Contemporary Jewries

Convergence and Divergence

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CHAPTER TEN

IDENTITY AND IDENTIFICATION OF JEWISH BABY BOOMERS

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For much of the past decade, I was involved in a study of the American Jewish baby boomer population, the results of which are in my book, *Jewish Baby Boomers: A Communal Perspective* (Waxman, 2001). Based largely on the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey, the work looks at Jews as both a religious and an ethnic group and compares Jewish baby boomers with Protestant and Catholic baby boomers, as well as with baby boomers from other ethnic groups. It then compares Jewish baby boomers even more extensively with their predecessors, the "pre-World War II" (or pre-WWII) generation, those born in 1925–1945. The focus is not so much on the condition of Jewish baby boomers as individuals as on the baby boomers as part of a Jewish collectivity. As indicated in the subtitle, the book has a communal perspective. This chapter reports on some of the major findings of that study, as well as patterns among younger generations of American Jews.

There has long been a good deal of confusion among scholars as to the notions of "identity" and "identification." To complicate matters further, within the framework of the newer "post-modernist" conception, Jewish identity is something that individuals create for themselves and involves how they think and feel emotionally about their Jewishness (Rubin-Dorsky and Fishkin, 1996). It is therefore not very susceptible to measurement by responses to survey questions. Given the semantic and conceptual complexities, I chose to refer to the variables that I selected as indicators of identity and identification. Since I knew of no other reliable and available criteria for analyzing Jewish identity, the empirical data in the National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) that reflect Jewish identification were also taken as indicators of Jewish identity.

In brief, it was found that, on the one hand, more than 85 percent of Jewish baby boomers stated that being Jewish is important

or very important to them. On the other hand, on almost every indicator of Jewishness as ethnicity and as religion, the baby boomers manifested lower levels than their elders in the pre-WWII cohort.

For example, fewer Jewish baby boomers than members of the pre-World War II cohort maintain the traditional kosher dietary rituals or fast on Yom Kippur; fewer identify with the more traditional denominations, i.e., Orthodox and Conservative; fewer have ever visited Israel; fewer contribute to Jewish charities; fewer report that their closest friends are Jewish; fewer view antisemitism as a serious problem in the U.S.; and more of them report having received no formal Jewish education. They attend synagogue services less frequently; they express weaker emotional attachments to Israel; they are less likely to consider the Jewishness of their neighborhood important; they are less likely to live in Jewish neighborhoods; they are more limited in their knowledge of a Jewish language (Yiddish or Hebrew); and they are more likely to intermarry. The intermarriage rates vary with denominational traditionalism and are highest among the Reform. Intermarriage, in turn, correlates with lower levels of Jewish identity and identification.

Perhaps this is not what the sociologist Herbert Gans meant by "symbolic ethnicity." He suggested that traditional ethnic identity entailed rootedness in the ethnic social structure with extensive as well as intensive involvement. Symbolic ethnicity has neither the social nor the psychological depth of traditional ethnicity. It is a matter of personal identity-construction in which one chooses if, when, and how to be ethnic. As Gans puts it,

> [this] generation has grown up without assigned roles or groups that anchor ethnicity, so that identity can no longer be taken for granted. . . . This has two important consequences for ethnic behavior. First, given the degree to which the third generation has acculturated and assimilated, most people look for easy and intermittent ways of expressing their identity, for ways that do not conflict with other ways of life. As a result, they refrain from ethnic behavior that requires an arduous or time-consuming commitment either to a culture that must be practiced constantly, or to organizations that demand active membership. Second, because people's concern is with identity rather than with cultural practices or group relationships, they are free to look for ways of expressing that identity which suits them best, thus opening up the possibility of voluntary, diverse, or individualistic ethnicity (Gans, 1979: 203–204).

Although he views this ethnicity as one "which is worn very lightly," he says he would not be surprised if it persisted into the fifth gen-

eration and perhaps even longer because there are both internal forces, especially those of identity needs, and external structural forces, relating to immigration patterns and processes, that "encourage the persistence of symbolic ethnicity (Gans, 1979: 215)."

Recent research indicates that, indeed, the "identity needs" of America's Jews are quite strong and, perhaps, increasing. As indicated previously, a very high percentage claim that being Jewish is important to them. Bethamie Horowitz goes further and, on the basis of her findings, argues that Jewish identity in America is not declining but is rather in flux. While 70 percent of her respondents reported low or declining ritual observance, a similar number—63 percent—reported high or increasing levels of subjective, "interior" Jewish attachment.

Steven Cohen and Arnold Eisen conducted qualitative research on a similar American Jewish sample and conclude that these people increasingly find meaning in the private spheres of the self and the family, rather than through involvement in the public spheres of organizations and institutions. Involvement in such causes as the Holocaust and Israel or contributing to Jewish philanthropy are no longer the major sources of Jewish meaning for the baby boomer generation. Like the NJPS, Cohen and Eisen found that the boundaries that previously separated Jews from non-Jews are weaker than before and the baby boomers are increasingly less connected to the communal expression of either Judaism or Jewishness (see Tables).

Cohen and Eisen found that those they interviewed seek Jewish meaning and derive the most meaning from those rituals and practices that involve family members. They are committed to Judaism and want to pass it on to their children but they do not socialize their children Jewishly by establishing clear boundaries of acceptable behavior.

Indeed, a detailed analysis of Jewish children and adolescents, based on the 1990 NJPS, indicates that they are being reared in households with a lower level of Jewish commitment and therefore their families cannot transmit Jewish norms and values even if they wish to do so. Fewer than half (46 percent) of Jewish children aged 6–17 receive any formal Jewish education. Given the increasing rate of intermarriage, a growing number of children will be reared in families that do not light Hanukka candles; more will have Christmas trees; fewer will attend a Passover seder, celebrate Sabbath or Purim, contribute to Jewish charities, participate in Jewish communal activities,

Table 10.1: The Importance of Being Jewish

	Boomers	Pre-WWII
Not important	3.0	2.9
Not very important	11.4	5.9
Somewhat important	42.0	30.0
Very important	43.7	61.3
Total	100.0	100.0

Table 10.2: Performance of Household Rituals

	Boomers	Pre-WWII
Household lights candles Friday night	17.7	16.3
Household attends seder	74.3	70.5
Someone in household buys kosher meat	16.3	16.3
Household uses separate meat and dairy dishes	12.1	13.5
Someone in household lights Hanukka candles	73.3	67.0

Table 10.3: Number of Times Respondent has been to Israel

	Boomers (100%)	Pre-WWII (100%)
Once	12.8	18.8
Twice	4.8	5.2
3 or more	5.6	6.1
Born in Israel	1.4	0.6
Never	75.3	69.6

Table 10.4: Emotional Attachment to Israel

	Boomers	Pre-WWII
Not attached	24.2	14.9
Somewhat attached	47.0	37.1

Table 10.4 (*cont.*)

	Boomers	Pre-WWII
Very attached	18.2	32.2
Extremely attached	10.6	15.8
Total	100.0	100.0

Table 10.5: Number of Jewish Organizations to Which Respondent Belongs

	Boomers	Pre-WWII
None	72.0	64.7
One	16.5	18.8
Two	7.1	5.7
Three or more	4.4	10.7
Total	100.0	100.0

Table 10.6: Closest Friends Who are Jewish

	Boomers	Pre-WWII
None Jewish	6.3	5.2
Few or some Jewish	60.4	44.1
Most Jewish	24.3	34.2
All Jewish	9.0	16.4
Total	100.0	100.0

Table 10.7: Jewishness of the Neighborhood

	Boomers	Pre-WWII
Not at all	33.0	31.0
Somewhat	59.1	59.9
All Jewish	7.9	9.1
Total	100.0	100.0

Table 10.8: Knowledge of Spoken Hebrew and Yiddish

	Boomers	Pre-WWII
Hebrew	27.6	19.1
Yiddish	23.6	42.6

Table 10.9: Intermarriage Rates in the Major Jewish Denominations

	Boomers	Pre-WWII
Orthodox	15.8	14.4
Conserve	44.0	17.8
Reform	52.3	34.0

Table 10.10: Jewish Involvement of Endogamous and Intermarried Baby Boomers

	Spouse Jewish	Spouse non-Jewish
Has never been to Israel	65.6	86.7
Doesn't belong to any Jewish organizations	60.1	85.9
Did not receive any Jewish education	19.3	29.7
Has not volunteered for a Jewish organization	60.7	91.9
Doesn't fast on Yom Kippur	26.6	61.3
Doesn't attend synagogue services at all	6.4	23.5
Household never lights candles on Friday night	33.9	79.4
Household never attends a Passover seder	3.3	16.9
No one in household ever lights Hanukka candles	4.3	17.8
Household never has a Christmas tree	88.5	14.7
No one in household celebrates Yom Ha-atzma'ut	67.0	92.7
No one in household is a synagogue member	37.6	87.2

or live in neighborhoods that are very or somewhat Jewish (Keysar, Kosmin, and Scheckner, 2000).

Whereas Keysar and her colleagues suggest that the decline in Jewish identification is primarily the consequence of intermarriage, Cohen and Eisen's work suggests somewhat similar patterns among children of endogamous Jewish marriages as well. Jewish baby boomers, whether intermarried or not, increasingly do not function Jewishly within a normative framework that establishes standards of what is "proper Jewish behavior."

This seems to be the nature of identity in the post-modern era. Identity is no longer fixed. Each individual creates his or her own identity and all identities are deemed valid. In contrast to the famous survey question "What is a good Jew?" asked by Marshall Sklare and Joseph Greenblum in their study of the Jews of "Lakeville," today's Jews increasingly reject the very notion of a "good Jew." They reject the notion that anything specific is required. Each individual is free to define his or her own Jewishness. The sources of this development lie in processes within the larger society.

In the second half of the twentieth century, according to Roger Inglehart's analysis, a major "culture shift" took place in modern societies. Inglehart's comprehensive cross-cultural surveys and analyses reveal broad international patterns. In his analysis of survey data gathered in twenty-five industrial societies, primarily in Western Europe and the United States, between 1970 and 1986, Inglehart argues that "economic, technological, and sociopolitical changes have been transforming the cultures of advanced industrial societies in profoundly important ways" (Inglehart, 1990: 3). Following Maslow's hierarchy of needs, according to which the needs for food, shelter, and sex are on the lowest rung and must be satisfied before a person can move up the pyramid to its apex (self-actualization), Inglehart maintains that individuals are most concerned with satisfying material needs and eliminating threats to their physical security. "Materialist" values, he avers, which are characteristic of less secure societies (economically and otherwise), are values which emphasize material security. In politics, these would focus on such needs as strong leaders and order. In the realm of economics, such values emphasize economic growth and strong motivation for individual achievement. In the area of sexuality and family norms, the emphasis would be on the maximization of reproduction within the two-parent family. And in religion, the emphasis is on a higher power and absolute rules.

However, once the basic material needs are satisfied and physical safety is assured, people strive for "postmaterialist" values, which entail the satisfaction of more remote needs, many of them in the spiritual, aesthetic, and interpersonal realms. Their focus becomes self-fulfillment and personal autonomy, rather than identifying with their families, localities, ethnic groups, or even nations. The "culture shift" is manifested in a declining respect for authority and increased mass participation in public activity; an increasing emphasis on subjective well-being and quality-of-life concerns; more emphasis on meaningful work; greater choice with respect to sexual norms; declining confidence in established religious institutions and declining rates of church attendance; and increased contemplation of the purpose and meaning of life. This shift from central authority to individual autonomy has taken place in the "postmaterialist" Western society of the late twentieth century. Accordingly, post-modernists are less bound by group affiliations, which should not be so surprising since one of the basic distinguishing features of modernity, as compared to traditional society, is the greater emphasis on the individual.

In the mid-1980s, Robert Bellah and his colleagues introduced "Sheila," who created her own religion, "sheilaism" (Bellah, 1985, 1996). More recently, the social scientist Robert Putnam argued that Americans are increasingly detached from social groups such as the community, are less likely to be involved in civic activities, and are less likely to join parent-teacher associations, unions, political parties, and a host of other social groups, and this, he argues, has serious implications for the future of American society (Putnam, 2000).

It now appears, however, that—at least in the United States—there has been another significant shift, this time in the opposite direction. The destruction of the World Trade Center in New York on September 11, 2001, and the subsequent anthrax terrorism appear to have shaken the sense of complacency that characterized much of the West in recent years. There is now much more fear and anxiety concerning global terrorism. There is a decreased sense of security in the United States and there have been increased manifestations of civic involvement, some of which Putnam himself indicated shortly after the destruction of the WTC (Putnam, 2001).

For American Jews, the shift is much more profound. In addition to the al-Qa'ida terrorism against the United States and the movement's overt antisemitism, the Palestinian Arab suicide bombings, the support for these bombings from a variety of pro-Palestinian

groups, and a variety of related issues have shaken American Jews' sense of security. The concern about growing antisemitism "out there" was eloquently and powerfully expressed by Jonathan Rosen in a *New York Times Magazine* article after September 11. As Jodi Wilgoren reported,

> Perhaps even more than the conflict in the Middle East, the situation in Europe has shaken American Jews' sense of security. A poll this month showed that more people in France, Italy and Britain sympathized with the Palestinians than with Israel.

Statements from the United Nations and the European Union condemning the Israeli occupation and the Israeli Army's invasion of West Bank cities, coupled with antisemitic attacks on Jewish cemeteries, school buses and a teenage soccer team, have led many to draw parallels with anti-Jewish attitudes abroad in the 1930's (Wilgoren, 2002).

The question we now face is the long-lasting effect of these events. Although it presently appears to be pure fantasy, most Jews have a strong desire to see a real peace process. Assuming that there will be one, sooner or later, the question then becomes the long-lasting impact of the current tensions. Have they unalterably moved the pendulum in the other direction? Will their effect be long-lasting? If post-modern Jewish identity should intensify again, those who regard affiliation with the Jewish people—Klal Yisrael—as an integral part of Jewishness will have some concerns. How will post-modern Jewish identity affect these? I don't have any panaceas, but I am convinced that the issue is something which we increasingly need to address. And I am convinced that we have to think of engaging the unaffiliated and loosely affiliated on their own turf. I am intrigued, although I remain quite skeptical, by the suggestion that the Internet provides the potential for building what Rheingold (1994), Hornsby (2001), and others have called a "virtual community." Jews and Judaism have a significant presence on the Web. There are hundreds, if not thousands, of websites on Jewish subjects. There are scores of host indexing sites which, in addition to listing sites of Jewish interest, offer the latest Jewish news from a wide variety of sources, hundreds of "listservs" for discussions on a very broad array of Jewish topics, and "shopping malls" for the purchase of Judaica of every kind. There are even several guidebooks to the Jewish Internet. Through the use of the Internet, Jewish institutions may be able to reach the

unaffiliated. However, that can only be done by making the community attractive and desirable.

In the end, however, such attempts pose a dilemma analogous to that presented by the sociologist Peter Berger at the conclusion of *The Sacred Canopy*, his book on religion in modern society. As he puts it,

> The pluralistic situation presents the religious institutions with two ideal-typical options. They can either accommodate themselves to the situation, play the pluralistic game of religious free enterprise, and come to terms as best they can with the plausibility problem by modifying their product in accordance with consumer demands. Or they can refuse to accommodate themselves, entrench themselves behind whatever socioreligious structures they can maintain or construct, and continue to profess the old objectivities as much as possible as if nothing had happened. Obviously there are various intermediate possibilities between these two ideal-typical options, with varying degrees of accommodation and intransigence. Both ideal-typical options have problems on the level of theory as well as on the level of "social engineering." (Berger, 1969: 152–153).

Whereas the choices he presents form a "crisis of theology," the challenge facing the Jewish community suggests a crisis of boundaries. That is, the question facing the Jewish community is how long it will be able to dodge the extremely thorny issue of boundary maintenance: are there any outer limits beyond which one is beyond the pale?