

Jewish identity? In fact, whenever Jews move to a new area, some feel the loss of identity and community. Years ago it was California that was the destination of young Jewish migrants. A few weeks ago we heard Las Vegas, the most recent relevant example, has lots of Jews with very little Jewishness. So there's a sense that whenever Jews move to a new area, they're moving to a new *trefe medinah*.

**Gans:** Not *trefe*. In those days people who kept kosher couldn't move to the suburbs.

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The young people who came to Park Forest were just Jews who knew they were Jews; it never occurred to them that they weren't. But they were suddenly a small minority in a predominantly non-Jewish community. They had come from communities where all their friends — often all the people they knew —

were Jewish, and in that situation they didn't have to think about whether they were or were not Jewish.

**Cohen:** The world had much less intentionality than we might find now. Your book, *Urban Villagers*, makes an argument that the ethnic behavior of Italian-Americans is really working class behavior. You also wrote an influential article on symbolic ethnicity in 1979 and later on symbolic religiosity in 1994 emphasizing the superficial nature of these identities among American white European-origin groups.

**Gans:** *Superficial* is your adjective. I think for the people involved, the identities were real, but they were looking for religious and ethnic expressions that were culturally more relevant to them. So they found ways in which to affirm their identity that did not conflict with the rest of their lives. What I noticed in Park Forest, I saw again in the practices of other ethnic groups. And now, immigration researchers are reporting that they are finding evidence of symbolic ethnicity among the second generation of the post-1965 immigration. 

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## Place, Space, and the Shaping of American Judaism

*Riv-Ellen Prell*

In 1954, on the 300th anniversary of Jewish immigration to North America, *Commentary*, then a relatively new magazine of opinion, culture, and politics, launched a series on American Jewish suburbanization. The editors compared it to the move from the Old to the New World and used the magazine's pages to assess its impact. *Commentary* was not alone. The new rabbinical journals of the Conservative and Reform movements, as well as a variety of other popular Jewish magazines, included articles that addressed the impact of suburbanization on Jewish life as well.

It is interesting, therefore, that Herbert Gans, to whom all of us who write about suburbanization and the postwar period are so deeply indebted for his research, told Steven M. Cohen that he did not understand himself to be "writing about suburbia." Perhaps he reflected the views of the men and women he studied, who thought about housing, their children's schooling, lawns, living among

other young families, and getting away from cities and possibly their aging parents, rather than becoming suburbanites. Perhaps it was largely intellectuals and some rabbis who shared the national critique of suburbanization of the period and who worried about Jews becoming conformist, and the passing of a way of life.

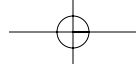
However, in hindsight, most historians and scholars of American Jewish life know that suburbanization had a huge impact on this culture, one that was closely intertwined with changes in American Jewish social class, male occupations, and a family focus on children. That realization should remind those who reflect on Jewish life, and those who live it, that the places where Jews live shape their Jewishness and their Judaism. Several issues emerge as direct consequences of Jewish suburbanization.

Jewish life changed as it became less dense, physically and socially, in suburbs. Proximity is critical to living a Jewish life. Sub-

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urbanization made the synagogue far more singular and central than it had been in the decades prior to World War II, despite the growth in philanthropic organizations. It may have hastened the narrowing of avenues for a more diverse Jewish experience. What can certainly be attributed to suburbanization was the loss of a public Jewish life that did not necessitate membership.

Suburban life paradoxically expanded and narrowed Jewish life. If one did not need to be a member of something to be a Jew in cities, suburbs encouraged participation and membership — often focusing on children. A child-oriented Judaism emphasized holidays and events as markers of difference from the larger community in which Jews lived as minorities. When children reached the age of *b'nai mitzvah* or confirmation, families often exited the synagogue, revealing that affiliation was not deeply rooted. At the same time, the self-consciousness of suburban Jews created an investment in synagogue life that led to greater religious participation for adults and children and encouraged women's meaningful involvement in new ways.

Suburbanization also, as many scholars

argue, cemented Jews into a world of privilege and whiteness because their neighborhoods were uniformly white and certainly middle class. Cities put Jews into contact with Jews of diverse classes and a racially mixed population. Suburbs were then artificial environments within the United States and Jews' liberalism flourished there in the 1950s and 1960s and went unchallenged by the urban crises that beset Jews in the city. When bussing and fair housing became suburban issues, Jews were far from uniformly progressive or liberal.

Nothing about the location of suburbs was fundamentally conservative. Baby boomers raised in the suburbs often rejected what they thought of as "its values." By the 1960s, Orthodox Jews moved to suburbia and recreated the religious institutions associated with cities. Suburban life was neither the paradise young Jews imagined when they hoped to find areas free of antisemitism where all Americans lived together happily, nor was it the nightmare that many predicted would end Jewish life. Nevertheless, it reshaped how Jews went about practicing Judaism and was perceived for decades, fairly or not, as the final step in the deracination of American Jewish culture. 

Sh'ma  
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## Suburbia: Battleground for Jewish Continuity

*Alan Silverstein*

I am profoundly honored to respond to the conversation between Steven M. Cohen and Herb Gans. Gans' assessment of the emerging suburbs of generations past offers a context to assess the suburban future of Jewish communal life. Below I share eight observations.

**1.** In 2007, suburbia is no longer the exception, the timid flight from urban areas of first and second settlement. Suburbia has emerged as the American Jewish norm for all but certain sectors of the Orthodox community.

**2.** Diversity exists within the suburban experience. Suburbs, such as Elkins Park (the suburban Philadelphia I knew in my childhood years) or Livingston (the Essex county suburbs of my rabbinical career), offer heavily clustered Jewish populations reminiscent of Jewish urban enclaves in generations past. More common, however, are suburbs in which Jews live as moderate-sized or small minorities.

**3.** Jewish/non-Jewish suburban friendship patterns in public and private schools, in civic

life, and at work have reduced Jewish/Jewish social networking. Adults socializing with peers of diverse backgrounds set into motion a similar, if not larger, pattern among their offspring.

**4.** As a counter factor, suburban Jewry's communal life no longer clusters around Jewish defense organizations. Rather, it primarily revolves around the quest for social networks forged within synagogues, federations, JCCs, and Jewish day schools.

**5.** Today, American suburban Jewry lives with a large and growing intermarried subset. As documented by Steven M. Cohen, this change accounts for much of the decline of the ethnic/peoplehood/Israel/Holocaust orientation and consensus.

**6.** Fifty years ago, Orthodox Judaism was rare in the suburban frontier. Today, both Modern/Centrist Orthodox as well as Chabad synagogues and *yeshivot* dot the landscape. They draw some of the population who might

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