

MARKETING COOL

Mitchell B. Hart

Just as there is nothing so unfunny as the analysis of a joke, there is probably nothing as uncool as an academic discussion of “what is cool.” So, as an overweight, balding, middle-aged Jewish Studies professor, I am going to refrain from offering hard-and-fast pronouncements about “cool” (bald, I should add, is indeed cool, while balding, pace Rudolf Giuliani, is surely not). Rather, I offer a few thoughts on why a concerted effort to make Jews and Judaism cool has recently emerged.

Have internal conditions – assimilation, intermarriage, the benign embrace of liberalism – produced a genuine crisis in Jewish identity and the prospects for collective American Jewish survival? And has this “crisis” influenced the effort to convince Jews, especially young, (re)productive Jews, to strengthen their identification? How much does the desire to make Jews cool have to do with this, and how much is simply the way culture works, a process from which Judaism and Jewry have never been exempt?

The obsession with making Judaism cool rests on a larger cultural notion of coolness. (We will set aside the question of whether coolness can be achieved through conscious effort or whether this very effort necessarily defines the attempt, and thus the outcome, as uncool. Nor is there room here to explore the parallel between the Jewish focus on cool and the ongoing attempt by Christian Evangelicals to make Christianity cool, in order, again, to sell it to a disaffected youth.) The emphasis on generational definitions of identity (what used to be termed “youth culture”), the grafting of Jewish images and ideas onto popular culture, reflects the broader American fascination with “cool.” Thus, the cool Jew is the natural expression at the moment of a certain segment of American Jewry, a set of images whose dissemination is facilitated by new or more open avenues of technology and communication: the online journal *Jewcy* or magazines like *Guilt and Pleasure* or *Heeb*; “kabbalah” (not to be confused with Kabbalah); and, of course, the hundreds of Klezmer bands (including Klezmer punk and reggae bands). At the same time, there is a self-consciousness here that seems palpable, a strained effort to make Judaism and Yiddishkeit relevant to Jews, to convince young Jews that “cool” and “Jewish” can comfortably co-exist.

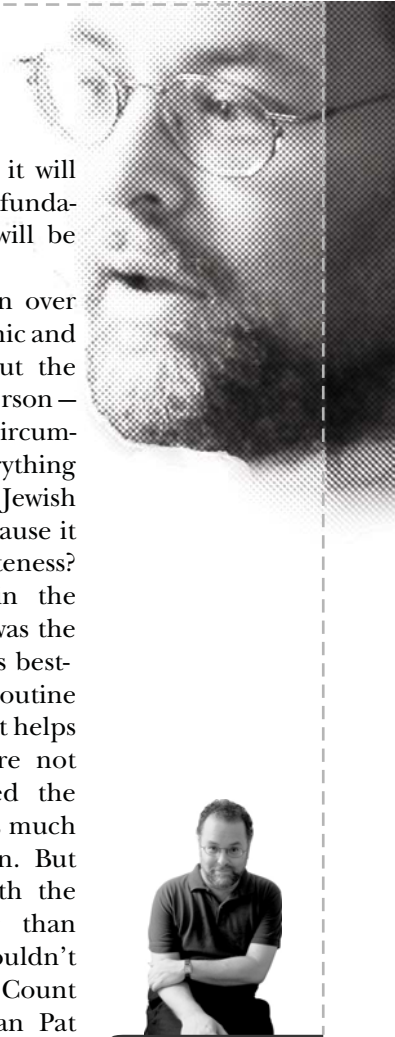
But if cool becomes just another

communal outreach strategy, ultimately it will be an unsuccessful negotiation between fundamental collective needs and ideals. It will be supremely uncool.

With the American cultural turn over the past three or four decades toward ethnic and racial and gendered diversity, just about the uncoolest thing you could be is a White person – straight up, no hyphens, no extenuating circumstances. Whitebread as symbol of everything devoid of taste, texture, complexity. Is Jewish cool an attractive proposition simply because it offers a way to escape the burden of whiteness? As many, including Jay Michaelson in the September *Sh'ma* discern, Lenny Bruce was the embodiment of the cool Jew, and also its best-known theoretician. And his best-loved routine helps us define ourselves as cool because it helps us understand that, deep down, we are not White. Of course, Jews have enjoyed the benefits in this country of “whiteness,” as much of the scholarship on whiteness has shown. But we remain distinctly uncomfortable with the category. In cultural terms (rather than economic, social, or political), who wouldn't rather be linked with Duke Ellington, Count Basie, and Louis Armstrong rather than Pat Boone, Lawrence Welk, and Perry Como?

But can you consciously will cool into being? Is this not, as so many people implicitly understand, a big part of what constitutes its opposite? Who decides if Bob Dylan is cool? Or Jon Stewart or Sarah Silverman? In the end, what value could such judgments possibly possess?

At the same time, the effort raises more profound questions about the condition of contemporary Jewish culture. Recent attempts, for instance, to make synonymous “relevant” and “cool” can make Jewishness into a product, an entity to be marketed, packaged, sold to a youth audience that requires what it consumes to be hip and cool. One's Jewishness defines a person in the way that his or her tastes in music, clothing, food, or movies are definitional. Jewishness, then, becomes one more statement or choice we make about who we are, a “thing” that has to compete with all the other products. Thus, Jews will always need to make a diligent and concerted effort to make Judaism appealing to the next generation to give it half a chance to compete with the rest of what is out there. Judaism as product, Jewishness as brand. How cool is that?



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