Generation Gap?

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The **Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs** recently published an **interview** with BJPA director Steven M. Cohen as part of their **Changing Jewish Community Series**. In that piece, Cohen shares reflections from his decades of work in Jewish demography, with a particular focus on what 'younger Jews' (under 40 - being Jewish is like drinking the fountain of youth, is there another community so generous in its definition of young?) are like today.

The interview contains a lot of tidbits that probably won't surprise people - younger Jews tend to feel less attached to Zionism and Israel, tend to place a lower value on denominational and ideological affiliation, to resist coercive expectations, to more highly value choice and individuality, and to place emphasis on Jewish principles and culture rather than Jewish security.

But one of the more unusual and most interesting aspects of the interview is Prof. Cohen's self-reflectiveness as a baby boomer looking outside and forwards from his own generation.

> "In the year 2000, together with Arnold Eisen, now chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary [JTS], I had written The Jew Within.[2] It explained how our generation, the Baby Boomers, differed from that of our parents who came of age during the Depression. After finishing the book, I honestly thought that American Judaism had taken individualism to the most extreme form possible. I couldn't imagine that there could be even further growth of this version of American Jewish individualism.

The idea that baby boomers see/saw themselves as the pinnacle of civilization is a common enough critique. Is Professor Cohen's apparent conclusion that the next generation has done a similar thing as his own, only taken it further, another instance of that, or its opposite?

> Given my own background and the way I view such matters, I regard the current younger generations as extending the principles of the Jewish sovereign self that Arnold Eisen and I first described in The Jew Within. They are extending and elaborating the major elements we discerned: autonomy, volunteerism, personalism, nonjudgmentalism, and journeyism. As I said earlier, I just could not imagine anyone taking those principles any further. It never occurred to me that the next generation would, albeit with firm and passionate Jewish commitment, take the principles of individualism and sovereign self even further than we had observed among Boomer types in the mid-nineties.

Studies of secular society have shown that there is in fact **less of a generation gap** between the boomers (especially later boomers) and their children than there had been between the boomers and their own parents. Cohen's interview notes that a lot of the support for the new kind of Jewish ritual, work and culture that the younger

generation is creating comes from established Jewish organizations. Interestingly, too, the younger generation often agrees with the boomers that the boomers did it (whatever it is) better!

If we accept Cohen's view of the situation as the younger generation following in the Boomers' footsteps (just perhaps further and faster), it does create an interesting paradox. On the one hand, this younger generation is in continuity with the Boomers, and on the other, Cohen posits that every generation tends to see itself in opposition with preceding ones:

> Each wave of Jewish innovation sees itself as at once alienated from its predecessors, bringing more excitement to Jewish life, setting new norms, and overcoming unnecessary boundaries. I'm sure the founders of B'nai B'rith, Hadassah, Young Israel, and the UJA [United Jewish Appeal] all saw themselves that way. Certainly, my generation saw its elders' Jewish ways as alien, bland, and boring, and coercive around the wrong issues.

In terms of the new generation's 'alienation from its predecessors,' Cohen presents an ABC of critiques:

> A stands for alienation, in that younger Jews feel alienated from conventional and longstanding Jewish institutions, customs, practices, and so forth. B refers to the sense that they find established institutional life bland and boring. It seems predictable in tone and content and populated by a predictable demographic of upper-middle-class, middle-aged, in-married, family people. C refers to the coercive features of Jewish life, especially its strong preference for in-marriage and seemingly unquestioning support for the state of Israel. And D stands for divisive. Younger Jews see their parents' generation sharply dividing Jews from non-Jews, Jews from other Jews - such as along denominational lines - putatively Jewish culture from non-Jewish culture, and Jewish institutional turf from non-Jewish turf.

So which is it? Are we in line with our parents but just don't like to see it? Were the Boomers less out of line with their parents than they thought? In terms of Jewish innovation, where does the creation of the Federation system in the very early 1900s fit in? The massive organizational effort behind early Zionism? The very creation of the denominations/movements which we're now innovating away from? Are we actually moving in some direction, or just responding to the successive cultural situations in which we find ourselves, and playing out our parent issues in the mean time? Does it always make sense to talk about trends in generational terms?