

The Meaning of Jewish Identity in the Context of Jewish Education  
(speech at the Education Research Conference, December 11, 2000)

There are public speakers who pander to their audiences. Many of you have heard of the speaker, an educator by the way, who appeared before the annual conference of American Jewish Federation leaders, removed his shoes in a demonstrative way, and said, “I remove my shoes since I am standing on holy ground”. My style is the opposite. I suspect that I have a subconscious need to provoke. Hence, the which I say on the subject of “Who Is a Jew?” is different when I speak to an Orthodox audience or a Reform audience. What I say about the condition of American Jews depends on whether I am speaking to an audience of Israelis or Americans. My dilemma this evening stem from the fact that this audience is composed of both Israelis and non-Israelis, Orthodox Jews and non-Orthodox Jews, religious Jews and secular Jews. How can I possibly provoke all of you?

I assume we all agree that the problem of strengthening Jewish identity in the Diaspora has fallen upon the shoulders of the school more than on that of any other institution. Whether a conscious effort to shape attitudes toward the Jewish tradition doesn't undercut efforts to impart the substance of the tradition is besides the point. Outside the Orthodox community this is what parents expect from the school and with some notable exception, they tend to be indifferent to the substance of the Jewish education which their children receive. Most Jews would categorize Noam Chomsky as an example of a Jewish educational failure. His knowledge of Hebrew or Jewish sources would be deemed a matter of secondary significance.

In Israel, strengthening Jewish identity plays a much lesser role among parents but it is of increasing concern to those Israeli educators who worry about Jewish identity which I assume includes everyone here this evening.

What do we mean by Jewish identity. What exactly should the schools be strengthening? I want to distinguish between the problem in Israel and in the Diaspora. I begin with a discussion of the problem in the Diaspora and I will confine my observations to the United States where I have conducted my research.

Until the 1980s, there was widespread agreement about what one meant by Jewish identity. It signaled loyalty to the Jewish people and the acceptance by the individual that he or she was part of the Jewish tradition along with a desire to perpetuate that tradition. Under these circumstances, finding measures of Jewish identity was a relatively simple. It was not an ideological issue. The appropriate measures of Jewish identity were both behavioral and attitudinal and numbered such items as: synagogue membership and frequency of synagogue attendance, ritual observance, the number of close Jewish as distinguished from non-Jewish friends, visits to and concern about the state of Israel, Jewish education of oneself and one's children, contributions to Jewish philanthropy, how important being Jewish was in one's life or pride in being Jewish and some times, not always, questions about one's attitude toward social justice. All items, except for the last, could be conceptually divided into measure of ethnic behavior and measures of religious behavior.

The results were fairly uniform. All the measures, with the exception of social justice, closely correlated with one another and they all correlated with age, generation in the U.S., denominational membership, income and secular education. To use the expression I first heard from Paul Ritterband, "the more, the more". The higher one scored on one measure, the higher one was likely to score on all other measures.

These measures of Jewish identity described what virtually all Jews (and non-Jews) considered to be defining characteristics of being Jewish. They were especially

important measures to rabbis and Jewish educators since it was assumed that what one wanted to do was to increase the levels of behavior or practice associated with each of these measures. It is this fact of Jewish life which has changed and I want to begin by describing these changes.

The studies of Jewish identity to which I already referred, led sociologists of American Jewry to conceptualize Jewish identity as one package. That package seemed to be getting increasingly lighter. Some added that whereas the package was getting lighter when measured in the aggregate a process of polarization was also taking place. There was at least some evidence in the 1960s and 1970s to argue that whereas the Jewish identity of most American Jews was declining, it was strengthening among many Orthodox, and among a minority of Conservative Jews. I also recall that in the sixties and seventies, anecdotal evidence pointed to a cadre of rabbis and synagogue members within the Reform movement whose Jewish identity was strengthening. As is so often the case, this anecdotal evidence was a more reliable harbinger than evidence obtained from sample surveys. In other words, whereas the package which most Jews carried was getting lighter, some Jews were assuming a heavier load.

Beginning in the 1980's some scholars began to suspect that there were two packages rather than one. I became conscious of this possibility in 1979 when I conducted an in-house study at the invitation of the American Jewish Congress. I found that their traditional forms of activity, political and ethnic in nature, were unable to attract a younger constituency whereas their most successful activities were those which appealed to the private or individual side of their constituents; their artistic, spiritual, and quasi religious sensitivities. I expressed this notion in an article in Midstream<sup>1</sup>. I noted that Judaism comprised both religious and ethnic dimensions

and it was possible that these two dimensions were not as intertwined in the lives of American Jews as many of us once thought. Steven Cohen found statistical support for this notion in his monograph Religious Stability and Ethnic Decline.<sup>2</sup> The title of the monograph tells it all.

But two packages did not satisfy others. In the last few years we find the notion that the packages have unraveled. *Hispardu hakhavelot*, as the Gemara says. Or, to put it another way, there are no longer one or even two major packages but an almost infinite variety of packages which a Jew might pick up and discard a number of times in his life journey. This new approach was reinforced by some contemporary social psychological theory. Identity, it was now argued was multi-valenced. Each of us constructed our own ethnic or religious identity in which elements of our other identities (gender, professional, family, etc.) mixed together to form unique patterns. That which one person meant by calling him or herself Jewish might be quite different from that which another person meant, and what one meant by calling oneself Jewish at one point in one's life or how strongly one felt about one's Jewish identity at any one point in one's life might vary greatly with what one meant by calling oneself Jewish at another point in one's life. Traditional measures of Jewish identity, it was argued, were inadequate. These were "ghetto measures" as one observer put it.<sup>3</sup> In this new age, one in which identity was so highly individualized, it was appropriate to seek new measures that would record the manner in which Jews identified as Jews.

This new conception of Jewish identity suited to the proclivities of many communal leaders, philanthropists and even Jewish educators to whom "the bad news" which the classic measures of Jewish identity conveyed, were unacceptable, too challenging and a reflection perhaps on their own failures. If one can argue that it isn't Jewish identity which is declining but rather that measures of Jewish identity are

inadequate, everyone comes away happy. At least in the short run. And so, a new conception of Jewish identity now vied with the older one. Instead of one package which was getting lighter or two packages only one of which was getting lighter we now have many many small packages, perhaps no packages at all but in any case packages that do not lend themselves to aggregation and to measures of weight. This ideally suits the proclivities of many Jewish communal leaders, philanthropists and even leaders including leaders of Jewish educational institutions. According to one educational leader, “there are as many Jewish identities and as many paths to them as there are Jews”<sup>4</sup>. There is a measure of truth in this statement today as there was in the past (it is almost true by definition), but the statement is basically misleading because it suggests that the traditional measures of Jewish identity are not good predictors to the most significant forms of Jewish behavior from a religious as well as a communal perspective. Nevertheless, this argument so suits the proclivities of prominent leaders in Jewish organizational life that, the absence of evidence notwithstanding, it has won their accolades. What all this means is that whereas in the past everybody agreed that the role of Jewish professionals was to increase the level of Jewish identity, as defined by the old measures, more and more Jews, including many of their leaders, no longer felt obliged to do so.

These developments which took place in the last decade are not unrelated to the manner in which the 1990 NJPS results were understood. The NJPS, as initially interpreted, did nothing to challenge the manner in which Jewish identity was conceived. The results, as interpreted by Jewish communal leaders and rabbis, strengthened and publicized the sense of a declining Jewish identity and undermined the notion of a Jewish renaissance. The perceived decline, highlighted by the 52 percent intermarriage figure, an exaggerated figure as we now know, sharpened an

awareness among American Jewish leaders of the threat to Jewish continuity and survival in the U.S. After all, what the NJPS showed was a weakened sense of *Jewishness* as much as a diminished commitment to Judaism. There were a variety of responses as to how the organized Jewish community should react to these findings. One response, expressed most vigorously in an article written by Jack Wertheimer, Steven Cohen and myself in Commentary magazine<sup>5</sup>, was a call to strengthen the commitment of the moderately affiliated Jews and ignore those whose identity was weakest. Others argued that the answer was to invest resources among those whose identity was weakest including and perhaps especially the intermarried.

This is a good opportunity to clarify my own objection to the strategy which emphasizes outreach to the intermarried or those uninvolved in Jewish life. My fear was that in formulating a strategy which would appeal to marginally affiliated Jews, especially to the intermarried, one would have to transform central elements of Judaism to render it palatable. In retrospect I am far less certain today than I was a few years ago that I am correct. The transformation of which I was fearful is certainly taking place, but it is not taking place in order to appeal to the marginal Jew. It is not taking place as a strategy but as part of what Sylvia Barack Fishman in her most recent book, Jewish Life and American Culture<sup>6</sup> has called “coalescence”—the assumption by the vast majority of American Jews that contemporary American culture and the regnant values in urban middle class American society are identical with the values of Judaism. The message which is presented to the potential convert as Judaism is indeed the essence of Judaism in the eyes of those making the presentation. The message, whether it is presented to affiliated or unaffiliated Jews, marginal or involved Jews, is basically the same message. At its core is the notion that Judaism’s concerns are universalistic rather than particularistic, that Judaism is

concerned with the individual rather than with the collective (a message which is rarely articulated but conveyed by that which is emphasized and that which is ignored), that in matters of ritual it is the individual who decides for him/herself what is or is not appropriate, and that ritual is to be understood principally as embodying ethical and moral values. It follows, from what I have said, that Reform Judaism comes closest to embodying core notions of American Judaism and in this respect, I believe, an important change has taken place in American Jewish life in the past two decades.

It is not surprising that given this understanding of Judaism, traditional measures of Jewish identity now appeared inadequate. They were inadequate for a number of reasons. First, they no longer measured what was really important. They measured items like Sabbath or kashrut observance, or the number of one's closest friends who were Jewish, or support for Israel – measures which some Jewish leaders no longer deemed important. Secondly, the traditional indices, as I noted, showed that among the three major religious denominations, Orthodox Jews scored highest on measure of Jewish identification and Reform Jews the lowest. This was simply an unacceptable result. Finally, the traditional indices suggested either declining Jewish commitment and identity, or at best the polarization of American Jews with a growth among the strongly committed (the rise in day school attendance is the best measure of this strengthening) but an even greater numerical growth among the least committed (intermarriage figures were often cited as the best evidence for this). But a polarization thesis is even more of an anathema to Jewish organizational leaders than a thesis which points to a steady, albeit slow decline in Jewish identity. The polarization thesis suggests to many Jewish leaders that many of their most important constituents and financial supporters, perhaps they themselves belong in the camp of

those on the path to assimilation. Most frightful of all, the traditional measures of Jewish identity, however one interprets them, are measures which judge some Jews as better Jews than others. Judgements concerning the quality of one's Jewish life, of the decisions one has made with respect to that life, of the values which are anchored in the kinds of choices one makes concerning ritual observance, or friendship groups, or support for Israel, violate core notions of contemporary American Jewish culture, its organizational culture in particular. The worst violation of this organizational culture is to make any kind of assertion about what is or is not Jewishly authentic or Jewishly proper. I recall a discussion last year in a Federation group which had just run a very successful seminar on marketing the synagogue. The questions was raised about how Federation would respond if Jews for Jesus had asked to be included in the seminar. The Federation professional at the meeting responded that it is a good thing they didn't ask to be included since Federation had no criteria for excluding them.

The challenge to traditional measures of Jewish identity takes different forms. What they all share is the notion that there is no system of beliefs or behaviors that is useful in defining higher or lower, stronger or weaker Jewish identity – either because we don't know what these indicators are or because there are no such indicators. Among those taking the lead in this new effort to redefine Jewish identity are heads of important Jewish educational enterprises in the U.S. For example, according to Jonathan Woocher, the executive director of JESNA, the key problem facing American Jewish organizations is “poor marketing.” Now Jon Woocher has made important contributions to American Jewish life. I admire his work on behalf of Jewish education so I wish to make it clear that what I am citing is a particular article by Woocher. Effective marketing, according to Woocher, demands that we determine who our customers are and what they seek. But by implication, his paper constitutes a

case against the Jewish community or its leaders determining standards to which it expects Jews to adhere. Instead, the customers who include “a growing population of intermarrieds” who are not prepared to remain invisible (emphasis in the original)” are to dictate the kinds of services that the Jewish community should provide.<sup>7</sup>

According to Woocher:

Looking at institutional life from the perspective of the client has enormous and far reaching implications. Of all the steps we might take to make Jewish life more attractive, accessible and affordable, this is probably the most important because it gets to the heart of what the Jewish community must be about on the threshold of a new millenium.<sup>8</sup>

Steven Cohen and Arnold Eisen chose a small sample of American jews in order to explore the meaning Judaism had for them.<sup>9</sup> After extensive interviews they found they could divide the respondents into those with higher and those with lower levels of involvement in Jewish life and practice. And this is precisely the kind of dichotomy which today’s organizational leaders fear. An overview and summary of the study appeared in a pamphlet published in 1998. David Gordis, President of Boston’s Hebrew College responded to the study as follows:

...the strength of these narratives lies not in suggesting how the community can move the “lower” group up... We should be hearing what these people are saying to us about who they are in order to learn from them, not in order to determine how to make them conform to what we know to be the proper way.<sup>10</sup>

... What the “unconventional” Jews have to say to us may be far more important than anything we have to say to them.<sup>11</sup>

An extreme variant in this school of thought is the position of Irwin Kula, director of CLAL, one of the leading organizations in adult Jewish education, urges. Kula not only directs a major institution for adult Jewish education but is a very popular lecturer and has delivered several major addresses before key national Jewish organizations. In an article of his that appeared in the March 19, 2000 edition of New

York City's major Jewish weekly, Jewish Week titled "The Transformation of Jewish Identity" he wrote:

...the "assimilation" of the present era ought to be understood as something else entirely; not as a flight from Jewishness but as its healthy normalization in an era of genuine acceptance of Jews as Jews. This normalization is in fact the necessary condition to the full realization of Jewish consciousness.

...Statutory prayer, extensive Talmud study, and rigorous ritual observance – all of these behaviors are indeed important. Historically they were normative expressions of Jewishness.

But it may well be that these long established forms, even if upgraded, are too circumscribed for this new era in Jewish history.

I reject statements by educational leaders which I interpret as legitimating assimilation, justifying low levels of Jewish affiliation and displaying indifference to traditional Jewish norms. I fear that Jewish educators may forget that one cannot educate, one cannot transmit a core set of values unless one projects a measure of certainty about what it is that commands one's commitment.

I don't wish to mislead you. I don't think that observance or non-observance of *halakha* constitutes an adequate measure of Jewish identity. The coherency which characterized older patterns of Jewish behavior and ritual observance no longer adhere. We were once confident in the scalability of Jewish ritual. When I first heard of a young man wearing a kippah who was seen getting off a bus to join the crowd of Jews at a *tashlich* ceremony I dismissed the incident as an anomaly. What I should have understood is that the phenomenon of *hazara b'tshuvah* which takes different forms in different denominations would upset the neat scales in which we social scientists had placed so much confidence. The observance of customs that are of minor importance on the *halakhic* scale while commandments of far greater *halakhic* significance are violated is increasingly commonplace and suggests that whether one does or does not adhere to Jewish law is inadequate to understand Jewish behavior. We need additional measures of Jewish religious behavior and we need measures of

ethnic behavior which point to broader avenues of attitude and behavior than was true of our previous measures and we need to carefully study the relationships between these measures. Finally, as I already suggested, we need ethnographic studies to understand such matters as why Jews do or do not belong to a synagogue, do or do not pray, do or do not send their children to Jewish schools. But this is a far cry from stating that social scientists much less Jewish schools or the Jewish organizations have no business affirming standards of Jewish behavior which, in their opinion are conditions for Jewish continuity and cultural growth. The admission that the observance of traditional Jewish norms is not as coherent or scalable as it was in the past is a far cry from admitting that synagogue affiliation or denominational affiliation or attendance at Jewish schools are no longer good predictors of Jewish commitment. Every study we have continues to indicate as much. Educators must not fall prey to the efforts of Jewish organizational leaders to blur this fact.

What about Jewish identity in Israel? Here I 'm afraid many of us are guilty of the opposite mistake. As events in the past few months demonstrate, ethnicity, without moral constraint is dangerous. I have no doubt that strengthening ethnic Jewish identity is not sufficient without the strengthening of moral constraints. And this not only means that Jewish ethnicity needs to be projected with a heavy dosage of Judaism, it means that Judaism has to be interpreted in a manner which at least until recently one was hard pressed to find within the Israeli religious community and which still exists only at its periphery. Nevertheless, if I turn my attention to the non-religious schools, especially those populated by middle class secular Ashkenazi students, I see their graduates losing their Jewish moorings. The very best of them, at least among the very best academically and intellectually, no longer share the basic Jewish loyalties and convictions of an older generation. I grant you that part of this is

the fault of the religious establishment. The intolerance ignorance and dull mindedness that characterizes the religious establishment has turned young people against the Jewish religion. And since the religious establishment has been ceded a monopoly on the interpretation of Judaism, it has turned these youngsters against Judaism and transformed the matter of being Jewish into an identity marker of little consequence. I am also prepared to accept as a fact of life, that living in a Jewish state, almost by definition, trivializes Judaism and Jewishness. It ceases to become, as it is in the free Diaspora, a matter of choice. After all, how many people in their right mind, who are born Jewish in Israel, would choose not to be Jewish. But that is hardly a basis upon which to build an identity. As we now learn to our dismay, a deep conviction or identity with Judaism and Jewishness fails in a competition with universalistic morality, human rights, and the cry for personal autonomy. These become stronger identity markers and to the extent that they are viewed as inimicable to Judaism, Judaism or Jewish loyalty, Judaism and Jewishness are the losers.

### **QUOTE FROM BG**

The challenge to develop Jewish identity in the non-religious school is a serious one. we can only thank the post Zionists and the Ministry of Education for its new text books and curriculum innovations. They have forced the issue onto the public agenda in a way that those of us who are concerned about the atrophy of Jewish identity among secular Israelis could never have done by ourselves.

You, not I, are the experts in creating alternate curricula and classroom material. I have no suggestions to make in this regard. But I do wish to make two points which I hope will set the tone for a non violent culture war which I welcome. First, strengthening Zionist loyalties or patriotic Israeli loyalties is not enough. I hope that we all subscribe to the notion that Israel should be a state for all its citizens.

Unfortunately, since the post Zionists have made it their slogan it is not something we can echo. But it is worth remembering that even those of us who are strongly committed to a Jewish state are no less committed to equal rights for all citizens. At the same time we mustn't forget that those who oppose our presence here do so because we are Jews, not because we are Israelis. This is a fact which has both historical and contemporary significance and those who write text books which ignore or obfuscate this are betraying their basic responsibility as educators. So Jewishness and Israeliness are necessarily connected. But it is Jewishness and strengthening Jewish identity which is of primary concern to me.

Strengthening Jewish identity and commitment to the Jewish people means that we have to think of Jewishness in non-religious as well as religious terms. We dare not dismiss definitions of a good Jew which lack a religious component. A traditional component is necessary. Awareness and celebration of Jewish holidays is certainly part of any definition of a good Jew. But belief that the celebration of the tradition is primarily an historical rather than a divine mandate does not preclude one from being a good Jew. The rhetoric of the religious leadership in this regard is bad enough but I worry that it has penetrated non-religious circles as well. Thus, for example, I think it unfortunate that serious surveys of Israeli Jews categorize respondents around their attitudes to "fulfilling commandments" when in fact many if not most Israeli Jews who light candles Friday night, or recite kiddush, or fast on Yom Kippur are not "observing commandments" but are participating in the folkways of the Jewish people. Such practices ought to be encouraged in our schools, they do strengthen Jewish identity, and they will not be encouraged and the exhortations of teachers may fall on deaf ears as long as they are considered "religious commandments". There is nothing new in what I am saying. It was an assumption

within the mainstream of Labor Zionism and of General Zionism in the early period. The problem was that to our founding fathers Jewish identity was so taken for granted that they didn't feel they needed to devote much thought or resources to its strengthening. And the programs they did eventually devise were woefully inadequate.

Strengthening Jewish identity in Israel and the Diaspora is not the same thing. The tasks that lie before educators are not the same. But neither are they totally distinct. Bearing that in mind, I believe there is a great deal that those of us devoted to this goal can learn from one another and I expect that this conference constitutes an important step in that direction.

---

<sup>1</sup> Charles S. Liebman, "'American Jews and the 'Modern Mind'" Midstream, 27 (April, 1981), 8-12.

<sup>2</sup> Steven M. Cohen, Religious Stability and Ethnic Decline (New York: Jewish Community Center Association, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Adam Simms, "What Assimilation? American Judaism has evolved but ghetto-bred 'continuity' fetishes have not." Long Island Jewish World (December 20, 1996), p.2.

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Woocher, "Comments" in Cohen and Eisen, The Jew Within, p. 59.

<sup>5</sup> Jack Wertheimer, Charles Liebman and Steven Cohen, "How to Save American Jews," Commentary, 101 (January, 1996), pp. 47-51

<sup>6</sup> Sylvia Barack Fishman, Jewish Life and American Culture (Albany: State University Press of New York, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Woocher, If You Build It, Will They come? Accessibility, Affordability and Participation in Jewish Communal Life, (Los Angeles: University of Judaism The Center for Policy Options, 1999), p.8.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>9</sup> Steven M. Cohen and Arnold Eisen, The Jew Within:  (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).

<sup>10</sup> David Gordis, "Reflections on 'The Jew Within'" in Cohen and Eisen, The Jew Within, p. 57.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p. 58.