

## THE QUEST FOR JEWISH IDENTITY IN AMERICA \*

by JOHN SLAWSON, PH.D.

*Executive Vice-President, American Jewish Committee, New York*

### Integration Without Assimilation

ONE experiences great difficulty in defining the subtleties of our subject, for is it not true, as Professor J. L. Talmon of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem once said, that "the links holding Jews together are—to use the words of Edmund Burke—as invisible as the air and as strong as the heaviest chains, and the Jewish ingredient as imperceptible to the sense yet as effective in result."

Identity is one of the most important quests of man. Its realization is a lifelong development, beginning with childhood. It is in fact the consciousness of selfhood and the extension of the ego from the individual through the family to the more embracing groups—peer, religious, ethnic, and national. Freud refers to Jewish identity as "the individual's relatedness to the unique history of a people."

It has been aptly said that "the modern, emancipated Jew does not fully know what he is and much of what he does know, he cannot accept." Yes, today's Jew finds the contemplation of identity at times very painful because there are vast uncertainties surrounding it. There is a gap between the label and

his own actuality, frequently an absence of authenticity which prevents a sure-footed attitude toward selfhood.

The current concern with Jewish identity centers increasingly on how to achieve an integrated yet unassimilated status in the general American community. Indeed, to many leaders of Jewish communities, defense against assimilation now seems more urgent than defense against discrimination. The intensity of this new interest doubtless derives from the need, now more than in the past, for the individual Jew to formulate his own beliefs and support them from within. He can no longer rely on the non-Jew to tell him what he is; he must decide and affirm the fact for himself. Otherwise he will cease to exist as a Jew.

It should be noted that although assimilation always requires integration, the reverse is not true. Integration does not necessarily involve assimilation. Integration is working and interacting with others for common purposes. Assimilation is trying to forget that one is a Jew.

Of course the evolving character of Jewish group identity must be very largely determined by the overall pattern of group life in America. We should therefore examine the contours of that pattern for a few moments.

May I say at the outset that never, perhaps, in American history, has the prevailing social framework afforded as

---

\* Presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Conference of Jewish Communal Service, Cleveland, Ohio, June 2, 1963.

great an opportunity for the development of Jewish self-regard as exists today.

Pluralism, with all its implications for group identity, is no longer a theory in America; it is a fact. The election of Mr. Kennedy marked America's entry into a new age distinguished by religious and ethnic pluralism and industrial urbanism. The Kennedy administration both symbolizes and ratifies this profound development. The pluralistic trend is gaining momentum even among Catholics; witness the proceedings of the current Ecumenical Council in Rome, the various pronouncements of Pope John XXIII, especially his last encyclical, and the marked changes in inter-group outlook and action among Catholics in the United States.

Jews today are Americans, not alone by citizenship, but by upbringing, outlook, taste, and even memories. Harry Golden's boyhood experiences on the East Side of New York are now regarded as no less American than Tom Sawyer's adventures on the Mississippi. Interestingly enough, certain features of American life have assumed what were traditionally considered Jewish traits—a sort of confluence of trends in the American character and traits generally attributed to Jews. Thus, it used to be said that Jews were peculiarly attached to middle-class pursuits and city life. But middle-class tastes and values now characterize the entire American population. Industrial urbanism and the technological revolution of our day have conformed the average American's socio-economic life to the very same patterns forced upon the Jew by exclusionary practices during various periods in his turbulent history.

#### Identity and the Religious Group

We often speak of tri-faith America. We put forth Judaism's claim for recognition and acceptance as one of America's

three major religions. We have assumed all the accouterments of a religious group in American society. Yet, we are often uncomfortable in this attire. Is it not because we feel within us that there is another dimension to Jewishness besides religion? What is it? And is there justification for this discomfort?

Before attempting to answer these questions, let us ask still another: In Protestantism and Catholicism, as practiced today, is there another dimension besides religion? It appears that the answer is yes. In spite of the vast increase in church affiliation during the past century, several studies indicate that church members consider organizational activity the important attraction, not creedal or devotional experience. Gibson Winter, brilliant sociologist of Protestantism, sums it up: Sacraments, he says, are giving way to committee meetings; confession to bazaars; and pilgrimages to deadly speakers. From these secular interests, according to some observers, people are deriving more of their thoughts and values than from distinctively religious sources. Gerhard Lenski says that a transcendental faith with supernatural aspects is gradually being transformed into a cultural faith. The late H. Richard Niebuhr, in noting the seeming contradiction between increasing church attendance among Protestants and a decline in devotionalism, also saw a cultural religion developing in America.

Will Herberg's thesis is that Americans, due to the specializations and compartmentalizations inherent in urban life, are turning to religious groups for communal identification and sense of belonging. Groupism is an important motivation in religious institutional identification among Americans. And turn to religious groups, be it said, they have done in unprecedented numbers. The most recent figures, reported by the Bureau of Census in 1957, showed church

and synagogue membership embracing about 63 percent of all Americans. Very likely, this figure is somewhat inflated—statistics of religious affiliations are notoriously untrustworthy. But in the same census, 96 percent of all respondents gave themselves a religious identification. Thus, even though more than one-third have no formal congregational affiliation, nearly all Americans see themselves as belonging to a religious group.

Thus, religion has become the prime means of establishing group identity; and communalism is becoming a very important attribute of the social-religious group. Lenski describes the overall picture this way: "In the Jewish group, communal ties predominate and ties with strictly religious associations are extremely weak. In the Catholic group, the relation is reverse, though it would be an exaggeration to say that Catholic communal ties are weak. The Protestant group is least cohesive, lacks the very strong communal bond of the Jewish group and lacks the very strong religious associational bond of the Catholic group."

Now, here we should note a difference in tradition between Jews and Christians. It is a well-established fact that among Jews, the distinction between the sacred and the profane (secular) is traditionally small—much smaller than in Christian groups. And while communal satisfactions are obtained by Christians mostly *within* the church, they are obtained by Jews mostly outside the synagogue.

Philanthropy is an example. Jews customarily regard philanthropy as a secular activity yet closely related to Jewish religious commitment. But among Christians, philanthropy tends to be an organic function of the church. The extent to which Jewish communal service is conducted outside the synagogue is hard for non-Jews to understand. Christian America, as Reinhold

Niebuhr puts it, has difficulty in grasping "the peculiar problem of a peculiar people who have miraculously survived for 2,000 years without a homeland, living under hazards of the Diaspora, in many nations and in many cultures." He concludes it is up to the Christian majority "to come to terms with the stubborn will to live of the Jews as a peculiar people both religiously and ethnically." Incidentally, we should keep in mind that other peculiar people live in America, such as the Quakers and Mormons.

An equally pertinent comment comes from the other Niebuhr. The late H. Richard said this: "It is difficult to classify Moses as a religious, political or an ethical figure or to designate a movement that began with him by one of these terms. He was a prophet and a chief and a law-giver, perhaps also a poet. It is only by virtue of relatively late developments and conventions that we put him in the category of founders of religion, rather than in founders of nations, or statesmen of constitutional societies."

#### **Importance of Secularism in America**

Secularism in the American environment is an important factor in determining whether the present-day climate favors the development of Jewish group identity. The predominance of secularism has been caused by a number of developments, past and present. Among them are the great migrations, the industrial revolution, the scientific revolution, the technological revolution, Darwin, Freud and the Atomic Age. We make a great error when we interpret secularism as a denial of God. It is by no means that, even though its connotation is civil rather than ecclesiastical. Secularism implies that religion is a private matter for the individual, that creedal commitments and theological doctrines are less important than inner convictions. Protestants who are not church-committed

are still considered Protestants—and, as revealed in the census findings, so consider themselves. There is a basic agreement between the two traditions, religious and secular, on a common humanism and humanitarianism. This common affirmation of the dignity of man has protected America against fiercely anti-clerical and anti-secular movements. John Courtney Murray, the distinguished Catholic theologian, reluctantly speaks of secularism as a fourth religion—Protestantism, Catholicism, Judaism and Secularism.

For Jews especially, this secularist atmosphere is important because it makes possible the free development of a minority religion, such as Judaism, within the accepted framework of society.

### Persistence of Ethnicity

While the socio-religious group is rapidly replacing the ethnic group in American society, ethnicity still exists in American life. It is a mistake to think that the Jews are among the very few who still preserve, besides their religious distinctiveness, their ethnic characteristics as well. Old-world counterparts are cherished by many groups in the United States. Americans of diverse descent—Greek, Norwegian, Italian or Irish—still preserve many of their distinctive customs and traditional celebrations. The Episcopalians, the Lutherans, and others maintain ties with their kindred groups abroad.

The American Jewish Committee expects shortly to publish a study of voting behavior by ethnic groups in the last presidential election. This study has brought forth some impressive findings that bear on ethnic identity. For example, in Boston as well as other parts of Massachusetts, and in Providence, the Yankees—the old-stock, Protestant, Anglo-Americans—have been behaving like the newer ethnic groups. Recently, Yankee Republicans have been crossing party

lines to vote for fellow Yankees running on the Democratic ticket against Italian, Irish or French-Canadian candidates. One obvious explanation is that the Yankees, finding themselves a beleaguered minority in New England, which was once theirs alone, are beginning to take on certain characteristics of their own group. But this explanation may be due to the perspective in which we have tended to view the old New Englanders. We have assumed that, as descendants of colonial settlers and Revolutionary warriors, they must be the very antithesis of the so-called immigrant minorities. But, now we know that the Yankees too are an ethnic group and that for them, as for later immigrants, a sense of group identity survives.

As for American Jews, our election study reveals that liberalism has been their hallmark. It evolved largely out of the political experiences the Jews brought from Eastern Europe, their economic experience as immigrants and urban proletarians, and their insecurities about anti-Semitism and admission to the general society. The voting pattern of Jews, which has often appeared completely mystifying in terms of their economic position, is completely understandable in terms of group tradition.

Even the descendants of German Jews, who once had a different political orientation, are taking on the more pervasive Jewish political tradition shaped by the East European immigrants. The memory of those European backgrounds is very faint, but the ethnic tradition to which it gave rise is vigorous. Unlike the Yankees, Jews do not tend to vote for candidates of their own groups, but express their ethnicity in supporting liberal platforms.

### Multiple Group Identifications

Thus, we may venture the conclusion at this stage that an appropriate group identification may be creedal or commu-

nal, sacred or secular—religious, socio-religious, or religio-cultural. There are no rigid rules or absolute formulae. Full American participation, hand-in-hand with Jewish identity, is fully consonant with the pattern of group life in America as it is today.

Some 150 years ago no one would have thought to ask "What is a Jew?" Everyone knew. A Jew was someone who observed the Jewish law—that is, he believed and practiced Judaism. But with secularism and liberalism combining to assault formal religion, the components of religious identity have become difficult to define—a difficulty, as we have seen, which is not limited to Jews alone. And besides the factors which complicate the defining of Jewish identity—the relationship of the individual to the Jewish group—the emergence of mass society in the last 50 years has even complicated the definition of personal identity—the relationship of the individual to society.

Still another factor which should be taken into account is the emergence of nationalist aspirations and ideologies among the many peoples of Central and Eastern Europe in the late 19th century. Under the impact of this development, many unbelieving Jews came to consider their group identity as based on a secular or political concept of Jewish *nationality*. In part, this outlook developed because many Jews could not identify themselves with the nationalist struggles of those among whom they lived. Zionism was an offshoot of these conditions, as was Yiddishism, Folkism, cultural autonomism and other secular, nationalist ideologies that flourished in those days, particularly in Eastern Europe.

With the waning of nationalist ideologies in the United States and other English-speaking countries, Jewish identity found a definition in the concept of peoplehood, or sense of community. Jews

were people bound together by a common faith, a common history, tradition, culture and language. This conception is implicitly, at times explicitly, secular—that is, expressed in non-religious terms. Yet its values or emphases are often derived from religion, though the derivation is acknowledged only rarely and sometimes with embarrassment.

Jewish identity is characterized by adherence to Jewish values—the morality and system of ethics derived from Judaism—and devotion to certain pursuits, such as learning (both secular and religious) and philanthropy. Participation in Jewish community activity is another way of expressing identity.

#### **Negative Influences on Retention of Jewish Identity**

During the last 150 years of European history, with anti-Semitic attitudes prevailing in most countries and anti-Semitic disabilities enforced by many, the retention of identity has not always appeared desirable. In quest of admission to the general society, some Jews often thought they could divest themselves of Jewishness and live as individuals detached from their historic past. But only a relatively small proportion was prepared to pay the full price of admission to Western society—conversion.

For those to whom Kiddush Hassem (the sanctification of God's name) had little meaning because they had ceased to observe Judaism, the penalties of being Jewish seemed to outweigh the rewards. Yet, there were rewards too, particularly at the darkest moments in Jewish history. One reward was pride in perpetuating a millennial tradition of righteousness and justice, practiced by people whose political powerlessness enhanced their moral purity. The Jewish dramatist, Ansky, the author of "The Dybbuk," who was also a great folklorist, used to say, especially after the pogroms the Jews suffered, and after the

first World War, "*Their* folklore tells mostly about women and bloodshed, while Jewish folklore is about the truth and justice." In the Jewish tradition, he said, "truth is so important that even God is called to judgment and if he decrees an evil, the righteous man nullifies it." There are well-known Hasidic tales about God being put on trial, as it were, and the decision going against him. Do we wonder where the argumentative impulse of the Jew comes from? And his independence of mind?

In the United States, the penalties and discomforts of being Jewish were never as extreme as in Europe. Because American Jews were not so violently rejected, they did not need to turn their backs and reject the Christian world. And whereas in Europe, Jews often found it important to reinforce their own dignity and self-esteem by stressing their moral superiority, they have not usually resorted to this type of apologetics in America.

America is different. Despite the persistence of anti-Semitism in various forms, although progressively less overt and less widespread, Jewishness has never been the only barrier to the general acceptance of Jews. Just being an immigrant was, from the start, another barrier—poverty, strangeness, ignorance of English and American institutions. America has indeed been a sort of melting pot, blending the qualities of many different nationalities into a new distillation of the old European stocks. But the blending of many people into one people never meant homogenizing them—a misconception propounded by the super-patriots, Gentiles and Jews alike. On the contrary, America's traditions of religious liberty and receptivity to ethnic diversity have made it possible for a variety of religions to flourish and maintain their theological, institutional and cultural differences.

Yet, we see factors at work that run

counter to this acceptance of difference. In the last decade we witnessed the strength that the forces of conformity could muster. As a result, in politics and in education, to name only two areas, the search for creative approaches was seriously hindered. Even more far-reaching is the rise of mass society where conformity is achieved by sheer force of numbers. In this modern society, with its dependence on technology, its mass culture, mass media, mass production, mass distribution, mass consumption and mass pressure, difference, uniqueness and originality tend to be erased. Assimilation, acculturation, amalgamation appear to be irresistible trends.

Now let us take, for example, an acculturated young man with a college education and a Jewish education that ended at age 13. Quite understandably, he envisions Jewish culture—in its broadest sense—within the limits of what he was taught as a child. Contrasting this relative pittance of learning with his extensive knowledge of general, Western Christian culture, gained during his adulthood at college and beyond, the disparity may well cause self-contempt or even self-hate. Then, too, some Jews, particularly those third and fourth-generation, college-bred young people, become alienated by some of the very institutions designed to attract Jews and maintain Jewishness—for instance, those we might call "gilded ghettos." Here we might give heed to Edwin Wolf's observation that most of us in American Jewish life *do* rather than *think*—that American Jewry cannot afford to lose the intellectual cream of the coming generation. The now famous symposium of younger Jewish intellectuals, published in *Commentary* in April, 1961, was an expression of this type of rejection. But these young people might have been prepared, and may still be, to identify with a conception of Jewishness and Judaism that is intellectually appealing,

philosophically valid in the modern era and sociologically compatible with current realities.

### **Positive Forces of Jewish Identity**

However, the centripetal forces of Jewish identity are very powerful. Nowadays the saying, "Shver tsu zayn a Yid" is used almost always ironically. It has lost its poignancy. Judaism is part of the American scene. It is one of America's three religions, one of the triple melting pots in Will Herberg's thesis of American religious pluralism. Judaism and the Jewish tradition are necessarily and increasingly winning the respect of Christian theologians and philosophers. The Judaic roots of Christianity are being stressed and studied in depth. Dr. Frederick G. Grant, Professor of Biblical Theology at Union Theological Seminary, wrote an influential book, "Ancient Judaism and the New Testament," in which he says that only "among half-educated and misinformed preachers and writers" is Judaism still presented unfavorably. This retrospective re-evaluation of Judaism, extending back to the days of Jesus, was inspired not only by the findings of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the advance of scholarship, but also by respect for the contemporary Jewish tradition. We may also note the role and influence of such persons as Professor Abraham J. Heschel as spokesman for Judaism among leading Christian theologians and clergymen.

The will to survive is perhaps the strongest expression of Jewish identity. In the studies of Jews in Riverton, a medium-sized Atlantic seaboard community, the AJC found that 93 percent of the parents interviewed, and 95 percent of their adolescent children, want Jews to remain a distinct group. Asked what religion they would choose if they were to be reborn, 82 percent of the parents and 88 percent of the adolescents chose to be reborn Jews. Over two-thirds of

the parents and nearly three-quarters of the youngsters expressed positive feeling about Jewishness.

Riverton's Jews are mostly second generation, of East European background, in the professions and trades, and with about middle income. They do not see Judaism as a burden; they want to be successful and they believe that they can be successful and Jewish.

The AJC has now been studying a midwest suburban community called Lakeville. Here we have largely a third-generation group, of German-Jewish background, in the professions and business, and very upper-middle range of income. These people share with Riverton's Jews the will to survive as Jews. They were asked how concerned they were with giving their children an understanding and a background of Jewish life. These are the answers: 45 percent were very concerned, 32 percent moderately, 14 percent somewhat, 6 percent not at all; and 3 percent gave no answer.

Thus, 91 percent expressed concern about passing on to their children a sense of Jewish identity, and over three-quarters were more than routinely interested. Even more significant is the fact that of this 91 percent, all but 5 percent were doing something about it; they were giving their children a Jewish education and practicing some observances and celebrating some holidays. These and many other details came out in the course of the interviews, which were very much in depth, each one taking from three to three-and-a-half hours.

Like Riverton's Jews, few in Lakeville saw their Jewishness as an obstacle to personal happiness or success. Asked whether, had they been born gentile, they would have had a more satisfying life, 11 percent said maybe. But 68 percent said it would have made no difference. And 17 percent were even more

positive; they felt they would have had less satisfying lives as gentiles.

In Riverton, 80 percent of the parents and 90 percent of the adolescents defined a Jew as someone professing Judaism. This was observed in Lakeville too. Ninety percent of the parents described themselves as Jews according to the three branches of Judaism, Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox. Only 10 percent applied a generalized, non-religious term to themselves, such as "agnostic Jew," or "cultural Jew." It is not necessarily true that the Lakeville parents are more religious than the parents in Riverton. It is more likely that professing religion and belonging to a congregation have now become the most acceptable and understandable form of expressing Jewish identity.

Economically and occupationally, culturally and even socially, American Jews are no longer Mike Gold's "Jews Without Money." Almost all studies confirm the fact that our young people today feel no shame or embarrassment, as they did thirty or forty years ago, about the accents of their parents, their foreignness, their lack of secular education, their poverty. And for good reason. "Jew" has almost become synonymous with education and culture in America. It is reported that more than one university president has asked Hillel to circularize Jewish students and encourage applications, hoping thereby to raise the academic level of the entire institution. It is predicted that Jewish enrollment in colleges will continue to grow until virtually every American Jewish youngster will be receiving a higher education.

One notable consequence of the change in attitude on the part of the younger generation is a renewed interest on the campus and among the teaching profession in the intellectual and cultural heritage of Jews. Chairs in Jewish studies are being established all over the country. Two have been founded by

AJC chapters—one at the University of Wisconsin, the other at Washington University in St. Louis. Professor Salo Baron recently cited some interesting figures: In 1940, 124 schools of higher learning included Hebrew studies. By 1957, the number of schools had nearly doubled, 245.

#### Acculturation without Loss of Identity

Yes, the Jewish tradition still speaks with vigor and relevance in the world today, not alone to Jews, but to all society. That tradition is the source of our identity. Acculturation to American society without loss of identity—either religious or religio-cultural, depending upon one's point of view—is the essence of Jewish integration.

Recognition of one's group identity instills a sense of surefootedness and tends to minimize feeling of uprootedness, unrelatedness, and aloneness in this modern mass society. It is essential to the unconditional acceptance of self, which in turn is basic to acceptance by others.

With a society hospitable to difference, and a vigorous tradition that has much to say to the modern world, it would appear that Jewish religious and communal leaders, social workers and educators, lay and professional, have both an opportunity and a responsibility to help the individual Jew to find the personal enrichment and sense of community that Jewish identity can give.

It is probable that we in America have put too much emphasis on eliminating or suppressing the differences which distinguish us from other American groups, as if we were trying to approach a mythical, non-existent American "type." Fundamental research on the problems surrounding Jewish identity would be of great value—influences from parents and others that shape the process of identity formation; the manifold ways in which Jewishness, in both its positive

and negative aspects, becomes an intrinsic part of the self of the growing child.

I should like to end with the words of Rabbi Zusya of 18th century Chasidic fame, as narrated by Martin Buber. Rabbi Zusya, the Chasidic rabbi of great

piety, explained to his disciples the meaning of identity in this manner: "When I face my Maker, I will not be asked, 'Why were you not Moses?' But I will be asked, 'Why were you not Zusya?'"