

Race, Ethnicity, and Religion in American Jewish Identity

The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity, by Eric L. Goldstein, Princeton University Press, 2006, 307 pp.

Reviewed by Chaim I. Waxman

Jewish identity is a very complex concept that has various dimensions. The dimension most familiar in recent times is the individual, that is, the individual determinants of Jewish belonging. The issue emerged on the legal plane in Israel in the Law of Return, initially in the Brother Daniel case and, subsequently, in the efforts of various religious parties to have the law based on a halakhic definition. That would mean a Jew is someone born to a Jewish mother or one who converted "according to Halakha."

The issue is confounded by the fact that, at least in the West, ethnic and religious identity are increasingly viewed as matters of choice rather than ascription. It was recently confounded even further by the comments of the prominent Israeli author, A. B. Yehoshua, at the centennial celebration of the American Jewish Committee. He was understood as disparaging Jewish identity in the Diaspora and asserting that only Israeli Jews have a complete Jewish identity.

Defining the Group

There is another dimension of Jewish identity about which there have been strong disagreements for centuries, namely, the nature of the group definition. In an early manifestation of this issue, Rabbi Yehuda Halevi (1075-1141) and Maimonides (1135-1204) gave very different definitions. Halevi's was an essentialist perspective, Maimonides' a nominalist one. In more recent times, the issue was between a national or religious definition, as in the responses of the Assembly of Jewish Notables to Napoleon in 1806.

Eric Goldstein, an American historian, has written a fascinating, meticulously documented book that concerns another aspect of Jewish identity. He shows that American Jews' definition of the Jewish collectivity, for themselves as well as for others, has undergone significant changes over the past two centuries, to a large extent reflecting their varying sense of security in American society.

The book invites comparison with the late Charles Liebman's *The Ambivalent American Jew*.^[1] Like Liebman, Goldstein views America's Jews as living in a state of constant ambivalence and tension. For Liebman, it is a struggle between the values of integration and survival. For Goldstein, there is also a struggle between identifying with white America and, given their own history of slavery and persecution, empathy with the plight of black Americans.

The United States has long been racially divided between white and black. Because of their distinct religiocultural patterns, especially their high rate of endogamy and common historical memory, as well as the common vocabulary of the time, Jews typically defined themselves and were viewed by others as a separate race. Jews could thus legitimize their separateness while still asserting their membership in the American nation.

A Changing Status

Internal and external migration patterns during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, changed all that. The dramatic internal migration of blacks transformed them, within less than half a century, from a rural southern group to an urban group throughout the country. This, coupled with the massive immigration of eastern and southern Europeans, of whom Jews were the second largest group, changed both the way white Americans viewed Jews as well as American Jews' own self-perception and definition.

Amid growing racism and anti-Semitism, Jews reconsidered their status as whites. From the end of the nineteenth century through World War II, Jews were increasingly forced to deny their unique racial status, to proclaim their whiteness, while simultaneously struggling to maintain their own uniqueness. They also were increasingly ambivalent

toward blacks. On the one hand, blacks were those with whom they feared being associated; on the other, Jews' own millennia-old experiences as a persecuted minority enabled them to empathize with blacks and to be highly critical of their plight.

From the late 1930s, with the rise of Nazism in Germany, Jewish communal leaders embarked on asserting a new understanding of Jewishness comprised of various versions of ethnicity based on cultural background and peoplehood rather than race. Yet this, Goldstein argues, did not resolve the identity issue for America's Jews, most of whom strove to adopt and become part of the larger American culture rather than develop their own Jewish culture.

The Growth of a Culture

This is one of several manifestations of Goldstein's tendency to overgeneralize and exaggerate. Much as he, as well as A. B. Yehoshua and others, may dismiss it as incomplete and doomed, an American Jewish culture did in fact develop. Indeed, it is a culture that largely reflects Jews' unique experiences in American society. Be that as it may, Goldstein argues that, despite the ethnic definition, America's Jews continued to retain something of a racial definition of Jewishness.

He supports this argument by pointing to instances in which Jewish spokespersons lauded the accomplishments of individuals who did not manifest any specifically Jewish norms and values, or any indicators of Jewish identification. Their Jewishness, at least as far as the public was aware, was based solely on their having had a Jewish parent. Nevertheless, they had become sources of American Jewish pride.

In his epilogue, which focuses on "Jews, Whiteness and 'Tribalism' in Multicultural America," Goldstein's thesis is even more overtly Liebmanian:

As Jews achieve further and further integration, breaking down social boundaries and marrying non-Jews in record numbers, the concern for preserving Jewish distinctiveness pervades all aspects of Jewish communal activity. . . . Far from having been eliminated by Jews' increasing integration into white America, the tensions and conflicting impulses of American Jewish identity have only been accentuated. . . . [M]any American Jews want to have it both ways. (211)

Liebman was personally so convinced of the incompatibility of the values of integration and group survival, and of the inevitable "victory" of the former over the latter, that he concluded he and his family had no Jewish future in the United States, and relocated with them to Israel. For Goldstein, the solution is multiculturalism. The only thing that will save Jews from extinction as a group in America, he avers, is "the ultimate dissolution of the dominant culture of which Jews have long strived to be a part" (239).

A Problem Not Limited to Jews

In contrast with the mythical Rabbi of Anatefka who, in a case before him, found both contestants correct, it may be argued that the conclusions of both Liebman and Goldstein are wrong. The struggle that they astutely identify and analyze is not unique to the United States. Indeed, one of Goldstein's weaknesses is his exclusive focus on the experiences of Jews in the United States, which leads him to interpret the dilemma as "the price of whiteness." He seems oblivious to the Jewish tendency to describe their group distinctiveness in racial terms in Europe as well.

For example, Sigmund Freud, in a 1910 letter to his fellow psychoanalyst Karl Abraham asking him to be accepting of their colleague Carl Jung, requests: "please be patient and do not forget that it is really easier for you than it is for Jung to follow my ideas...for you are closer to my intellectual constitution because of racial kinship." Unquestionably, Freud sought acceptance into Western society and culture and, as his 1931 letter to B'nai B'rith attests, was highly conflicted about his Jewish identity. But it was not *white* society in which he sought acceptance.

As indicated earlier, many Jews have tended to describe themselves in racial terms going back at least as far as Yehuda Halevi, in societies which had no white-black dichotomy. The dilemma is not an exclusively American Jewish one; it is a dilemma for Jews in all relatively open societies. Ironically, as Liebman found out, it is not even limited to societies in which Jews are a minority. Israelis Jews are experiencing their version of the dilemma in the struggle between Jewishness and Israeliness. Indeed, it is not solely a Jewish dilemma; it is one facing all groups in modern or "postmodern" society.

The racial issue aside, the dilemma that Goldstein identifies is a very real one, and American Jews' high rate of assimilation is a very real consequence. There are also, however, indications of growth in American Jewish culture over the past several decades. The struggle is constant and perhaps has no resolution, but that does not mean America's Jews as a group are destined to extinction.

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Moreover, one may question Goldstein's faith in multiculturalism. Ironically, many of the Jewish advocates of multiculturalism are the least interested in and least tolerant of Jewish group identification and Jewish culture.

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[1] Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1973.

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