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Choosing Chosenness in America

The Changing Faces of Judaism

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Some 70 years ago, as the children of the massive eastern European Jewish immigration to America moved to take full advantage of the unprecedented opportunities available to them, the major question debated in countless Jewish sermons, newspaper articles, plays, novels, and theological writings was whether and how Jews could continue to remain apart *from* American society and culture at the same time as they moved to become a full part *of* it. Hyphenated identity, a Jewish desideratum since the start of the modern period, finally seemed attainable. "America is different," Jews proclaimed, because it seemed, for the first time really, that they were not. This achievement, or the prospect of it, ironically brought the Jewish community face to face with a new sort of "Jewish problem," long anticipated but never before actually encountered—a question that still looms large in Jewish debates today. What can it mean to be Jewish in the absence of palpable Jewish difference? Identity, for two millennia a given, has become a persistent question in the United States over the past century, made such by the fact of American openness and diversity.

In part, it must be recognized, the source of the question does not lie in sociological transformation but in theological perplexity. For centuries, Jews had seen themselves, and had been seen by Christian or Muslim neighbors, as a people blessed and cursed with a unique divine covenant and mission. By the early decades of the 20th century, however, many Jews no longer believed that God had chosen their ancestor Abraham to perform a special task in the world, delivered the Israelites from Egypt, or issued a special revelation to them at Mount Sinai; they no longer expected that God would one day send the Messiah to redeem Jews from

the lands to which they had been exiled as part of a divine plan for the world's education and salvation. Enlightenment had had its impact on many future immigrants even before they left the "old country" for the new, and in America the ancestral beliefs seemed still less compelling. A survey done in the 1930s indicates that the doubters had come to include a majority of the community's rabbis (Zeitlin, 1945). More than 70 years later, while belief in God as personal being or force remains high among Jews, traditional tenets of faith are held outside the Orthodox world by only a small minority (cf. Eisen, 1983; Cohen and Eisen, 2000).

These *theological* issues surrounding chosenness, however, have from the outset been framed, shaped, and exacerbated by the *sociological* transformation to which I have already alluded—one that continues to exert a major influence on Jewish belief and practice alike. For centuries, the claim to divine election has been given force and meaning by ghetto walls and everyday discrimination, and, in turn, has made sense of that isolation. Jewish self-definition became quite another matter when Jews sought and then achieved full participation, as one among a number of ethnic and religious immigrant minorities, in a society to which they, like all the others, belonged and called home. Hence the vexing and impassioned communal debate over Jewish distinctiveness and purpose that consumed Jews of the "second generation" and has not abated since. As one leading communal figure posed the matter in 1943, "Nation, people, religion—what are we?" (Morgenstern, 1943). It was already clear that hyphenated identity could not mean simply joining a given and stable Jewish selfhood to new American conditions and surroundings. Indeed, the very presence (or possibility) of the hyphen necessitated the interrogation of Judaism and Jewishness, as well as the effort to construct new meanings for Americanness. Recent decades, carrying on that discussion, have witnessed a new concern: the meaning of selfhood as such at a time of unparalleled individualism on the one hand and remarkable cultural diversity on the other. Both developments have immensely complicated the conception and formation of identity among Jews, as among all other groups.

My purpose in this essay is to reflect further on this theme, drawing on recent research into American Jewish identity, as well as recent writing on American religion and ethnicity more broadly. The study of 20th-century American Jews and Judaism has for some decades focused on the ways in which Jewish thinkers and the Jewish "laity"—whether of the "second," "third," or "fourth generation" from the point of immigration—have fashioned through ideas and institutions alike a set of new Jewish

self-definitions designed to suit the new realities of diversity and actual or hoped-for pluralism. For all that "Jews *are* different" to some degree from other American religious and ethnic minorities—in large part because they have generally claimed that their identity partakes to some degree of *both* sorts of identity rather than only one—the study of Jewish debates on the matter should prove helpful in understanding other groups as well: "It could be argued that all immigrant ethnic identities in America have been tied at first, at least to some extent, to particularist religious affirmations. It is certainly true that they exhibited differences more substantive than those who defined the conditions for their acceptance would allow" (Eisen, 1983: 178). Jews have not been the only American immigrants and descendants of immigrants to face the choice between continued distinctiveness and incomplete assimilation on the one hand, with consequent testing of the limits of pluralism, or, on the other hand, the reduction of ethnic and religious distinctiveness to the "symbolic" dimensions described by sociologist Herbert Gans (1979). "To be other in America," I wrote 20 years ago, "has in practice proven a combination of the two: pretending a greater sameness than exists while at the same time claiming for otherness a greater substance than in fact remains to it" (Eisen 1983: 178). I hope to help explain why this continues to be the case in our day.

Judaism in the Second Generation (ca. 1925–50)

Calvin Goldscheider's essay in this volume (chapter 7) has well summarized the demographic, occupational, political, and social dimensions of Jewish adaptation and adjustment to America in the 1920s and 1930s. In the words of a leading rabbi of the "second generation," Milton Steinberg (1955 [1934]: 23–35), American Jews of that period stood between two worlds: one in which they could no longer live, the other of which would not admit them. Judaism as believed in and practiced by immigrant parents was unappealing. America, at a time of economic depression and rising anti-Semitism, was barring or closing doors it had promised to open wide, and "only a people of acrobats could preserve a semblance of poise on a footing so unstable" (247). The rabbis, for their part, strove to make Judaism relevant to, and so viable in, these changed and difficult circumstances. Several of the strategies that they pursued to that end are particularly noteworthy.

American Jewish thinkers of all denominations (but none so much as Reform) traded on the resonances of the Bible, and of chosenness in

particular, to join Judaism with American ideology (cf. Eisen, 1983: 37–41). Leo Jung, the prominent Orthodox rabbi of the Jewish Center in New York City, declared in a 1939 sermon titled "Sinai and Washington" that Jews and Americans shared a divine mission to humanity: "And the Father of man bethought himself, and sent men to look for the country of their dreams where the song of the Lord might be sung." The leader of Conservative Judaism, Louis Finkelstein, devoted a major scholarly work on *The Pharisees* (1938) to showing the identity between rabbinic teachings and the Puritan ideals that were the basis of American democracy. Simon Greenberg, another leading Conservative thinker, wrote in 1945 that since the Bible's influence on American democracy was so well known, he would instead discuss "democracy in Post-Biblical Judaism." Reform rhetoric was in general the most extravagant: "Here in the New Jerusalem of America, planned as a spiritual Zion by its founding fathers and brought into being by revolutionary patriots imbued with the God-inspired liberalism of the prophets of Israel, the concept of this country as a citadel of social justice and warm-hearted humanitarianism was a natural one" ("Democracy in Post-Bibilical Judaism," 1945: 1–9).[1] Note that Jewish apologetic in this 1951 address also serves the purpose of intra-Jewish debate, pitting Reform Judaism against "other less progressive Jewish movements." But thinkers of all movements laid claim to the ideological alliance between democracy and Judaism, in one way or another invoking God as its source. The hyphen linking the two halves of American Jewish selves, they hoped to show, linked all Americans to all Jews, because the highest ideals of the two were in fact one.

Chosenness could only play the dual role assigned to it by American Jewish leaders—at once connecting Jews to America and rooting them in their own past—if the doctrine could be interpreted in ways that did not conflict with current Jewish theological assumptions and sociological necessities (or desires). The doctrine seemed essential to the maintenance of Jewish distinctiveness, but its traditional meanings (or what these seemed to be) were impossible to affirm; the result was a concerted and persistent effort at reinterpretation. Reform thinkers generally understood chosenness as a Jewish mission to humanity. The purpose of Israel's covenant was universal service. Julian Morgenstern, head of the Hebrew Union College (Reform's rabbinical seminary), proclaimed in 1945 that "we of the Reform wing conceive of Israel as a people, a chosen people, endowed from the very birth with a genius for seeing God in every aspect of existence and of interpreting all of life, nature and history from the standpoint of

the one, eternal God" (14). The traditional belief that God had chosen Israel meant, to modern minds, that "Israel chose God as his ideal of service, the province of religion and ethics and morality—all values emanating from God—as its domain of self-expression and self-realization."

Mordecai Kaplan, a Conservative rabbi who argued over the course of a long career that Jewish beliefs and institutions needed "reconstruction" in order to suit the radically new conditions of Jewish life, rejected the notion of chosenness entirely because it rested in his view on an unscientific belief in a "supernatural God," immorally connoted superiority over other groups, and ill-befitted the Jews' status as citizens of a pluralistic democracy (1934: 15–24). He urged replacement of election with a notion of "divine vocation or calling," which would not involve "any of the invidious distinctions implied in the doctrine of election, and yet [would] fulfill the legitimate spiritual wants which that doctrine sought to satisfy." Many are called, we might say, but few are chosen (Kaplan, 1948: 229).

Kaplan's Conservative colleagues chose for the most part to reinterpret the doctrine of election rather than abandon it. They denied that it carried connotations of superiority or demands for isolation, and they reinterpreted the claim to divine revelation of the Torah—in their view the principal element of Israel's uniqueness. Rabbi Ben Zion Bokser, for example, argued that all groups were equally chosen by God, for each was a unique vehicle of His revelation and an instrument of His purposes in history. In this sense, the Jews as a distinct community had been "divinely chosen both as to the causes that have fashioned it and as to the mission of universal service which it is obligated to perform in the world." Jews say that [God] chose Israel, wrote Finkelstein, "in the sense that Israel was more keenly aware of his being than other peoples" (quoted in Eisen, 1983: 107–11). Orthodox thinkers, of course, did not need to engage in such equivocal affirmations, both because their theologies permitted and demanded a more robust view of election and because their constituency remained, until after World War II, far more of an immigrant rather than a second-generation community.

My point in this brief survey of how American thinkers reinterpreted one central doctrine of their tradition is twofold. On the one hand, inherited religious beliefs and practices can only be seen by its adherents through the lenses of their own experience. Biography and culture always mediate tradition. The transformed conditions of Jewish life in America both elicited new selections from the repertoire of tradition and precluded older readings. Some Biblical verses and themes assumed new importance

or took on new meanings, just as the Hanukkah celebration assumed greater urgency in the context of America's Christmas, and Passover became a "festival of freedom," the observance of which in many homes came to include the singing of Negro spirituals. On the other hand, religion continued to serve its role as "model for" life outside its precincts. Chosenness helped Jews to understand who they "really" or "essentially" or "eternally" were as individuals and as a group, and so what they should and should not be doing, as Jews or Americans or both. The lesson could be more distinctiveness, or less; more concern with social justice, or reinforcement of conventional morality; support for one version or another of Zionism (in the years before Israel's creation) or opposition to all forms of Zionism on the grounds that Jews had a mission to perform among the nations, not as a state among states.

Kaplan perhaps drew the most far-reaching conclusion from the encounter with election: Jews had to abandon not only the claim that God had chosen them but the definition of themselves as a religion:

> Now that the aura of divine election has departed from his people, and his Jewish origin brings with it nothing but economic handicaps and social inferiority, the Jew rebels against his fate. . . . He has to evolve some new purpose in life as a Jew, a purpose that will direct his energies into such lines of creativity as will bring him spiritual redemption. (1934: 15).

None of the existing religious options were satisfactory, Kaplan argued, neither Orthodoxy (because it clung to "supernatural" claims that simply were not credible in the face of modern science and rationality), Reform (because it had abandoned the notion of Jewish peoplehood with its key component of allegiance to a homeland in Zion), nor Conservative Judaism (because it had never followed through on its own guiding convictions but had waffled and equivocated so much that Kaplan divided his treatment of the movement into two chapters, which he called "Right Wing of Reformism" and "Left Wing of Neo-Orthodoxy"). Kaplan urged that, instead of debating the proper course of Judaism as religion, Jews stop conceiving of Judaism as a religion at all but regard it instead "in its totality," as a civilization.

His "social scientific" argument for the switch went as follows: "To be different may mean to be both other and unlike, or, to be other only. Otherness is different in entity, unlikeness is difference in quality" (1934: 177–78). It was a mistake to see Jews as Americans in every respect but

one: religion. That definition via "quality" could not work when "what is at stake in our day is the very maintenance of Jewish life as a distinct societal entity. Its very otherness is in jeopardy." Kaplan reasoned that if otherness could be taken for granted, "the element of unlikeness will take care of itself." Judaism had always been, and should once again be, far more comprehensive than Jewish religion. "It includes the nexus of a history, literature, language, social organization, folk sanctions, standards of conduct, social and spiritual ideals, esthetic values, which in their totality form a civilization." Judaism, we might say, should not be a set of beliefs or purposes—an "ism." Rather, it should be the culture of the group to which Jews knew themselves to belong.

He called this an "intuitional approach" and asserted, in an extravagant passage, that "attachment to Judaism has always been derived from just such an intuitional attitude toward it. The various interpretations of Jewish doctrine and practice, the abstract values and concepts, are but the formal afterthoughts of that intuitional attitude" (182). Jews had uttered and found meaning in the credo of Jewish faith, the Shema Yisrael prayer, "not because of the abstract idea of absolute monotheism which it is supposed to express, but simply because it provided the thrill of being a Jew." Kaplan hoped to reconstruct Judaism as civilization—its land, its language and literature, its folk-customs, its communal institutions—in the belief that renewed excitement in Judaism—that is, at being a Jew—would follow.

I shall leave aside the many vexing issues associated with Kaplan's functionalist reinterpretation of Jewish practices and beliefs, including his idea of God as a set of forces at work in history and the cosmos, in order to focus on a matter far more relevant here: the possibilities and limitations of what Kaplan called "living in two civilizations." Kaplan's many ruminations on the subject remain of interest, some 70 years after he published them, because he was not only exceedingly perceptive but extraordinarily conflicted. He repeatedly called, on the one hand, for a "maximalist Judaism," noting that a civilization, any civilization, "demands that the foundations of personality in the child be laid with the materials which the civilization itself supplies" (1934: 196). Jewish attachment to a homeland in Palestine, study of Hebrew, immersion in Jewish history, obligations to Jewish philanthropies, and observance of mitzvot (understood by him not as commandments but as "folkways") would make for an identity far more comprehensive than religion alone could provide, even if that religion were Orthodox.

The problem, of course, is that all this activity would be over and above Jews' full participation in American cultural life, which came more naturally and was ready to hand. Kaplan himself urged Jews to live in two civilizations, not one. At moments of clarity he was forced to acknowledge that Jews in America could never "live Judaism" as their "primary civilization" or even as a "co-ordinate civilization" as they might in a situation of real cultural autonomy (1934: 215–16). Judaism in America could "survive only as a subordinate civilization. Since the civilization that can satisfy the primary interests of the Jew must necessarily be the civilization of the country he lives in, the Jew in America will be first and foremost an American, and only secondarily a Jew." The two sides of the hyphen, we might say, were not and could not be equal. Indeed, Kaplan's call for a "maximalist Judaism" meant, in fact, "a maximum program of Jewishness compatible with one's abilities and circumstances" (1934: 220; 1948: 445). These would likely be severely limited.

Still—and this is how Kaplan got around the problem of cultural primacy—America was simply not constituted at the moment to provide Jews or Gentiles with the self-fulfillment (he called it "salvation") that they required. The citizen of the modern state turns to its culture only for "his literary and esthetic values" and of course owed the state duties of civic allegiance. Gentile Americans, possessed no less than Jews of hyphenated identities, turned to "Christian civilization" for "moral and spiritual" values. Kaplan repeatedly cited American Catholics as a model of what he had in mind for his readers (e.g., 1934: 217, 250). Jews did not have the option of seeking salvation as their Christian neighbors did, all the more so, Kaplan wrote because Gentiles were not yet prepared to accept Jews on their own terms, and begrudged Jews' corporate life as equals (280). All the Jew wanted, he wrote poignantly, was that Gentiles "not monopolize his life [so] as to leave no room in it for the Jewish civilization" (234).

Then, 14 years later, after urging Jews to identify spiritually and culturally with the nations among which they live (1948: 102), Kaplan argued in a remarkable passage that Jews in the United States should turn to America for "economic and social security" (437). For "moral and spiritual security"—for all that really mattered, we might say—there would be Judaism. If their culture were suitably reconstructed, if it were shorn of outmoded beliefs and useless institutions, if its synagogue were revitalized by new liturgies, its traditions outfitted with new meanings, and its institutions equipped to meet all of a Jew's needs, material and spiritual (synagogues subsumed, for example, into all-purpose "community

centers")—why would Jews *not* turn to it for their fulfillment? Where else *could* they turn?

The inequity of value that we noticed earlier, in Kaplan's talk about the "zones" of Jewish life, has now been decisively reversed. Judaism's side of the identity hyphen occupies a lot less space than America's, as it were, but claims a lot more quality time. I think we would not stretch the point too much were we to say that in Kaplan's view (as in that of many other American Jewish religious thinkers of all denominations, then and since) America is depicted as means, while Judaism is end. America is body, and Judaism is soul. America is external, and Judaism is internal. America is now, and Judaism is forever. American values, for all they are identified with Judaism, are sometimes good and sometimes not so good (Kaplan was remarkable for his critique of the damage caused to body and soul by capitalism), while Jewish values—once they have been "revalued" to suit the present day—are always prized. In a word: America rescues, but only Judaism saves.

And still, Kaplan knew, Jews resisted their own salvation through Judaism. The societal and cultural reality around them was simply too powerful. In passage after passage in *Judaism as a Civilization*, Kaplan calls for renewed involuntarism in an attachment he knows full well is now utterly voluntary. The man who interpreted heretofore-obligatory *commandments* as freely chosen *folkways* writes that every people's collective will "takes the form of law." The group tells its members what they must do—and punishes those who disagree: "If, then, Jewish nationhood is to function in the diaspora, its principal manifestations must be this very element of involuntarism characteristic of national life" (1934: 292–93). Kaplan's diaries from the period, only recently published, reveal the extent to which he despaired of ever getting American Jews (including his own family) to see the light (Scult, 2001). The reason, in part, was that they, like him, had internalized universalist Enlightenment notions, and so could not lend credence to the particularist beliefs on which their tradition seemed to rest. In part, too, they, like him, had embraced Emancipation, and so opposed with all their hearts any bar to their successful integration into American society. But there was another reason, to which Kaplan recurred at several points in the book: anti-Semitism. Jews made their decisions under considerable pressure.

One example of external suasion will have to suffice here. *The Christian Century* magazine, principal organ of liberal Protestantism, featured regular criticism of Hitler and of anti-Semitism in America throughout

the mid-1930s. But in 1936–37 the magazine aroused Jewish ire when it ran a series of editorials arguing that Jews could find a legitimate place in America only if they defined themselves as a religion and not as "a particular race" or "hereditary group" ("The Jewish Problem," 1936; "Jewry and Democracy," 1937; "Why Is Anti-Semitism?" 1937). Hostility to Jews arose because of Jewish exclusiveness, the magazine asserted. The real question at the bottom of Jewish-Gentile relations in America was this: "Can democracy suffer a hereditary minority to perpetuate itself as a permanent minority, with its own distinctive culture sanctioned by its own distinctive cult form?" Jews persisted in keeping themselves apart because of the "illusion that [their] race, [their] people, are the object of the special favor of God" ("Jewry and Democracy, 1937: 735–36). They had to realize that "the only religion compatible with democracy is one which conceives itself as universal, and offers itself to all men of all races and cultures. The Jewish religion, or any other religion, is an alien element in American democracy unless it proclaims itself as a universal faith, and proceeds upon such a conviction to persuade us all to be Jews" ("Why Is Anti-Semitism?" 1937: 862–64).[2] The message was clear. Particularist beliefs and practices carried a price, and Jews had to decide if they wanted to pay it. The more distinctive they remained, and the more that distinctiveness was a matter of group identity rather than individual choice, the less acceptance they could expect from other Americans. Jews responded to this challenge, and others like it, by pointing to American principles of religious freedom, or ethnic and cultural pluralism, or both. Jews were one of the three great American religious groups. Will Herberg's *Protestant-Catholic-Jew* (1960 [1955]) is the key title in this connection—a book written by a Jew that accords Jews, despite their relatively small numbers, the same status and importance as Protestants and Catholics. Rabbis and other communal leaders were likewise the principal proponents of the idea of the "Judeo-Christian ethic." Others, such as the philosopher Horace Kallen (1970 [1924]) and anthropologist Melville J. Herskovits (1990 [1941]), argued for a notion of cultural pluralism that would include Jews by rendering them analogous to Irish or Italian or African Americans. Kaplan, as we have seen, reminded everyone that all Americans—Jews and Gentiles alike—possessed hyphenated identities. Jews were not unique in their uniqueness, not distinctive by virtue of their distinctiveness, but precisely the opposite.

These defenses of cultural and religious diversity continue in our day. Before turning to them, however, I briefly examine debates over

chosenness in the "third generation:" the postwar period when American identity became more secure, and Jewish identity—haunted by the Holocaust, bolstered by the creation of Israel—seemed once again an option to be asserted.

Judaism in the Third Generation (ca. 1950–75)

Jewish religious thought from the late 1940s through the 1970s has a different tone and purport than comparable writing from the preceding decades, in part because a "Jewish state" was now a fact rather than an aspiration or source of communal contention and the Holocaust had lent added urgency and pain—as well as inescapable reality—to the notion of Jewish uniqueness. The change had other sources as well. For one thing, America was different. Virtually all remaining barriers to Jews' full acceptance in American society—occupational, residential, political—fell one after the other in the wake of the war. What is more, a widely noted if short-lived "religious revival" in the 1950s spurred renewed popularity for theology and theologians and sent Americans back to church, especially in the suburbs to which they now moved in large numbers. Jews, as they moved outward from the cities, constructed new and imposing synagogues at major intersections.

The vast majority of the community was now removed by two generations, at least from the point of immigration. It was highly educated and increasingly successful. Jews were less averse to public expressions of their Judaism, as long as these seemed to be sanctioned or encouraged by Christian neighbors. They also became more open to or even eager for religious observances such as Passover, as long as these met a set of conditions first enunciated by sociologists Marshall Sklare and Joseph Greenblum (1967). Jewish practices had to carry universalist messages, to take place in private space and time, and to be child-centered. Most important of all, perhaps, no activity proposed to Jews, public or private, could seem to threaten the delicate and newly won peace that America now seemed to afford them. Philip Roth's story from the "third generation," "Eli the Fanatic" (1994), captured these calculations beautifully. Looking back on the period, Nathan Glazer suggested that a historian of ideas should one day try "to determine just how the United States evolved in the popular mind from a 'Christian' nation into a nation made up of Protestants, Catholics and Jews" and "how the Jewish group, which through most of the history

of the United States has formed an insignificant percentage of the American people, has come to be granted the status of a most favored religion" (1972: 1).

My concern here is the change in Jewish theology that resulted from and further shaped that process. Two developments relating to chosenness are especially germane. First, a number of secular Jewish intellectuals came to see their work, and their status as artists, as expressions of an alienation, which, in turn, stemmed from—and, indeed, constituted—their Judaism. Jewish authors in America, wrote Irving Howe, could not but feel " a profound, even a mysterious sense of distinctiveness. . . . What [they] make of it in the context of their experience, how they transform, play with, and try sometimes to suppress it—this forms the major burden of their art" (1977: 3–4). Or, as Roth put it, "There were reminders constantly [in childhood] that one was a Jew and that there were goyyim out there. . . . [One had to] create a moral character for oneself. That is, one had to invent a Jew" (1963: 21, 39).

Second, rabbis and theologians restored election to a central place in Jewish belief and urged their readers to accept and enhance Jewish uniqueness rather than seek to blur or obliterate it. Arthur Hertzberg wrote that Judaism could survive in America only by "emphasizing what is unique to itself and by convincing its children that that uniqueness is worth having" (1964: 7–9). America was exile, he asserted, in clear contradiction with the widespread conviction that America was *home* for Jews, meaning that Zionism meant not the ingathering of all Jews but support for a home needed by *other* Jews, who were not lucky enough to have one in America: "The essence of Judaism is the affirmation that the Jews are the chosen people: all else is commentary" (Hertzberg, 1966: 90).

Emil Fackenheim (1970), like several other thinkers who began publishing in the late 1940s and early 1950s in new journals established then for that purpose, asserted that Jewish commitment entailed "mystery" and "scandal" which would not yield to rational inquiry. Abraham Heschel (1968) sought to arouse wonder, awe, and the sense of the ineffable to provoke the ultimate questions, which he believed only the personal God of the Bible could answer. "Israel has always been a mystery to Israel. But it is a mystery on its own terms," wrote Arthur Cohen (1971: 84). Eugene Borowitz (1973) reasserted the primacy of covenant, precisely as a Reform Jew committed to autonomy and heavily influenced by Kant.

It would be wrong to attribute such beliefs to the majority of American Jews, though lack of data precludes any certainty as to what most

Jews did or did not think about God and Judaism. I have characterized the variegated pattern of Jewish decision-making about distinctiveness in this period, conscious and unconscious, as a "halfway-covenant" with Jewish tradition (Eisen, 1983: 148). Jews were at home in America—but not entirely so. Intermarriage rates through the mid-1960s remained low. Most Jews numbered only other Jews among their closest friends. They identified with one or another of the Jewish religious denominations—but synagogue membership and attendance, like home ritual observance, were not high. Yet there were persistent and widespread signs of new interest, even before the renewed communal attachment that came with the 1967 war and the sudden outpouring of attention to the Holocaust several years later.

Herberg's famous notion, borrowed from Arthur Hansen, of the third generation returning to the religion of the grandparents, partly out of rebellion against the rebellion of the parents and partly because they no longer had to struggle free of a heritage their parents had rejected for them, captures some truth where American Jews are concerned. But it misses the abiding ambivalence, rejection, and regret. The truth in Herberg's generalization relates to the difference it made for Judaism that the vast majority of American Jews in the third generation were no longer immigrants or children of immigrants—and so had very different concerns. They were no longer oppressed by an identity they had inherited but in search of an identity that they could choose—a selfhood that could then carry the force of having chosen them. Borowitz claimed, in fact, that Jews clung to a greater particularism than they were willing to avow, masking significant commitments behind trivial choices: "God lurks behind the chopped liver" (1973: 125–28).

Theology for all that remained an elite pursuit among third-generation American Jews. Systematic articulations of belief were few and far between, while American Jews responded to powerful images such as election and rituals such as Passover. Belief remained idiosyncratic, and observance eclectic.

The reason, in part, is that most people are by definition not intellectuals and so remain uninterested in highbrow pursuits such as theology. But disinterest in Jewish theology on the part of American Jews of the third generation had at least two other causes, I believe. One is that theology is inherently particularistic. It concerns a *single*-faith community and its relation to God. Theology thrives on challenges from the outside but is designed by insiders for insiders. It articulates the truth that they come

to know by being who they are—and not others. Jews in America, as we have seen, resisted this degree of distinctiveness and were uncomfortable with traditional notions—revelation at Sinai, special protection by God, chosenness—which seemed to imply or demand it.

The other, borrowing a phrase from Jacob Neusner (1979), is that theology is "life reflected upon," and so requires "life lived" on which to reflect. American Jews lacked a coherent communal way of life on which their theologians could meditate and to which it could lend meaning. The community had disintegrated to a significant extent. Jewish law had been repudiated by all but a small minority, primarily Orthodox. The idea of a Jewish mission provided an invaluable sermonic theme for Reform rabbis, in part because it rhetorically conjured up the illusion of action, of Jews doing something for God or the good—something distinctive and unique—among Jews whose Jewish activity was minimal. American Jews, we might say, were willing or eager to embrace a modicum of distinctiveness, a degree of chosenness—a "halfway covenant" with their tradition—but they were not prepared not to accept a *theology* of chosenness that came complete with beliefs in particular revelation and redemption, let alone a unique way of life to go with these. Hyphenated identities require hyphenated theologies—or, as I have suggested, they subvert the effort at theology altogether.

Judaism in the Fourth Generation (ca. 1975 to the Present)

All this began to change in the 1970s. Israel and the Holocaust for the first time took center stage in a communal agenda. which one analyst (Woocher, 1986) has aptly named "sacred survival." It was not clear what Judaism entailed, or why Jewish distinctiveness was important, but it was urgent that both continue. Fackenheim gave eloquent (and problematic) articulation to this sentiment in his famous invocation of a new "614th commandment," uttered by the "Commanding Voice of Auschwitz," which supplemented and even took precedence over the traditional 613: "Thou shalt not give Hitler posthumous victories" by abandoning Jewishness, Judaism, or trust in humanity (1970: 84–98).

Jewish "federations," the community's umbrella for charitable organizations, used this appeal to bolster support for overseas causes including Israel, as well as social service agencies in the United States—this as concern steadily mounted over rising rates of intermarriage and assimilation.

(Starting in the 1980s, the latter concern far eclipsed the former; Israel declined in importance as a locus of identification or a motivation of fund-raising.) Rabbis, joined by some younger Jews who had participated in a countercultural movement of lay-led, egalitarian communities called "havurot," protested that survival without content was pointless and would not work. In the 1980s a series of new developments took place, all of which placed renewed emphasis on the religious or transcendent meaning of Jewishness.

Reform prayer books, for example, were revised to include more Hebrew and more of the traditional liturgy. At the same time, the movement urged more observance by its laity (voluntarily chosen by individuals, of course), and its rabbis and theologians expressed new sympathy for the language of mitzvah, reinterpreted to bear more (but not all) of the traditional force of binding commandment. "Tradition" became still more prominent as the "god-term" or authority in all movements, but especially in Conservative Judaism, which continued to claim (as against Reform) that it had never abandoned the authentic tradition, embodied in Jewish law, while (as against Orthodoxy) adopting law and tradition to new realities. Reconstuctionism, since the 1960s a separate movement complete with its own seminary, journal, lay and rabbinic organizations, and ideology, sought more aggressively than either Reform or Conservative Judaism to appropriate elements of "new age" religiosity and and respond to widespread interest in "spirituality."

All three movements had decided by the mid-1980s to ordain women as rabbis, as well as to afford women equality in other aspects of ritual observance. Reform and Reconstructionism broke with Jewish law by recognizing the children of Jewish fathers and non-Jewish mothers as Jews (called "patrilineal descent"). Conservative rabbis, like their Orthodox colleagues, did not. Modern Orthodox Jews found themselves pulled "to the right" by ultra-Orthodoxy, the continuing success of which has borne witness not only to the surprising appeal of separatist communities and premodern theological claims but also to the increasing willingness of Gentile Americans to tolerate substantive difference, at least in the religious sphere. One would be hard-pressed to find more salient markers of Jewish transformation in the period than the impact of feminism on the one hand and the success of Orthodoxy on the other.

Both these phenomena, though they stand in some respects at opposite ends of the spectrum, can usefully be seen as responses to a set of developments characteristic of Judaism throughout the modern period (Eisen,

1998: 242–63). They involve, first, a *calculation of distinctiveness:* just how different the Jews involved wish to be from their surroundings, how much difference each particular observance entails, and how much the relevant surroundings will bear. Second, they demand or resist *the explanation of particularist practices in universal terms* deemed compatible with the Jews' status as citizens of a diverse and pluralistic society. Modern Orthodoxy has by no means been immune to this dilemma, and in the wake of the September 11 terrorist attack, an ultra-Orthodox organization took out an ad in the *New York Times*, expressing sympathy and solidarity for fellow Americans of different faiths in a fashion more typical of religious colleagues to their left. (A Greek Orthodox church ran a similar ad on an adjacent page, with similar wording, to similar purpose.) Third, American Jews of all denominations responded to the powerful *appeal of ancestors:* the desire to walk in the ancestors' ways, to feel their presence by engaging in ritual activities that they too had observed, sometimes with the help of inherited ritual objects, and so to feel their presence and enjoy their blessing. Fourth, many Jews and their rabbis continue to *search for authority,* without ever finding it or wanting to find it; they prefer to see themselves as seekers after truth rather than as people who possess it. Like Christian contemporaries studied by Robert Wuthnow (1998a, 1999) and Wade Clark Roof (1993, 1999), they believe it right that each person on his or her own spiritual journey arrives at his or her own ultimate convictions (and is free to depart from those convictions for others, at a later point in the journey), and they hold it wrong to accept the teachings of religious authorities. The point is to *struggle with* God rather than (merely) to *believe in* God. Contemporary rabbis are fond of pointing out that "Israel" is the name given to Jacob after he has "wrestled with God," the apparent meaning of the words of which the name is composed.

Sociologist Steven Cohen and I (2000), interviewing moderately affiliated Jews of the baby boom generation from all across America (not the 20–25 percent who are most active Jewishly, or the comparable group which is least involved), and supplementing those interviews with a 1,000-person survey of a representative sample of American Jewish adults, found that all these trends are very much in evidence at the start of the 21st century. Our study of the "habits of the American Jewish heart" reveals the same tension between individualism and communal commitment first articulated by Robert Bellah et al. (1985). Among Jews, too, the first language spoken is "individualism," autonomy, freedom, the "sovereign self," its claims voiced at every point of every interview. Community,

as Bellah put it, remains a "second language," spoken not as often and not as well. The Jews we interviewed resent it when anyone tells them what they "must do" because they are Jews or in order to be a "good Jew." They reserve the right to decide what they will observe and how they will observe it. What is more, if they cannot find personal meaning in observance, they will let that observance lapse—and feel that they are right in doing so. "Sacred survival" no longer compels them. The "public Judaism" of federations, support for Israel, and remembrance of the Holocaust has lost much of its appeal.

Yet the people we interviewed are Jewishly active enough to earn the title of "moderately affiliated." They are not ashamed of being Jews and are proud of the tradition from which they are free to select. Their declarations of autonomy go hand in hand with the belief that a person born of at least one Jewish parent (or converted to Judaism) is a Jew for life, and—even if he or she never performs a single distinctively Jewish act—no less a Jew than any other. Holding fast to this conviction, our respondents can rest assured that their children and grandchildren will be Jewish to the end of time, barring conversion to another faith. They respect the right—and not just the obvious ability—of their children to choose an identity other than the one that they themselves had been given and had confirmed. They hope for them, above anything else, that they be happy. But they also allow the hope that the next generation will find meaning, as they did, in Jewish tradition: choosing a manner of chosenness, individually tailored to suit their needs, which will be a source of blessing.

The major source of meaning that our interviewees found in Judaism was ritual activity performed in the home with children. Those whose children had grown up and left home looked back wistfully to Sabbath dinner tables and Passover seders with their children, or they looked forward to sharing those activities with grandchildren. At a time of extreme mobility and individualism, when many Americans live far from close friends and family, and when ascribed communal loyalties cannot define the self one chooses to be, meaning in life centers more on members of one's intimate family, especially children. American Jews seek to link that source of meaning to the rituals and tradition that they share with their own ancestors, thereby rooting themselves and that which they pass on to ancestors as well as to descendants. Intermarriage seems less and less a bar to such observance; even when both spouses are Jewish, we found, Jewish ritual activity is a subject of negotiation like any other and takes place when one spouse—usually the female—feels strongly about it; ritual

finds a mode and meaning of observance with which the other can be satisfied. Initiative where private observance is concerned now seems overwhelmingly to rest with women—home and children, even in two-career families, remaining primarily the responsibility of wives and mothers—even as the role of women in public leadership roles such as the rabbinate continues to grow dramatically.

The synagogue is widely valued as an extension of family, as a site where community and tradition can be experienced, and as a place for quiet introspection apart from the harried workweek—though fewer than half of American Jewish adults are members of synagogues, and the vast majority of members attend only infrequently. God is believed in far more widely as a personal deity or force(s) in the universe than one might have imagined (56 percent in the survey "definitely" believe "there is a God," and another 27 percent that this is "probably" the case [Cohen and Eisen, 2000: 219])—but not the Jewish God of synagogue liturgy. American Jews believe, when they believe, in a universal and personal God. They find this God in nature, in their children, in the kindness of strangers, in history, and sometimes even in synagogue.

Among men as well as women, we discovered, ethnic as well as religious Jewish involvements and activities are often fraught with ambivalence. Jewish commitments are transmitted, after all, by parents (or had been rejected by parents whom our interviewees had rejected in turn by turning back to observance). They also involve demonstrations of distinctiveness with which many Jews are still uncomfortable, even in the privacy of their own homes.

Other essays in this volume, and particularly those by Yvonne Haddad (chapter 9) and Ann Chih Lin (chapter 10) in this "quartet," chart similar calculations of perceived and desired distinctiveness, a similar concern with family combined with significant differences of ethnic/religious activity according to gender, and similar concern for the demands of authenticity of belief on the one hand and accommodation to the new realities of America on the other. One suspects that as Arab and Islamic communities become more removed from the "old countries" and more exposed to the cultural pressures of contemporary America, they will exhibit more of the individualism we found to be prominent among American Jews.

Cohen and I titled our study *The Jew Within* to capture the degree to which Jewishness at the turn of the new century, a full three generations since the massive immigration of Jews to America, seems less and less a matter of public declarations and commitments and more and more an

identity performed in the intimate spaces of home and family or even *inside* the individual self. Jews can pretty much select freely from the repertoire available to them. For one thing, American tolerance of religious and cultural distinctiveness has greatly increased, particularly when that difference is expressed in the private sphere and when the people expressing it are linked by class, race, and ethos to the still-regnant majority culture. Nor is there much Jewish communal pressure, outside Orthodoxy, to bend Jews in the direction of behavioral or ideological conformity. Choosing a degree of chosenness, therefore, does not appear to threaten autonomy, all the more so if the Jews involved come from nonobservant or intermarried homes. Christian neighbors, too, are seen to choose, and switch, their own communal allegiances. At the same time, adult education courses and the huge outpouring of Jewish books in recent decades, readily available in national chain stores and via the internet, have combined to make Jews far more knowledgeable than ever before about what their choices are.

Kaplan would likely have been happily amazed at the sheer number of activities available to Jews who wish to "live two civilizations"; he would have felt vindicated, too, by the eagerness of many American Jews (including a candidate for the vice-presidency) to identify with both civilizations and even, to varying degrees, to regard that identity not merely as an ethnic attachment parallel to that of Italian Americans or African Americans but to find religious meaning in it. While "ethnicity" and "religiosity" are for many Jews largely "symbolic" in Gans's sense; and while, as Richard Alba (1990) has pointed out, these differences are no longer "structural"—that is, they do not have constraints imposed by birth, occupation, or place of residence (but see Goldscheider's essay in this volume, chapter 7, on the continuing distinctiveness of Jewish patterns).

Nonetheless the hyphenated identity of American Jews seems in a great many cases to go deep beneath the surface. It reaches as it were to the heart of selfhood. The survey data confirm that American Jews overwhelmingly *want* their differences to run deep, and they value America precisely for permitting a degree of distinctiveness at the same time as it binds Jews up in a wider world, enabling them at once to be *part of,* and *apart.*

Conclusion

As one looks forward from the turn of a new century toward the likely developments that will shape American Judaism in coming decades, one question stands out: What does it mean to be a self in a multicultural society—or, in a more recent formulation of the question that Jews and other minorities have been wrestling with for over a century—what does it mean to be a *multicultural self* in a society that may or may not prove open to the public expression of substantial difference, religious or cultural? Does it make sense to speak of "the self" at all, at a time when the self can choose so often and so richly from so many different options—when, indeed, the very notion of "the self" is held up to postmodern questioning?

Kaplan recognized in 1934 that "to admit the Jew on a basis of complete equality, the nations would have to be tolerant of the cultural differences among their own groups instead of trying to cast them into a uniform mold" (280–81). The additional issue now seems to be whether it still makes sense to speak of "the Jew" or "the Christian," the Italian American or the Mexican American. Definite articles seem inadequate to the task of identifying fragmented selves who may no longer even be in search of wholeness. The effect on their religions and cultures is likely to be profound.

The philosopher Jeremy Waldron, for example, regards the various sources that make up his identity as so many pieces which need not add up to make one whole; he equates allegiance to a Catholic or a Methodist church with the taste for campfires as opposed to operas (1995: 93–100). If churches die out because cosmopolitan selves have no need of them, Waldron writes, "it is like the death of a fashion or a hobby, not the demise of anything that people really need" (100).

This is exactly the sort of selfhood that Michael Walzer has in mind when critiquing the "postmodern project" of " a life without clear boundaries and without secure or singular identity": "The associations that these self-made and self-making individual form are likely to be little more than temporary alliances that can be easily broken off when something more promising comes along" (1997: 88–90). Walzer favors what he considers the best of the emerging American reality: "namely that we are both this and that; that there are still boundaries, but they are blurred by all the crossings" (90). The hyphen, he writes, should work as a plus sign rather

than a divider and should enable Americans to live on either side, or both (1992: 17, 45). Others find even this formulation too constrictive, too essentialist. The self is what it is, and will be whatever it becomes.

It may matter differently, in this context, that American Jews still enjoy the luxury of appropriateness from received (or newly created) ethnic and cultural traditions. Jewish individuals, like Jewish organizations, can be "ethnic" when it suits them and "religious" when that seems preferable; they can be equal partners in the Judeo-Christian ethic, or they can be "private celebra[nts] of cultural difference," as one historian nicely puts it, in the context of "public assimilation to putatively American behavioral norms" (Greenberg, 1998: 57). American Jews are also overwhelmingly white, of course, as well as highly educated and affluent. Their difference is any number of ways especially safe—and, to that degree, untypical.

Jewish numbers, however, remain relatively small—about 2 percent of the American population—and shrinking every year. This may close off options available to larger groups, or it may spur individual activity born of anxiety about collective disappearance. It seems likely that Jewish patterns of distinctiveness and integration—of boundary maintenance, boundary crossing, and boundary definition—will depend more than ever for their success on the willingness of other Americans to follow similar patterns, and on the willingness of American elites and institutions to countenance the public expression of serious difference. Horace Kallen wondered aloud in the final paragraph of his classic essay, "Democracy versus the Melting Pot," whether "the dominant classes in America want such a [pluralistic or multicultural] society" (1970 [1924]: 120–21). This of course remains an open question, in 2008. Its answer for Jews and Judaism will depend as well on the ability of Jewish religious thinkers to interpret their tradition in ways that not only legitimate other religions and cultures—this task is revolutionary enough—but value those cultures precisely in and for their difference.

Judaism (like Islam and Christianity) has yet to find actual *value*, as opposed to mere inevitability, in the possession of hyphenated identity. Religions have never been known for their pluralism; American ethnic groups, on the other hand, have yet to resist the pressure to move from substantial to symbolic difference—or to engage other groups in a way that goes beyond mere toleration or coexistence. Both sorts of difference, religious and ethnic, are being tested and stretched by the presence in large numbers of individuals and groups who are visibly distinct in new and different ways—and who do not positively value the liberal traditions

to which all American minorities, religious and ethnic, have submitted heretofore.

The outcome is uncertain, to say the least. It seems fairly certain, however, that the choices surrounding chosenness by Jews and others will likely be a very different enterprise in the 21st century than it was in the 20th, for immigrants as well as descendants of immigrants, for all that the need to calculate perceived and desired distinctiveness, to enact participation and apartness, is a constant.

These choices will draw on different meanings of self and other, will involve different notions of personal and collective boundaries, and will invoke different notions of ethnicity and perhaps of religion. Most important of all, perhaps, the processes of constructing self and community will proceed in the full awareness that parallel processes are transpiring among *other* ethnic and religious groups, the members of which—the boundaries of self and group now being so permeable—may not be "other" at all but part of "we" or "I." Kaplan would likely have been neither pleased nor displeased at this prospect but rather perplexed and uncomprehending, and he is not the only one.

NOTES

1. See also Greenberg's later statement, "Judaism and the Democratic Ideal" (1966) in Foundations of a Faith (New York: Burning Bush Press, 1967), 13–34, and his recent reiteration in *The Ethical in the Jewish and American Heritage* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1977).

2. A similar complaint about "Pluralism: National Menace" appeared on June 13, 1951 (701–2). Yet elsewhere the magazine considered Christianity itself to be a culture, not a religion, expressing the fear that the culture of America would be other than Christian ("God-Centered Education," 1937: 542–44).