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Jewish Communities in the Diaspora

Edited by Sol Encel and Leslie Stein

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Jewish Identity Research in the United States: Ruminations on Concepts and Findings

Steven M. Cohen

A SHIFTING FOCUS: FROM INTEGRATIONISM TO SURVIVALISM

In the mid-twentieth century, American Jews were rapidly moving upward socially and outward geographically. In entering the upper middle class and the newly built suburbs around major metropolitan areas, they experienced halfhearted acceptance, if not outright rejection, in several domains. For American Jews, the central issues were tied up with entry into the larger society; for academics who studied such issues, the research agenda reflected the drives and problems felt by this aspiring American minority seeking to rid itself of the burdens of age-old prejudice and discrimination. Accordingly, social scientists of the mid-twentieth-century Jewish experience focused in large part upon minority status, adjustment, acceptance, status attainment, and related matters (see, for example, Gans 1958; Glazer 1958; Ringer 1967).

After 1967, the agenda of American Jewry shifted from integrationism to survivalism (Cohen and Fein 1985), from winning social acceptance to assuring group persistence. Accordingly, since the late 1960s, social scientists of the American Jewish experience and their lay readers have been focused upon a central question that has animated their work. It is the question of group survival, a matter of discerning the health of the Jewish community in America at a time when Jews experienced the near total removal of all barriers to their participation in the larger society. As early as 1973, Charles Liebman would articulate what would emerge as the master question in the study of American Jewry until the present day:

The American Jew is torn between two sets of values—those of integration and acceptance into American society and those of Jewish group survival. These values appear to me to be incompatible. But most American Jews do not view them in this way. . . . The be-

behavior of the American Jew is best understood as his unconscious effort to restructure his environment and reorient his own self-definition and perception of reality so as to reduce the tension between these values. (1973: vii)

Over time, and particularly during the last decade or so, the matters of Jewish continuity and Jewish identity have taken center stage both among the small coterie of social scientific researchers of the Jewish experience in the United States, and among the broader organized Jewish community that has played the roles of sponsors, readers, consumers, and critics of that research.

In this context, during the mid-1980s, researchers staked out major competing answers to this master question. In broad strokes, some claimed to have observed, or at least forecast, widespread assimilation of Jews and decline of Jewish community, marked by high rates of intermarriage and lower levels of engagement in ritual practice, synagogues, and communal organizations (e.g., Hertzberg 1985). This perspective is situated in the context of modernization theory that perceives and anticipates the decline of religiosity and ethnic loyalties in favor of more rational bases for collectivity and identity.

Opposed to this view were those dubbed transformationists. This camp saw the evidence pointing to continued strength in Jewish identity and community, albeit under different terms than those that had defined community and identity in the past (e.g., Goldscheider 1986; Silberman 1985). For transformationists, American Judaism was changing form, dropping some elements and advancing or creating others, but not at all weakening, eroding, or declining. Jews, in this view, were moving from place to place (be it in terms of geography, social class, occupation, or other dimension) but recongregating in new parts of the social and geographic maps they inhabit, physically or metaphysically.

Still other theorists discerned a move toward polarization or bimodality, with growth in the most identified and least identified wings of the Jewish identity spectrum, and a commensurate shrinkage in the number of those in the middle range of Jewish involvement (e.g., Cohen 1988). Other studies were more equivocal (Cohen 1983; Fein 1988). That debate set the stage for the next round of social scientific research, which developed not only new substantive foci, but the new application of more diverse methodologies as well.

The 1990s were marked by relatively few heated controversies, save one skirmish over the level of intermarriage, pegged at 52 percent by the official analysts of the authoritative National Jewish Population Study and closer to 41 percent by me (Cohen 1994; Kosmin et al. 1991). Rather than engaging in much debate, the field turned to developing a number of middle-range concepts and observations.

Situated conceptually between grand theories and empirical findings, theories of the middle range constitute the conceptual building blocks for any school of research or research program, and so it is with the study of American Jewish continuity and American Jewish identity. This paper presents critically what I hope is a useful selection of important middle-range concepts and find-

ings in the recent social scientific study of Jewish identity in the United States. The discussion offers both conceptual and substantive explorations and ruminations aimed at providing a reasoned and informed assessment of the chances for and contours of American Jewish continuity in the foreseeable future.

Jewish Identity: Limitations and Distortions

If Jewish continuity is to be assured, the thinking has gone, it will be assured by a large number of Jews with strong Jewish identities. Conversely, threats to Jewish continuity are seen as emanating from the growth of weaker forms of Jewish identity. In fact, Jewish identity, as ambiguous and misleading as it may be, probably most widely characterizes the major subfield of study of contemporary American Jewry. (In Israel, the same field is often referred to as Jewish demography, reflecting the prominence of demographers in the study of contemporary Diaspora Jewry.) With this said, confusion over the nature and meaning of Jewish identity immediately generates confusion over the future of Jewish continuity. For purposes of clarity, the term "Jewish identity" bears some scrutiny, as preliminary to any discussion of Jewish continuity.

The truth be told, Jewish identity, taken in certain ways, is not a particularly apt characterization of the field of inquiry to which the term often refers. In connotation, though not by necessity, Jewish identity is too individualist, too attitudinal, and too fixed. Those concerned with Jewish continuity, or more broadly, the health and vitality of American Jewry, are really concerned about issues that embrace but extend beyond Jewish identity, or at least the more obvious and colloquial understandings of the terms.

By saying that Jewish identity is, by connotation, too individualist, I note that the term "identity" grows most naturally out of the fields of psychology and social psychology, with their emphasis on the individual and his or her interaction with others. Sociology, anthropology, economics, and history—to take contrasting examples—focus more on the experience of the group, community, and society. My sense is that much of what researchers of American Jewish identity are ultimately about is assessing the group character and communal health of American Jewry, and that the study of Jewish individuals' identities is a convenient way to get at the larger, more collectively oriented question. Certainly studies of American Jewish community (e.g., Elazar 1976), specific communities (e.g., Mayer 1979), and cultural representations (Prell 1999) can be found. However, the great bulk of contemporary Jewish social science in the United States derives from the answers of individuals to social surveys, from which researchers draw inferences about their commitment, engagement, and involvement, and ultimately, by extension, about the health and vitality of American Jewry as a whole.

A second limitation lies in the tendency for Jewish identity to draw our attention more naturally and automatically to attitudes and beliefs, rather than to actions and behaviors. Of course, students of all sorts of identities certainly

explore behaviors and social interaction. How could they not? But quite often the purpose of doing so is to better understand personality characteristics, beliefs, images, and other attitudinal features. In point of fact, reflecting the very character of Protestantism, much of the research in the sociology of religion in the West understandably emphasizes matters of faith, belief, and religious commitment. Judaism, however, inherently values the performance of specific rituals and the undertaking of acts of association (e.g., marriage, friendship, and neighboring with other Jews) and affiliation (e.g., with synagogues, community centers, organizations, charities, etc.). Marshall Sklare's classic sociological work, first published in 1967 on the basis of field work conducted in the 1950s, that pioneered the study of American Jewish identity reflects this emphasis on sacramentalism:

For the Jew, this means confronting a religion which is strongly sacramental in orientation. Since the sacraments—what the Jew call *mitzvot*—are divinely ordained, their performance has sacred significance. (Sklare and Greenblum 1979: 46)

Not surprisingly, yet significantly, the major empirical chapters of this monograph, *Jewish Identity on the Suburban Frontier*, focus upon ritual practice, synagogue affiliation and involvement, pro-Israel support and attachment, Jewish organizational involvement, friendship ties (with Jews), Jewish socialization of one's children, and the "image of the good Jew," an analysis of norms of what a Jew ought to do to be a good Jew. Thus, in this classic analysis of Jewish identity, behavior and attitudes toward normative behavior occupy the bulk of the analysis. (Sklare's work may be contrasted with that of his younger contemporary Simon Herman [1970, 1977], who, as a social psychologist, more readily and explicitly focused upon identity, distinguishing it from Jewish identification, which he referred to how Jewish identity is expressed.) Notwithstanding the shift in American Jews' own conceptualization of their notions of belonging to greater subjectivity (Cohen and Eisen 2000; Horowitz 1998, 2000), I would argue that contemporary analysis of Jewish identity needs to still explore and assess the performance of certain behaviors as ends in themselves, as inherently important components of Jewish group identity, and not merely as indicators of some underlying attitudinal reality.

The third and final concern with Jewish identity is that it may well, for some, connote a fixed personality characteristic. The lay public, Jewish communal practitioners, and others (even researchers) sometimes think of Jewish identity as consisting of a set of beliefs and commitments that individuals carry around with them wherever they may go. The Jewishly motivated will find ways and settings to express their ties to Judaism, and the unmotivated will fail to do so. In point of fact, the likelihood and the tendency to manifest Jewish commitment (by way of ritual observance, association, affiliation, etc.) reflect social characteristics and circumstances. These include family status, social status, the nature of the surrounding Jewish community (size, density, veteran status, institutionalization), to say nothing of highly personal and idiosyncratic cir-

cumstances such as personality characteristics, family history, and interpersonal relationships. Jewish identity, then, is not simply a matter of motivation, beliefs, and images. It is all of that in combination with social and related circumstances.

THREE SORTS OF JEWISH IDENTITY MEASURES: AUTHENTICITY, SUBJECTIVITY, CONTINUITY

Granting, for the moment, that we take a more complex and enlarged view of Jewish identity, and one that is peculiarly appropriate for the study of Jews and in particular Jews in the United States, any analysis of Jewish continuity still needs to distinguish among major ways of conceptualizing measures of Jewish identity. In particular, I suggest three principal alternatives are available to any researcher or observer:

Measures of Jewish authenticity
Measures of Jewish subjectivity
Measures of Jewish continuity

Jewish authenticity refers to whatever one defines as authentically Jewish. Inevitably, this decision must be informed by values and Jewish ideology. Jewish socialists, Haredim, and Zionists—to take just three diverging examples—will certainly disagree on that which is essential to being Jewish, and ultimately, that which should be measured and analyzed. The Jewishly authentic, then, can embrace an ideologically wide range of ideas, including ritual practice, text study, and a Jewishly informed social justice advocacy. Although the determination of the boundaries of Jewish authenticity is heavily informed by ideological considerations, this determination is not entirely ideological. One can analyze an historic culture and its development and declare that certain innovations so radically depart from their cultural predecessors that they lack any reasonable claim to authenticity and continuity. Alternatively, based upon an ostensibly dispassionate analysis, one can declare certain cultural elements (e.g., organized community, synagogue participation, study of Torah, love of Israel, ethical practice, etc.) as central to Judaism, however it has been understood. The actors, of course, may feel otherwise. Obviously, by some traditional measures of Jewish authenticity, Jewish continuity seems downright threatened, if not already destroyed beyond recognition. I suspect that less traditional observers, with quite different views of authentic Judaism, tend to hold a more upbeat view of the American Jewish present and future.

Jewish subjectivity refers to the sorts of things that rank-and-file Jews define as Jewishly meaningful, be they music, food, comedy, or putative traditions of Jewish intellectualism and philanthropy. For the last several years, the social science of Judaism has been engaged in an implicit, if not sometimes explicit, debate

over the most appropriate measures of Jewish identity. Measures of authenticity embody the prescriptive pole of this prescriptive-descriptive debate, reflecting the researcher's sense (with Sklare earlier) that one may determine *a priori* the essential aspects of Jewish identity. Measures of Jewish subjectivity embody the descriptive pole, reflecting the sense that researchers need to define Jewish identity in accord with those who constitute and live out the life of the Jewish group. Part of the role of the social science of contemporary Jewry is to measure compliance with subjectively determined definitions of Jewish identity, even if they radically depart from those used in the past, or those use contemporaneously in other places or by other movements in Jewish life. The vast majority of Jews, even some with a tangential tie to Judaism or actually being Jewish, readily claim to be Jewish and almost as readily assent to being proud to be Jewish. Most Jews say that being Jewish is very important to them. By such subjective measures, American Jewish identity and, by extension, continuity, seems quite healthy indeed.

Jewish continuity measures refer to those elements that best ensure the continuation of the Jewish group in American society, without necessary reference to authentic Jewish norms or Jewishness as defined by the population. Calvin Goldscheider's work (1986) probably best exemplifies this approach, with its emphasis on Jews' social structural distinctiveness from the larger society, the frequency of harmonious intragroup interaction, and the persistence of group cohesiveness. In this approach, the maintenance of group ties (in-marriage, in-group friendship, neighborhoods, occupational concentration, institutional belonging) will guarantee Jewish continuity, even if (and when) Jews decide to define their being Jewish in ways that some might find innovative, heretical, strange, or inauthentic.

THE PERSONALIST SHIFT, OR THE JEWISH VERSION OF RELIGIOUS INDIVIDUALISM

With these conceptual observations in place, we can proceed to consider some of the major trends and tendencies in American Jewry and American Jewish identity. Possibly one of the most central is the move to a more personalist approach to being Jewish. Again, Sklare proved both useful and prescient:

The modern Jew exercises a kind of personalism in contrast to the prescriptionism of earlier generations. That is, the modern Jew selects from the vast storehouse of the past what is not only objectively possible for him to practice but subjectively possible for him to "identify" with. Of course his personalism is not really individualistic: it is influenced by his spouse, his children, his class position, his times. These forces help assure that the selection from the sacramental heritage will not be a random one. (Sklare and Greenblum 1979: 48)

By the late 1990s, researchers began to understand American Jewry as moving more decidedly in the direction of personalism, as first articulated by Sklare

and later elaborated by Liebman in a number of works (see, for example, Liebman and Cohen 1990). In our study of moderately affiliated Jews, combining both qualitative interviews with 50 such Jews and a national sample survey, Arnold Eisen described these processes in some detail. The main findings of this study, *The Jew Within*, can be summarized as follows:

The contemporary American Jewish self sees him/herself as sovereign. The individual feels entitled, with little guilt or hesitation, to decide what to observe Jewishly, and insists on a personal meaning for every observance. These tendencies are not entirely new, but their importance has grown of late. For years, American Jews have felt free to pick and choose their practices, but now they are justifying their choices in terms of personal meaning, and insisting upon personal meaning as a pre-condition to observance. Studies of Gentile Americans have come to similar conclusions. However, the Jewish difference is the focus of the sovereignty of the self is on practice rather than belief, home ritual rather than the house of worship—and the engagement with a familistic community, the Jewish community. To be sure, the self is not as fully sovereign as it could be, or as interviewees may say it is. (Cohen and Eisen 2000)

The prime locus of Jewish meaning is the family, particularly when small children are in the home. Certain family members emerged as most prominent and influential in the minds of moderately affiliated American Jews. Grandparents (or memories of grandparents) play a crucial role in anchoring Jewish commitment. Parents are ambivalent, or even negative, figures with respect to Jewish commitment. Negotiation of Jewish practice with spouses is a recurrent theme. Last, much practice and emotional investment in being Jewish for parents is oriented toward their children. Of course, for decades the Jewish family has been a principal arena for Jewish expression. What is new is the extent to which the range of significant Jewish family members has narrowed to a select and near few. Also new is the extent to which the locus of Jewish meaning has been drawn inward to the self, the family, and the proximate institutions that serve them. Today's family may not represent a more rich and meaningful Jewish environment in absolute terms. However, relative to the community, politics, philanthropy, and organized Jewish life, it occupies a larger and more central place than it did two or three decades ago.

Related to this inference is our sense that ritual is a main source of Jewish meaning. This investment in ritual, especially that which takes place in the home, serves to differentiate Jews from most American Christians who, with the exception of Christmas, lack elaborate home-based religious rituals. Passover and Sabbath observance are the main observances people most readily mention. (Chanukah, whose observance is most frequently reported on many surveys, fails to evoke as much personal significance as Passover and Shabbat.) Individuals feel free to decide whether to observe, when to observe, and how to observe, relating tales of innovation on all levels. The centrality of home ritual has special implications for the respective roles of men and women in Jewish family life. Women, given their greater responsibility for children and the

home, even in two-career families, take far more initiative where home ritual is concerned. Sometimes they act against their husbands' opposition, and sometimes with their acquiescence or support.

We found, in comparison with the not-so-distant past, a steep decline in collective commitment generally and communal attachments specifically (i.e., Jewish federations, organized community, Israel). Interviewees saw conventional organized Jewish as largely irrelevant to their lives. They were affectionate toward Israel, but clearly did not often see it as central and inspiring. Many were annoyed with Israel for, in effect, rejecting their identities as non-Orthodox Jews and as political liberals. At the same time, they did not reject all collective embodiments of being Jewish. In fact, significant numbers of interviewees expressed enthusiasm for their synagogues and for adult learning experiences.

Belief in God (as person or force) was nearly universal among our interviewees. For some observers, this finding may come as a surprise, but this God is not a Jewish God. Our interviewees' God has no special relationship or revelation to Jews; has no particular providence over Jews, and promises no messiah to the Jews. All is universal and personal. Hence, few Jews go to synagogue looking for God and few find God there. Like other Americans (Roof 1993, 1999; Wuthnow 1998, 1999), few Jewish worshippers take the content of their prayers very seriously, even among those who pray with fervor. Rather they seek tradition, familiarity, comfort, and community, and, if lucky, they find them.

Our findings represent both a break with and continuity with the recent past. In comparison with Jews of the 1960s and 1970s, today's Jews more easily make the self the arbiter of Jewish involvement. They more readily decide for themselves whether, when, where, and how to observe ritual practices. When they pick and choose (and invent), they do so with less (if any) guilt and less reference to systems of Jewish authenticity such as those embodied in halakah. They concentrate a greater fraction of their Jewish energies and passion on their nuclear families rather than on politics, philanthropy, or social justice arenas. They find far less import in large membership organizations (that, not incidentally, numerically peaked in midcentury and shortly thereafter). They seek community in the synagogue, their children's schools (increasingly of the all-day variety, even among the moderately affiliated), and their Jewish Communal Centers (JCCs).

As noted, we were not alone in making these observations. Bethamie Horowitz (1998), for example, developed the notion of "Jewish journey" to describe the changing nature of Jewish identity over the life course, and the ease with which today's American Jews invent and reinvent their relationship with Judaism. More broadly, our work can be seen as the application to Jews of such trends as rising individualism (Bellah et al. 1985), religious searching (Roof 1993), religious individualism (Wuthnow 1999), and departure from established forms of community life and organizations (Putnam 2000).

Reflecting in one way or another all of these trends is, of course, the issue of intermarriage, and what it means for Jewish life, identity, and continuity.

Intermarriage—The Major Vulnerability

Any analysis of American Jewry today inevitably hinges on intermarriage, its implications, and its significance.

As noted earlier, in the mid-1990s, I engaged in a sometimes acrimonious debate over interpreting the correct frequency of intermarriage by Jewish individuals in the United States in 1985–1990. In contrast with those who quoted a figure of 52 percent, I argued that the data pointed to a figure of just 41 percent. (Intermarriage refers to the marriage of a Jew to a non-Jew who does not convert to Judaism. The rates here refer to the individual rate rather than to the higher couple rate.) Although I argued that intermarriage was less widespread than others had suggested, I in no way wished to be seen as arguing away the importance and the severity of the challenge posed by intermarriage to Jewish identity, community, and continuity.

Certainly, many interfaith families are Jewishly involved, and indeed such families are overrepresented among the friends and relatives of Jewish leaders, activists, researchers, and other likely readers of this essay. With that said, the more general picture regarding intermarriage remains quite disturbing in that the high incidence of intermarriage reflects the current state of Jewish identity, community, and connection in America. Social integration, geographic dispersal, and, indeed, weaker levels of Jewish commitment contribute to the likelihood of intermarriage. Hence, evidence of a high or growing rate of intermarriage is also an indicator of other telling trends in the Jewish population.

As critical are the consequences of intermarriage for interfaith families. Individual exceptions aside, as a group, intermarried Jews are strikingly different from in-married families and even more different from the sorts of families generally found in synagogues and other organized Jewish precincts (Medding et al. 1992; Phillips 1997). Intermarriage weakens Jewish ethnic bonds in several ways (Cohen 1997a; Wertheimer, Liebman, and Cohen 1996). Inherently, it means that Jews form immediate families with non-Jews, thus acquiring non-Jewish in-laws and friends. One consequence is that Jews can less readily maintain in-group solidarity and out-group boundaries. Here, we cannot ignore the boundary-strengthening role of ethnic stereotypes, be they grounded in reality or not, aesthetically pleasing or not. Higher rates of intermarriage almost automatically bring about an acceptance of intermarriage and a weakened preference for endogamy, a norm that is central to historic Jewish ethnicity (and crucial for most other groups' ethnic identity as well). The practice of Judaism loses its ethnic or group character in mixed-faith households (Medding et al. 1992). Even if the Jewish partner observes some Jewish religious customs, he or she does so more as an isolated individual and less as a participant in shared family observance—anecdotal examples to the contrary notwithstanding.

Out-marriage influences the practice of Judaism even when the formerly non-Jewish partner has converted to Judaism, thereby turning a potential mixed marriage into an in-marriage. Such families do exhibit relatively high rates of Jewish religious involvement, far higher than that manifested by mixed-faith households. However, converts score low on many ethnic measures of Jewish involvement, which include maintaining ties with Jewish friends, opposition to children's out-marriage, attachment to Israel, and organizational involvement (Cohen 1997b; Winer, Seltzer, and Schwager 1987). Some evidence points to very high rates of intermarriage among the children of conversionary marriages. Historian Jonathan Sarna has referred to those who convert because of their marriage to a Jew as the only known phenomenon of one-generation Jews: neither their parents, nor he suspects many of their children, are Jewish (Sarna 1990).

And intermarriage is disturbing in its ongoing impact on leaders' and educators' conception of and presentation of Judaism, as many of them have subtly refashioned Judaism in ways that are more accepting of intermarriage. Inevitably, a Judaism that approves of intermarriage, even by way of quiet acceptance, is one that becomes less centered on collective Jewish identity, on what Charles Liebman and I once called, "historical familism," or which goes by such names as tribalism, Jewish Peoplehood, and Klal Yisrael (Liebman and Cohen 1990).

But alongside these disturbing concerns is an instructive and even hopeful observation: intermarriage is somewhat predictable; it is not at all randomly distributed in the Jewish population. Rather, it varies strongly with Jewish socialization and education, as well as with patterns of Jewish density. In fact, zip code—a proxy for Jewish density—may be a better empirical predictor of intermarriage than intensity of Jewish education.

The well-known rise in intermarriage is but a piece of a larger phenomenon, namely, the ongoing and multifaceted decline in connections between and among American Jews on many levels. Geographically, to take one critical dimension, demographers Sidney and Alice Goldstein (1996) have demonstrated that American Jews have been moving from established Jewish communities, with thick institutional infrastructures and high rates of communal affiliation, to areas where institutions are fewer, and institutional affiliation is lower. Moreover, those more likely to move are those with weaker or fewer connections to Jewish life. On another plane, Jews long have been moving outward from the cities and inner suburbs to the more Jewishly dispersed outer suburbs and rural areas.

However, geographic mobility is itself only a part of the story of fraying connections among American Jews. Most critically, perhaps even more critically than intermarriage, fewer Jews than before have mostly Jewish close friends. A national study measured the proportions of Jewish respondents with mostly Jewish close friends (Cohen 1998). The analysis found that that number plummeted from 60 percent among those aged 55–64 years to just 34 percent of

those aged 35–44 years. Jewish friendship patterns may be the single most important fulcrum of Jewish identity, perhaps even more indicative and consequential than intermarriage. To exemplify this point, the rather dramatic variations in Jewish identity patterns between the West Coast and the rest of the country can be entirely explained by the lower levels of Jewish friendship ties in the West.

To be clear, intermarriage both reflects and instigates certain sorts of changes in Jewish identity and community. Although associated with lower levels of all sorts of indicators of Jewish involvement, intermarriage is particularly linked with the ethnic as opposed to the religious side to Jewish identity. Indeed, very different tendencies seem to characterize Jewish ethnicity and Jewish religiosity today.

Ethnic Decline—Weakening Attachment to Jewish Community, Real and Imagined

Historically, the religious and ethnic dimensions of Jewish identity have been closely interwoven. In fact, so closely bound are they that the traditional Jewish lexicon hardly distinguishes between the two concepts. Jewish religious practice, by definition, was observed exclusively by the Jewish people, and notions of Jewish peoplehood, nation, and community were suffused with faith in the Jewish God, the practice of Jewish (religious) law and the study of ancient religious texts. Indeed, the Bible enjoins Jews to be a "holy people," fusing, in one succinct phrase, the modern Western concepts of religion and ethnicity.

Yet the Jews' encounter with modernity occasioned a rift between Jewish ethnicity and Jewish religion. With their incorporation into larger national societies, they were obligated to adjust their group identity to the social constructs prevailing among the majority groups among which they dwelled. In the West, where Jews entered more as equals than elsewhere, more overtly religious formulations took precedence, giving rise to Reform, Orthodoxy, and Conservatism. In Russia and other parts of Eastern Europe, national, cultural, or ethnic conceptions were given primacy, as expressed in such movements as Zionism and Bundism.

Since their arrival in the United States, consistent with the expectations of the surrounding society, American Jews have publicly defined themselves as a religious group. The tendency has been so pronounced that the religious definition of Jewish seems to have more legitimacy, if not more currency, than the ethnic definition. The title of Will Herberg's book, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew* (1955) reflects popular linguistic usage that, in turn, reflects the religious framing of being Jewish. So, too, do numerous public references to the Judeo-Christian ethic, as well as organized interreligious encounters exemplified in such organizations as the National Conference of Christians and Jews. Whereas some social scientists have readily classified Jews with other ethnic groups (Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan's *Beyond the Melting Pot* [1964]) may be

the best-known illustration), Jewish communal leaders and the Jewish public at large seem more apt to regard being Jewish as an expression of one more legitimate American religious faith.

Patterns of linguistic usage, of course, reflect the relative prestige assigned to religious and ethnic statuses in the United States. Since its inception, American society has accorded a special place to religious belief, idiom, and leaders, even as it struggled to preserve a separation between church and state. At the same time, American society has been ambivalent about ethnicity (Gordon 1964). Although seeming to welcome immigrants, American society and its leaders have been decidedly uncomfortable with the persistence of strong ethnic identities among the generations that succeeded the immigrants. Today, almost all groups expressing strong ethnic ties are nonwhite, recently arrived, and/or socioeconomically deprived. In this environment, it is not at all surprising that Jews have largely refrained from defining themselves outwardly as ethnic, even as they have established and supported institutions that are seemingly both ethnic or religious in character.

With this said, we should not dismiss the idea that putatively religious schools and even synagogues have also served as venues for expressing and perpetuating what must be seen as primarily ethnic attachments and activities (Glazer 1972; Sklare and Greenblum 1979). Acting like many other American ethnic groups, Jews have disproportionately married other Jews; maintained friendships with one another; lived near one another; and concentrated in certain industries, professions, and companies. All of these patterns of in-group interaction constitute the fundamental and necessary social bases for cohesive ethnicity (Goldscheider 1986). The community's ethnic character is also manifest in its highly developed organized group life outside of the synagogue. Most notable in this regard are the Jewish community centers, philanthropic agencies, pro-Israel support groups, fraternal associations, and cultural institutions. American Jews also maintain an identifiable ethnic style in culture, the arts, intellectual life, and politics (for a discussion of Jews and their politics, see Cohen 1989a; Cohen and Liebman 1997; Liebman and Cohen 1996). Thus, despite the Jews' demonstrable preference for American (religious) nomenclature, there are equally strong foundations for regarding Jewishness as a form of ethnicity.

Stephen Sharot offers a particularly insightful formulation of the intertwining of American Jewish religion and ethnicity:

Among American Jews, ethnicity and religion are in a relationship of symbiosis. Ethnicity is strong with respect to identity and feeling of belonging to a group of purported common ancestry and history, but weak with respect to a structural basis. Religion is weak in the sense that feelings of belonging to a community of shared religious beliefs and practices are declining, but strong in that it provides a firm structural basis. Ethnicity...provides the "real" reasons for joining synagogues and carrying out religious practice....Religious institutions...make possible the persistence of a relatively strongly-held ethnicity. (1997: 40)

To be clear, "ethnicity" is used here to refer not to such everyday stereotypical matters as bagels and lox, comedians, and material ostentation. Rather, ethnicity in this context refers to the more comprehensive way in which social scientists use the word (social networking, formal association, cultural differentiation, and more). In a manner of speaking, ethnicity refers to everything that distinguishes Jews from other American religious groups. It connotes common ancestry, shared circumstance and culture, and common destiny. It underlies all the decidedly nonreligious institutions that distinguish Jews from, say, Episcopalians and Methodists.

If the ethnic dimension has been so crucial in defining American Jews, Judaism, and Jewishness, it behooves social scientists to examine the phenomenon closely, especially because several pieces of evidence point to its recent decline. Among these are, as noted earlier, the rise in intermarriage, a decline in in-group friendship, and the geographic dispersal of the Jewish population, both within metropolitan regions and across the United States. In the national study cited earlier, among those 55-64 years old, as many as 57 percent belonged to two or more Jewish institutions, as compared with just 34 percent among those 35-44 years old (Cohen 1998). But beyond these trends are also changes in Jewish membership organizations that report aging and declining constituencies, and centralized Jewish philanthropies (federations) that grapple with shrinking, albeit more individually generous, donor bases. Moreover, informed observers sense weakening enthusiasm for Israel. Jewish involvement in leftist politics (socialist at one time, liberal more recently) and social justice causes seems to have waned, as recent studies point to a partial Jewish shift toward the American political center. Even if Jewish political views remain as far to the left of the shifting American center as they always have been, Jews apparently attach less significance to politics as an expression of their Jewishness.

Indeed, a quick glance back to the mid-twentieth century suggests, by comparison, a reduction in ethnic options of Jewish association as compared with stability or even growth in the religious options (e.g., Moore 1981). Compared with the turn of the twenty-first century, the 1950s and 1960s seemed to have been characterized by much more vigorous and vital expressions of Jewish ethnicity. These included pro-Israel and Zionist activities; liberal political mobilization; densely settled Jewish neighborhoods (and the Jewish community centers that thrived within them); struggles against anti-Semitic discrimination in housing, employment, resorts, and higher education; and the declining though still living Yiddish culture of the East European immigrant generation (now, of course, vastly reduced in number and influence). As Judaism is drawn "into the self," it is withdrawn from politics, philanthropy, organizations, peoplehood, Israel, and Jewish-Gentile interactions.

Insofar as American Jewish group identity may be assuming a *relatively* more religious and less ethnic character, such a turn would be consistent with (and probably influenced by) several larger trends in American society. Among

these are the near evaporation, among all major European ethnic groups, of the social bases for ethnicity (for example, neighborhoods, friendship networks, intermarriage)—a phenomenon that sociologist Richard Alba labels “the twilight of ethnicity” (1986). Similarly, Herbert Gans writes of the widespread emergence of a very superficial identity he calls “symbolic ethnicity” (1979), with a parallel in symbolic religiosity (1994). (Gans uses the word “symbolic” as a rough equivalent of superficial, having little substantive significance or influence on real behavior; Alba [1986, 1990] and Waters [1990] express similar views on ethnicity among white Americans.)

The findings point to the power of U.S. societal expectations in shaping Jewish self-conceptions and the actual expression of Jewish group identity. Jews have good reason to believe that upper-middle-class white Americans are expected to maintain some sort of religious commitment. At the same time, as Will Herberg, Ben Halpern, Herbert Gans, and so many other commentators have long since observed, American society looks askance at the persistence of ethnic attachment. Ethnicity may be acceptable for the poor, for nonwhites, and for immigrants. But in its most potent forms, it is unsuitable for the socially advantaged (and thoroughly Americanized) distant descendants of immigrant white forebears. Accordingly, declining ethnic attachments move Judaism in the direction of other upper-middle-class white American religious groups.

Taken to an extreme, the weakening of the ethnic dimension to American Jewish life and identity could spell trouble for those institutions that differentiate American Judaism from liberal Protestant denominations. The United Jewish Appeal (UJA)—Federation annual campaign, the social services it supports, Jews’ connection with Israel, Jewish political mobilization, fraternal organizations, and Jewish community centers are all collective expressions of that which most clearly differentiates being Jewish in America from being a member of another religious group. Indeed, the age-related decline over time in Jewish ethnicity may already have been responsible for the reduction in the number and diversity of institutional expressions of Jewish ethnicity. Examples include the once vigorous and multifaceted American Zionist movement, the disproportionate involvement of Jews in liberal politics, and the prominence of centralized philanthropic agencies such as the UJA and the Federation movement.

An unarrested decline in Jewish ethnicity, then, is not only of considerable academic interest to students of contemporary American Jewry. If extended, the trend will present particular difficulties for those institutions and activities that most directly draw upon Jews’ historic commitment to peoplehood, including even synagogues. That is to say, given the intertwining of Jewish ethnicity and religiosity, the continued decline of the ethnic impulse will eventually pose problems for the strictly religious sphere of American Judaism.

In the last 20 years, social scientists have sharpened the conceptual distinction between what may be called “real” or “imagined” communities. The for-

mer are built around genuine interaction, often face to face, abetted by physical proximity. The latter constitute such frameworks as nations, peoples, colonies, and geographically dispersed social entities. The available evidence with respect to American Jews points to a clear association between participation in real communities of interaction (family, friends, neighbors, institutions) and attachment to imagined communities (e.g., Israel, Jewish peoplehood). In fact, measures of the two dimensions are more closely bound to each other than is either with what may be called the religious dimension to Jewish identity. Moreover, participation in and attachment to both sorts of Jewish communities, real and imagined, appears to be in decline, both with respect to data over time and to age-cohort comparisons.

Religious Stability and Growth

This apparent decline in ethnicity does not, as some have claimed, come amidst a wholesale decline in all manner of Jewish identification (Dershowitz 1997). At the same time as Jewish ethnicity seems to be in slow retreat, indicators of specifically religious involvement seem to be holding their own, and in some cases rising. Among these indicators are membership in synagogues, enrollment in Jewish day schools, and adult study of classic Jewish texts. Included here as well are the publication and reading of books on Jewish spirituality, theology, and religious practice. I also include here the solidity in enrollments in Jewish studies at over 400 universities, and I cite the growth in adult education programs sponsored by synagogues, centers, federations, and such networks as the Florence Melton Adult Mini-Schools. As Aryeh Davidson and I documented, the wide variety of adult Jewish learning experiences and the extent that American Jews participate in them goes well beyond the levels we generally assume (Cohen and Davidson 2001). Religious trend lines point to stability or growth in such indicators as faith in God, synagogue membership, religious service attendance, holiday observance, and ritual practice. In these respects, younger Jews are no less religious than their elders (sometimes more so), and those surveyed more recently are no less observant than those surveyed many years ago.

Indeed, beyond the individual-level data, a case can be made that all three major religious movements—Orthodoxy, Conservatism, and Reform—appear in many ways healthier and more vital than they were 30 or 40 years ago. The Orthodox movement has certainly developed a far greater degree of institutional independence than it had in the middle 1960s. In addition, normative standards in matters of piety, faith, learning, and ritual observance have increased from one generation to the next (Heilman and Cohen 1989). Moreover, rates of attendance at Orthodox yeshivas and day schools have increased, as has the extent to which Orthodox parents manage to produce Orthodox-identifying youngsters.

The Reform movement has experienced not only numerical expansion, but also a shift to a more traditionally oriented rabbinic and lay leadership. With

some exception, movement representatives and activists urge ritual practice, Jewish learning, and engagement with Israel.

Conservative synagogue members, though shrinking in number, have been improving in Jewish cultural quality (Cohen 1997b; Elazar and Geffen 2000). According to continental survey data, the youngest adult members of Conservative synagogues are a truly exceptional lot. One or two generations ago, Conservative Jews were those who had experienced a huge drop in ritual practice from the homes of their childhood to their current levels of observance. However, over the years, with increasingly younger cohorts, the parents of congregants have become increasingly less observant, even as the members themselves have become more observant. Today's youngest cohort of Conservative congregants is the most ritually observant in recent history. They are the first cohort thus far to exceed and surpass their own parents in level of ritual practice.

The young adult group is distinguished in other ways as well. In the history of the Conservative movement, it is the most Jewishly educated in terms of schooling, camping, youth groups, Israel experience, and Jewish studies at the university level. It is the most practiced in and capable of taking leadership in religious services. It is the most highly committed Conservative generation in American history to educate its children in Jewish day schools. Although only 11 percent of these parents of school-age children have ever been to day schools themselves, more than three times as many have sent their children to Jewish day schools. Moreover, they have developed a positive view of Conservative Judaism. Relative to the Orthodox, they take pride in their egalitarianism. Relative to the Reform, they take pride in their higher levels of Jewish learning, proficiency, and observance.

Americans, compared with others in the West, are unusual in their reported levels of religiosity, whether measured in terms of beliefs, self-assessment, or church participation. In the context of American society's ambivalent view of ethnicity, it comes as no surprise that those aspects of being Jewish that are most compatible with a Protestant-styled religious conception of Judaism are also those that seem to be most firm and stable.

Collective Achievements of American Jewry, Post-1967

As I argued at the outset, the matter of Jewish continuity is not simply a matter of Jewish identity. Nor is it a matter of Jewish aggregates, that is, measuring the Jewishness (however defined) of individuals and computing the sum total of their attitudes and behaviors. Rather, we need to also look at what may be called the collective Jewish cultural product. To what extent have Jews been successful at achieving collective goals, be they political, religious, or educational, and to what extent do they harbor the potential and likelihood of continuing to produce those collectively based achievements? It is with this

perspective that one arrives at the impression that American Jews are, or at least have been, extraordinarily healthy, vital, and successful.

Jewish commitment, infrastructure, mobilization, and available resources all combine and must be present in sufficient quantity to produce collective Jewish achievement. Thus, to take one illustration from the political realm, we may compare the effectiveness of American Jewry during the Holocaust years with its effectiveness in mobilizing American support for Israel post-1967. By most standards, Jews of the 1930s and 1940s were, in all likelihood and on average, more culturally distinctive and more ethnically connected to one another (and possibly more religiously observant) than were their children or counterparts a generation later. Yet it was the latter generation of Jews who were clearly more capable of producing a significant influence on American foreign policy to the benefit of Jewish interests. Jews of the post-1967 era simply had more financial, technical, and political resources at their disposal, as well as a society that was more hospitable to aggressive pursuit of seemingly sectarian interests within American democracy.

In reviewing such sorts of achievement since 1967, we find impressive developments in several domains. In the religious sphere, it is fair to say that every major religious denomination has become, in its own way, more traditionally minded, and its members more Jewishly schooled, if not learned. Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform youngsters of late have been receiving more extensive and intensive forms of Jewish education than did their counterparts from their parents' generation (Lazerwitz et al. 1998). As noted earlier, standards of ritual observance in all three movements have edged upward over the years.

In yet another aspect of religious life, during the last four decades, American Jewry successfully launched a Jewish feminist movement, a development that expanded the leadership base of the Jewish people, giving us twice the selection of candidates for rabbis, educators, cantors, lay leaders, and even scholars (Baum, Hyman, and Michel 1975; Cohen 1980; Fishman 1993; Hyman and Moore 1997; Keysar and Kosmin 1997; Lerner 1997; Nadel 1998; Wenger 1997). It also very simply made it possible for more women to become more learned, more observant, more active, and more influential in congregational life.

In the political realm, American Jews also amassed an impressive record of achievement. In fact, arguably, American Jews succeeded in attaining all their major national political objectives in the last 35 years, of which there were four:

1. They fought to end anti-Semitic discrimination in housing, resorts, education, and business, all of which came to an end in the 1970s. (Chanes 1995; Cohen 1989b; Silberman 1985)
2. They secured public recognition of the Holocaust, marked by the dedication of public property to Holocaust museums and memorials in scores of American cities, most notably the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C.
3. They pressed successfully for the release of Soviet and other endangered Jewries, placing the matter of Soviet Jewry on the agenda of the then two most important world powers.

4. They established solid bipartisan support for Israel, resulting in annual commitments of American financial aid approximating \$3 billion, and, more critically, diplomatic support for Israel that has placed the United States in a more favorable posture toward Israel than that expressed by any other Western country.

Each of these achievements is impressive. Taken together, the attaining of all four objectives is truly remarkable, and testimony to a highly effective and productive American Jewry.

Finally, in the educational sphere, the last 30–40 years have also been marked by extraordinary developments. Gains have been recorded in almost all forms of Jewish education, from preschool to adult text study (Cohen and Davidson 2001). The 1980s saw significant growth in non-Orthodox day schools, followed by the expansion of community-sponsored Jewish high schools in the late 1990s. Over 400 universities in North America offer courses in Jewish Studies, and almost all of the institutions of higher learning with sizable numbers of Jewish students sponsor significant numbers of courses. The Association for Jewish Studies, the professional association in the field, boasts about 1,600 members. Predictably, professors and doctoral students have been contributing to an uncharted expansion of publication in a wide variety of fields in Jewish Studies, with both scholarly and popular books for sale at major commercial bookstores throughout the United States. In adult education, several networks and centralized sponsors have been sponsoring courses in Jewish subject matter both for communal elite and rank-and-file Jews at all levels of sophistication. To take one example, the Florence Melton Adult Mini-School, initiated at three locations in 1986, now sponsors 63 sites around the world (most in North America) with an enrollment of about 5,000 learners for their two-year program of weekly classes.

Fueling all of these achievements is an ongoing and prodigious record of philanthropic fund-raising. Although Federation centralized campaigns, except during emergency periods, have experienced slow growth if not stagnancy at times, communally controlled endowment funds amassed almost \$10 billion during the 1990s and family foundations entered the field of Jewish philanthropy with greater numbers and substantive significance.

In short, over the last 30–40 years, the Jewish communal elite (volunteers, donors, and practitioners) have been operating to produce significant collective achievements in many domains, including religious life, the political arena, education, and philanthropy. These sorts of developments also need to be taken into account when assessing such matters as Jewish communal health, vitality, and continuity.

ASSESSING THE PAST, DIVINING THE FUTURE

Differences over assessing the health and vitality of American Jewry (or any other community or society for that matter) may derive either from differences

over fact, or differences over measurement. For the most part, learned observers of American Jewry are characterized by empirical agreement and value disagreement. Generally, the facts are not much in dispute; more often, social scientists in this field disagree on how to interpret their findings, and may well disagree even more widely on what significance to attach to their alternate interpretations.

Reviewing the preceding material, we may arrive at a succinct summary of the major trends affecting the past and future of American Jewry and bearing upon the matter of Jewish continuity.

Jewish life, Judaism, and Jewish community are challenged by a rise in Jewish personalism, in parallel with a greater emphasis upon religious individualism in the wider society.

Intermarriage, though not rising, has reached significant levels, and, although not always and inevitably a precursor of diminished involvement in Jewish life, intermarriage is most strongly associated with lower levels of practice, engagement, association, and affiliation, with clear impact upon the next generation and more.

Measures of Jewish ethnic attachment, be it to real or imagined community and collectivity, have been in decline, and may well be expected to continue to do so.

Notwithstanding all of the foregoing, overall measures of Jewish religious involvement have been holding steady, if not increasing in some areas. Quite possibly, in-married Jews' greater involvement has been offsetting the diminished activity among the mixed married.

In a period of rising concern about Jewish continuity, the organized Jewish community has managed to produce remarkable achievements in religious life, politics, education, and philanthropy.

How are we to interpret these trends, and what do they augur for so-called Jewish continuity in the United States? Clearly, different notions of Jewish authenticity, different emphases on Jewish subjectivity, and different understanding of the very meaning of Jewish continuity must come into play in answering this sweeping question. My own bias has been to assess American Jewry contemporaneously, the way historians have assessed Jewish communities of the past—in terms of their contemporaneous achievements and the historical legacy they left behind. Thus, although the overall Jewish population is bound to shrink, and although average levels of ethnic engagement are clearly bound to decline, the size and resources of the most heavily engaged Jewish population is just as likely to expand. The committed core of the million or so most active and educated Jews who have been responsible for building and sustaining Jewish institutional, cultural, and political life in the past figures to retain or expand its numbers and to match or exceed its predecessors in commitment and educational preparation. They ought to be as well positioned as were their metaphorical and real parents and grandparents to

produce an impressive record of achievement in the major areas of Jewish communal life and culture.

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Chapter 2

Canadian Jewry: A Relative Success Story

Morton Weinfeld

In this chapter I shall present an overview of Canadian Jewish life.¹ In general, present conditions and continuity prospects for Canadian Jews are good, compared with other Diaspora communities or Canadian Jewry in the past. Canadian Jews are able to realize the twin goals of Canadian multiculturalism: they participate in all dimensions of Canadian life and retain a reasonably strong Jewish identity. In essence, the rhetoric surrounding Canadian multiculturalism legitimates what Diaspora Jews have been hoping for since Emancipation. To illustrate the distinctive features of Canadian Jewry, I will routinely make comparisons with the better known American community.

DEMOGRAPHIC OVERVIEW

How many Jews are there in Canada? The census of 1991 lists 318,070 Canadians who identify themselves as Jewish by religion, and 369,565 as Jewish by ethnic origin. Of the ethnic Jews, 281,680 are also Jews by religion, 38,245 have no religion (secular Jews), and 49,640 have another religion. For Canadian Jews there is clearly no one-to-one correspondence between these two definitions. For example, there are 36,390 Jews by religion who do not claim to be Jews by ethnic origin. This is the good news. They could be formal converts into Judaism or technical non-Jews who call themselves Jewish; they are Jews by choice. They can also be Jews who for some reason picked another ethnic origin as their census answer, such as Polish or English. On the other hand, there are 49,640 Jews by ethnic origin who claim another, non-Jewish faith. This is the bad news. Either they themselves, or some ancestors, converted out of Judaism. They are truly lost to the Jewish community.

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