, often heavily Jewish, to the suburbs. They not only married other Jews, with very few exceptions, but for the most part numbered only other Jews among their closest friends, retained a social distance from non-Jewish co-workers, and--by virtue of the Jewish neighborhoods in which many remained, or the new suburbs in which Jews tended to cluster--encountered other Jews on a daily basis when shopping, taking their kids to the playground, or swimming at the country club.

At the same time, Jews built an impressive array of communal institutions. Federations of Jewish philanthropies raised unprecedented amounts of money, particularly after the events of May and June 1967 in the Middle East seemed to bring Jews face to face with renewed threat to their collective survival. Synagogues built impressive new buildings in the suburbs, even as they lost pride of place in the community to secular organizations which could claim to speak for American Jews as a whole rather than for particularist or partisan sectors of the population. According to Jonathan Woocher's concept of the "civil religion" which emerged and triumphed among Jews in this period, the adherents of civil Judaism included the following: that one could be a good Jew and a good American; that the separation of church and state was essential; that Jews were one people and could not permit denominational differences to divide them; that while theology was somewhat irrelevant, ensuring

Jewish survival was central; that Jewish rituals were valuable, but individuals must be free to observe them or not as they chose; that every Jew was obliged to work for the survival of Israel. "To the question of what it means to be Jewish," Woocher writes, "civil Judaism responds: to be part of a people with a proud tradition and enduring values, values which can be embodied in the life of the modern Jew and the modern Jewish community."

## **The Postmodern Jewish Self**

In several crucial respects, today's Jews are very different. They count non-Jews among their close friends and marry non-Jews in ever greater numbers. Even when they do marry Jews, they maintain that they might well have done otherwise but for the intervention of chance or circumstance. They remain anxious about the possibility of renewed anti-Semitism in America, but few reported actual experiences of such hostility in their own lives. Quite the contrary: they take for granted the opportunity for full participation in every aspect and arena of American society. They have attended some of the best universities in the country, and were not socially isolated. They know that Jews are counted among the members of the most exclusive country clubs and are represented (or over-represented) in American political and financial elites.

Despite retention of most of the principal tenets of "civil Judaism," therefore, today's moderately affiliated Jews do not fit the previous notion of what it is to be a Jew. Their connection to Israel is weak, as is the connection they feel to the organized Jewish community in America. They take the compatibility of being both Jewish and American for granted; this is simply not an issue anymore. And they are even less interested in denominational

differences than their parents' generation was, insisting on the right of individual autonomy when it comes to deciding the details of Jewish practice. On the other hand, theology is far from irrelevant to these Jews. God is often quite important to them; spirituality is a felt concern; ritual and texts resonate with religious meanings that they view positively. Their self-consciousness as Jews is strong, their claim to their birthright proud, despite their insistence, on the basis of personal struggles with their identity, that they themselves had chosen Judaism, and could have chosen otherwise. They want to be Jewish because of what it means to them personally--not because of obligations to the Jewish group or its historical destiny or the need to ensure Jewish survival (though this too remains a widespread concern). Jewish survival is not in and of itself sacred in their eyes. Jewish life, in the private spaces of self and family, is held sacred--it is that which they most deeply value.

We would suggest that this pattern marks the emergence of a postmodern Jewish self. The term "postmodern" involves several elements of selfhood that are consistent with major currents in the set of theories grouped together under the rubric of postmodernism.

Our subjects emphasize *personal meaning as the arbiter of their Jewish involvement*. Their Judaism is personalist, focused on the self and its fulfillment rather than directed outward to the group. It is voluntarist in the extreme: assuming the rightful freedom of each individual to make his or her own Jewish decisions. As a result, Judaism must be strictly nonjudgmental. Each person interacts with Judaism in ways that suit him or her. No one is capable of determining for others what constitutes a good Jew.

*Jewish meaning is not only personal but constructed, one experience at a time.* The Jews

we met exhibit unusual and diverse configurations of Jewish involvement. With the revalorization of tradition, the absolute commitment to pluralism, and the continuing assumption of individual autonomy, they feel free to borrow selectively from traditional Jewish religious and cultural sources. They also--routinely and without embarrassment--combine these Jewish elements with others drawn from the larger cultural milieu, including non-Jewish religious or spiritual traditions.

The principal arena for the construction of this meaning is the family. Judaism more and more is enacted in private space and time. Many noted a preference for Passover, because the seder takes place at home rather than in synagogue. At home each Jew is sovereign in relation to the tradition. In the synagogue, by contrast, one enters a space in which what is said and done is predetermined and prescribed.

The key to renewed interest in ritual observance among moderately affiliated American Jews involves a recognition that one need not take on any rituals with which one is uncomfortable, or associate with anyone who will challenge the Jewish choices one has made, however idiosyncratic those might be.

A related development is the *emergence of Jews who combine great concern for issues of spirituality and meaning with severely diminished interest in the organizational life of the Jewish community*. This seems to reflect a shift of passion from the public domain to the private sphere, from what post-modern theorists call the "grand narrative" (in this case, the exalted story of Jewish peoplehood and destiny) to the "local narratives" and "personal stories" of family and self. Many Jews evinced this pattern, revealing a high degree of commitment to Judaism and concern for the continued existence of the Jewish people,

accompanied by relatively infrequent participation in conventional Jewish communal activities.

Finally, *identity is far more fluid than ever before*. One can change Jewish direction, and change again, at many points in life. Almost all our subjects saw themselves as explorers in Judaism, people in perpetual quest of Jewish meaning.

Life is fluid in other senses as well. The boundaries dividing Jews from non-Jews have come to seem less essential, because they have been less fixed and of less consequence. Fully two-thirds of our survey participants agreed that "my being Jewish doesn't make me any different from other Americans." The self is more and more composed of multiple parts.

There were, of course, exceptions to these generalizations, most notably among those Jews who exhibited the highest degree of activity and involvement. Simon, a lawyer from Denver who brought his family to Israel for a year dedicated to exploring and deepening their Jewish commitment, expressed a sense of humility before the tradition that we found rare. "I realize, the more I study, the more I know how much I don't know; the more I wade into the sea of Jewish knowledge, the more I realize how big it is, and how deep it is, and how wide it is. I didn't have any idea before; I was barely on the beach, let alone in the sea."

While these sentiments were somewhat exceptional, they highlight the fact, true in nearly all cases we encountered, that we are not witnessing an extreme turn inward by Jewish selves uninterested in Judaism or the Jewish people or in Jewish community at the local level. Our subjects remain Jews who value their membership in a people three thousand years old. No less than 94 percent agreed that "Jews have had an especially rich history, one with special meaning for our lives today." The individuals we interviewed expressed

6/10/2009

"The Sovereign Self: Jewish Identi...

pride in their participation, real or vicarious, in the achievements of the Jewish people in the present day. The Jews we met celebrated Jewish community where they sensed real connection, and voiced the desire for more such community. They took no pleasure in the "invisibility" of their religion; indeed they could rarely become aware of themselves as Jews, let alone sustain Jewish involvement, except in the presence of extremely "significant others" and with the help of the community and its tradition.

Indeed, if those we interviewed are and seek to be autonomous, sovereign selves, who carefully weigh every commitment they make and no less carefully guard their options for transferring commitments as they please, they are only exhibiting in the Jewish realm attitudes and behaviors which are demanded of them in every other realm of contemporary American life. Jewish families inculcate independence, initiative, agility, and personal drive no less than any other middle-class families, and savor the rewards these attributes bring no less than any others. Our subjects, at times, seem to recognize that the kind of selves they have been raised to become does not always jibe with the models of self put forward by the Jewish tradition.

As we listened to them speak, it occurred to us that a great deal of modern Jewish thought has stressed that Jewish commitment represents precisely the fulfillment of the self rather than its denial. How else could Judaism appeal to selves who had internalized notions of autonomy and agency, and for whom submission or obedience were no longer virtues to be prized? Fulfillment by means of tradition and community is very much the message preached in the synagogues of virtually every denomination these days. Our subjects have perhaps heard that message and made it their own.

Our subjects have also moved beyond the modern

6/10/2009

"The Sovereign Self: Jewish Identi...

rejection of Jewish commitment in the name of modernity, a rejection often enacted by their own parents or grandparents. They are defined as much by what they have embraced Jewishly as by what they have rejected of the tradition--and still more by *how* they have embraced it, resolutely protecting their autonomy at the same time as they reach out for meaning and community they cannot attain on their own. These are selves very much in process, engaged in fashioning a relation to the Jewish past and to other Jews that is likewise only now emerging.

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6/10/2009

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