HOW TO THINK ABOUT BEING JEWISH IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY: A NEW MODEL OF JEWISH IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

RABBI TSVI BLANCHARD
CLAL, New York

The prevailing models of Jewish identity, which were derived from the social circumstances of Jews as an immigrant group, do not take into account contemporary American culture, which is based on individual choice. The new model of identity construction makes choice its centerpiece and has important policy implications.

Since the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey, organized Jewish communities have been acutely concerned about rising rates of intermarriage, lower rates of communal affiliation, and a general "leakage" of Jews from community life. Professionals and lay leaders alike have connected these phenomena with an overall failure of Jewish religious and educational institutions to promote successful Jewish identity formation. In the discussion so far, little attention has been paid to reexamining the prevailing models of Jewish identity and identity formation—models that derive from the social circumstances of Jews as an immigrant ethnic and religious group.[1] In this article, I argue that, in order to understand what being Jewish means in the twenty-first century, we need a new model of how Jewish identity is formed.

WHY PREVAILING IDENTITY FORMATION MODELS ARE PROBLEMATIC

There are three reasons why we should shift the basic paradigm in terms of which Jewish identity formation has been conceived. First, the socioeconomic situation of Jews in America has changed in important ways. Jews as a group have become comparatively socially secure, powerful, and affluent. We now need a model[2] that fits with the process of identity formation in an economically and socially successful group. Second, American Jews live in a self-consciously pluralistic, multicultural society that understands ethnic or religious identity in terms of its profound commitment to individual freedom of choice (Waxman, 2001). Finally, most American Jews do not see themselves as belonging to a community or other group of Jews in which a compelling consensus exists about how to be Jewish (Cohen, 2000).

Let's begin with the oversimplified but still helpful story of the Eastern European Jews who came to America primarily for physical safety and economic opportunity (Karp, 1997; Sachar, 1992; Sarna, 1997). America, the *goldene medina,* offered the possibility of greater economic success than was available to them in Eastern Europe. Whatever the level of anti-Semitism in America, Jews never felt as vulnerable here as they had felt themselves to be in Europe.

[1]The social and institutional context in which the relevant research was done and the resulting theory developed, as well as the funding of this work, cannot be separated neatly from the world of Eastern European immigrants and their children. It is no surprise then that the models developed addressed the issues of concern to Jews *as an immigrant group.*

[2]I am using the term "model" here in the descriptive sense, i.e. a kind of map that allows us to navigate the relevant territory but does not, as a normative model would, tell us where we want to go or why. Of course, many of us have made serious normative commitments concerning Jewish identity in the twenty-first century. As we work on behalf of these commitments, it seems to me that we are better off being realistically guided by a clear map of American-Jewish social territory.

As these immigrant Jews and their children attained economic success, they, as the German-Jewish immigrants before them, wanted the opportunity to be accepted as equals not only legally and politically but also socially. As a group, Jews had essentially attained these goals by the 1970s.

The sociologist's understanding of this Jewish immigration has always assumed that the process being studied consisted of the competitive interaction between two cultures—Jewish and American—with the latter dominant by virtue of its size, historical position, and command of socioeconomic resources (Farber & Waxman, 1999). In this model, both the dominant American culture and the vulnerable Jewish immigrant culture have a relatively well-defined, but not completely monolithic, sense of what counts as participation, membership, and personal identity. Of course, there are subgroups within Jewish and American cultures that differ in important ways. Nonetheless, each subgroup has a basic consensus about the content—the beliefs, attitudes, values, character traits, and behaviors—of being American and being Jewish. Jewish cultural content is based on what is understood as the culture that Jewish immigrants brought with them from Europe. Cultural transmission, Jewish and American, is presented as the attempt of the parent generation to replicate existing cultural content in the next generation.

Since these models see being Jewish and being American as relatively well defined, the sociology of Jewish life has investigated the extent to which Jewish cultural content changed under the impact of the dominant American society and its culture. Perhaps the most influential concept employed in this model was *assimilation;* that is, the replacement of Jewish cultural content by American content. It generated the following kinds of questions: Are traditional Eastern European Jewish practices being dropped and/or replaced by secularism and a more American-style religion? What happened or is happening to Yiddish? Do rich Jews prefer donating to and working for a charity in the general American community over donating to and working for a Jewish communal charity? In terms of this model, Jews appeared to be increasingly assimilated and even in danger of disappearing altogether. Preserving Jewish identity thus came to be understood in terms of the prevention of assimilation.

A more optimistic version of the model replaced assimilation by the concept of *acculturation,* with an emphasis on the gains—social, economic, and cultural—made by the Jews through the integration of American cultural content. Again, it was assumed that there was some relatively well-defined *essential* Jewish cultural content. To be sure, the model still focused on what was seen as a struggle for cultural dominance between the immigrant culture and the native culture. However, so long as Jews continued to think, feel, and act in accordance with this essential Jewish cultural content, there was little danger that Jews would disappear through assimilation into the dominant American culture. In the struggle between the immigrant and native cultures, preserving Jewish identity was now viewed as a process of gradual adaptation in which core elements of Eastern European Jewish culture were kept and other incidental elements came to be ignored. In fact, many Jews saw becoming acculturated as guaranteeing that Jewish-Americans would have enough social power and economic resources to ensure that being a Jewish-American remained attractive to the next generation.

It was inevitable that Jews in positions of communal leadership would use the assimilation and acculturation models in their efforts to interpret the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey. But as the discussion unfolded, it became clear that many viewed Jewish acculturation merely as a step toward Jewish assimilation. Once again, the perennial story of Jewish cultural decline in America surfaced in policy debates and federation allocations meetings. Assimilation was seen as the result of a widespread ongoing failure in Jewish identity formation. This failure

was described as a cultural pathology that was undermining Jewish cultural transmission. If allowed to continue, it was argued, the failure of Jewish identity formation would eventually prove fatal to American Jewish culture.

Let us consider this argument. First, what evidence led to the conclusion that the process of Jewish identity formation was failing? Typically, studies focused on the frequency of behaviors and, to some extent, on the attitudes and beliefs that were seen as important parts of Jewish cultural content. A look at the questions that were asked in the 1990 survey makes clear that Jewish cultural content was defined almost entirely in terms of traditional Jewish religious practices—lighting Shabbat candles, going to synagogue, fasting on Yom Kippur—and affiliating with existing Jewish communal institutions. Since the research showed that fewer and fewer Jews were doing either of these things, it was concluded that Jewish identity in America was declining.

For several reasons, it was a mistake to construct a measure of Jewish identity formation in terms that, in effect, equate the strength of Jewish identity with the level of traditional religious observance or participation in the institutions of organized Jewish life. First, doing so *assumed* that Jewish identity is defined by commitment to the religious, social, and political practices that traditionally were or are now a part of organized Jewish communal life.[3] But our own daily experience already told us that traditional Jewish religious practices no longer play a significant role in the expression of American Jewish identity. Similarly, no one active in Jewish communal life needed to be told that there has been a decline in institutional affiliation. The researchers only discovered what everyone already knew: that many Jews are not much attracted to the prevailing Jewish ethnic or religious identities. In terms of Jewish identity formation, we were still "fighting the last war."

Second, the research model was not open to discovering the equally plausible hypothesis that, although traditional routes to Jewish identity formation are in decline, alternative routes may be opening up.[4] Part of the problem was the difficulty of imagining such new forms of Jewish identity. To members of American Jewish culture the prevailing definitions of Jewish and American seem natural, that is, they are the way things are. For both researchers and Jewish leaders alike, the shared assumptions of the assimilation and acculturation models defined the ways things are. As a result, it was difficult for them to imagine alternative ways of forming American Jewish identity, let alone find evidence of them.

As a thought experiment, imagine it is around 1875 and you are thinking about Jewish identity formation in post-Enlightenment and post-Emancipation Poland. Studies would show you that both traditional religious observance and many of the institutions of pre-Emancipation organized Jewish communities are in serious decline. You cannot help but fear the possible consequences of increased assimilation and even conversion. Almost without thinking, you assume that Jewish identity and Jewish cultural content must be defined in terms of the existing, traditionally religious Jewish institutions that you know. Jewish identity, culture, and community in Poland, you conclude, are "sick."

You would be wrong. To be sure, despite the development of large Hasidic communities, there was not a general return to traditional Jewish religious practices and institutions. Instead, there ensued a Jewish cultural

[3]In many respects, the underlying fear about the loss of Jewish life in America—found most often in discussions about Jewish continuity—has actually been about the decreasing affiliation of Jews with organized Jewish community life. The success of communally funded efforts aimed at curing this "Jewish identity formation illness" has typically been measured by the extent to which these efforts increase affiliation with and participation in existing religious and communal institutions.

[4]Had we taken this possibility seriously, we would have used the methods of ethnographic research. Of course, it's still not too late.

renaissance in which newer, alternative forms of Jewish identity and organizational life emerged, including Zionism; Jewish socialism; Yiddish newspapers, theaters, and literature; and all the powerful nontraditional organizational expressions of Jewish identity that marked Warsaw between the wars. Before they actually appeared on the Jewish cultural scene, who could have imagined the alternative forms of identity and communal organization that were about to emerge?[5]

This thought experiment suggests that existing models tend to restrict our vision. Certainly, the two models discussed above do so. In studying changes in Jewish identity formation, these models treat the inherited cultural definitions of Jewish and American as relatively fixed or static. Thus, despite their recognition of social and cultural change, they fall victim to the kind of wrong-headed cultural essentialism that is rejected by contemporary cultural anthropologists (Ingold, 2002).

As a result, these two models lead to a conception of Jewish cultural change as either an undesirable falling away from some "true" Jewish identity (assimilation) or an insignificant sloughing off of what was never really essential to that Jewish identity (acculturation).[6] Perhaps for immigrants, the latter conception provided a false sense of cultural security. One can hardly blame an immigrant Jewry for wanting to minimize their sense of personal and cultural loss. For other Jews, it might have felt right because it treated their cherished assumptions about what it was to be Jewish as normative. Nonetheless, as our thought experiment suggests, both the assimilation model and the acculturation model make it hard to imagine new cultural identities and institutions. They also make it virtually impossible to recognize them when they appear.

AN ALTERNATIVE MODEL OF IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

The alternative model I propose is based on the nature of contemporary American identity formation, especially the great value attached to *individual freedom of choice.* From its inception, the United States has witnessed ever-increasing freedom of choice in occupations, marriages and areas of residence. With this has come increasing social, economic, and geographical mobility. For the economically and socially successful contemporary Jew, America is primarily a society of voluntary association at work and at play. As both intermarriage rates and geographic population shifts indicate, Jews, as other Americans, live where they want and marry as they choose. The new question to answer is, *What is the* process *of identity formation like when individual choice replaces inherited cultural practices, ethnic kinship structures, and geographically based community affiliations?*

First, as fits a culture of individual choice, *there is no group of experts or authorities recognized as legitimate gatekeepers to the Jewish institutions—synagogues, agencies, federations—where Jewish identity is expressed.* By and large, in contemporary America, individuals believe that they have the right to choose their own identity and the ways it is expressed publicly. In a shared culture of individual choice, each of us expects others to recognize and validate our personal choices, however idiosyncratic these choices may be.[7] In this culture, for example, liberal rabbis are not criticized for

[5]Perhaps only skilled ethnographic research fearlessly open to the unexpected could have found early signs of the positive Jewish identity shifts that would take place after the Emancipation/Enlightenment.

[6]If Franz Rosenzweig was correct, we would always be making a mistake by deciding a priori that some parts of Jewish life, say gefilte fish, are unnecessary. *Anything* may come to be essential in the Jewish identity of an individual.

[7]To some degree we do this despite, or maybe even because of, a lingering "essentialist" anxiety about how *really* Jewish we are. Once our paradigm of Jewish ethnic and religious identity formation has shifted fully, this anxiety will disappear. In my experiences, for many Jews, it has done so already.

restricting themselves to Jewish marriage partners. If, however, they refuse to officiate at a congregant's intermarriage, they will certainly be criticized indignantly for "arrogating to themselves the right to tell others whom they may marry and at what kind of ceremony."

Second, *ethnic and religious identity formation is not essentially linked to particular institutions.* Synagogues, community agencies, and the occasions of public communal life are used to achieve the goals and objectives of individuals whose Jewish identities are largely constructed independently of them. Boomers and Gen Xers, in general suspicious of institutional and societal authority, see no problem with a culture of choice and its cultural implications. Although they understand that institutions can only exist where there is a confluence of individual wills, they resent and resist institutions that impose such a confluence. For example, Boomers and Gen Xers tend to resent it when a synagogue or temple maintains policies about how to prepare for or hold bar or bat mitzvahs that prevent them from doing what they find personally meaningful. Much the same resistance to authoritative norms occurs in the areas of marriage, conversion, and charitable donations. Those who claim for themselves the role of institutional gatekeeper are most likely to hear, "Who are *you* to tell *me* what is or is not *my* Jewish identity?"

Third, *Jewish identity has become fluid and linked to life context.*[8] Historically, one important source of the stability of traditional Jewish identities was the individual's sense that being a "good Jew" entailed special obligations.[9] These obligations too were linked to life-context. Being a Jew of certain age and gender meant that you *must* do certain things. For example, it was once generally believed that every Jewish male over age thirteen had an identity that required him to put on *tefillin* daily and that no Jewish female had an identity that required her to do so. Today, however, for Jewish adults living in a culture of individual choice, such a belief seems at best ridiculous and at worst a form of neurotic rigidity. Why, they might ask, should anyone feel that in order to be Jewish they have to do the same things over and over? And what has it got to do with gender?

Those who think of ethnic or religious identity as relatively constant in its expression will have a hard time accepting "shape-shifting" identities as authentically Jewish. To them, such a process of Jewish identity formation gives one nothing to hold on to and appears faddish and ephemeral. And how, they might ask, will stable institutions—synagogues, federations, and the like—last if Jewish communities have to constantly reconstruct a confluence of wills?

Paradoxically, the increasing tendency to treat identities, including religious and ethnic identities, as commodities might solve this problem. In a consumer society, "branding" can succeed even as the relatively short-lived products that express the brand vary. For example, the confluence of wills that constitutes the market for one line of designer clothing does not unravel as that line's particular products change. Perhaps the market for being Jewish will also not unravel just because the Jewish products change. Of course, this assumes that the Jewish products are ones that Jewish consumers want.

Fourth, *the specifics of one's Jewish identity come from choosing to do (or not to do) something, indeed anything, so long as that something is understood as a Jewish thing to do.* Jewish identity is made up of choices

[8]Presently, life contexts are culturally linked to psychosocial stages of individual lives. An increasing number of later marriages as well as an increase in the rate of divorce and remarriage may change this linkage.

[9]At the close of a moving mission to Israel, CLAL guides asked participants what obligations they thought flowed from their experiences on the mission. This outraged participants who insisted that there should be no talk of obligations since in these areas they did as they *chose* to do. These were serious Jews but, nonetheless, they saw the concept of obligations as irrelevant to how they acted on their sense of Jewish identity.

among options perceived as Jewish options. Where do these options come from, and why are some perceived as being Jewish and others not? Once individuals regard themselves as free to pick and choose, yesterday's requirements become today's resources. Although relatively few Jews are interested in committing to the ongoing practice of traditional Judaism, individual Jews will draw on traditional Jewish texts and religious practices—on an as-needed basis of course.[10]

Jewish identity resources are in no way limited to behaviors or practices that comprise rabbinic or traditional Judaism. Today, individualist Jews use whatever they think of as part of their cultural heritage: music, painting, stories, novels, films, accents, verbal expressions, jokes, foods, and recipes. For some, Chagall, I. B. Singer or Jackie Mason, gefilte fish or cous-cous, etc. form a more important part of their Jewish identity than Torah or Talmud. Identity-making options also come from personal experience—from the family, school, or work. In constructing their identities, Jews draw on what other people they respect regard as being Jewish. In principle, almost anything can be reconceived as Jewish if one can honestly imagine it as Jewish. For example, I have seen donations to a university, art museum, or symphony sincerely framed as *tzedakah*. Why not? In a culture of choice, we can also choose what we regard as Jewish.

Finally, according to the individual choice model of identity, Jewish and American are not necessarily regarded as mutually exclusive.[11] Hence, Jews can also construct their identities by *coalescence*. Coalescence is a process in which values, attitudes, or behaviors once understood as Jewish but not necessarily American, and values, attitudes, or behaviors once understood as American but not necessarily Jewish become merged so completely, consciously or unconsciously, that they are experienced simultaneously as Jewish and American (Fishman, 1998-Blanchards' wording). As already indicated, in a culture of choice, we can consciously make an object or action Jewish simply by sincerely adopting it as Jewish.[12] Contemporary America is a society in which one can borrow differing cultural styles in food, dance, music, dress, ideas, etc. without feeling any loss of personal authenticity.[13]

To summarize, the contemporary process of Jewish identity construction should be understood in the following manner. Identity construction is an ongoing process of choosing that is sometimes conscious, sometimes unconscious. It is a selecting from the actions, objects, attitudes, and beliefs that most Jews have come to understand as either already Jewish or as capable of becoming seen as Jewish. Typically, options are divided into categories—traditional religious observance, community action, federation, Israel, foods, jokes, art, music, dance, books, languages, etc. As expected in a culture of choice, no

[10]The following true story is indicative of this phenomenon. CLAL Shabbatonim include singing together *Birkat ha-mazon,* the traditional grace after meals. After one meal, a participant was heard to remark, "*Birkat ha-mazon* is great! I do it once every year at the CLAL Shabbaton." In the old paradigm, the incongruity of this statement makes it funny. In the new paradigm, it makes perfect sense.

[11]The lingering effects of the older models of ethnic and cultural identity formation can sometimes seduce Jews into saying that only what is uniquely Jewish is really Jewish. Once it becomes clear that identity/being Jewish is constructed—a language practice, a way of talking—there is no longer any necessity for seeking out some unique reality that is Jewish. Of course, Jews could choose to talk about Jewish identity as all and only those values, texts, and the like that Jews do not share with people who are not Jewish. But that would both marginalize Jewish identity and, hence, for most American Jews, trivialize it.

[12]Since completely idiosyncratic usages play a minor role in Jewish identity construction, it is usually groups of Jews who do this. But note that the group might be no larger than a nuclear family or even the children in a nuclear family.

[13]That *some* such symbols feel alien to Jews does not mean that *all* such symbols feel alien. A cross, for example, feels alien to most Jews and would most likely not be consciously adopted as a Jewish symbol. In contrast, yogic meditation positions have already become part of some Jewish services.

one is required to choose from or include any particular category in order to construct a "valid" Jewish identity. My own experience with the world of Jewish federations has taught me that, for many Jews, this kind of pluralism has been a stated cultural norm for some time now. Particular categories become privileged only as the result of individual choice and the categories that are "personally privileged" can be shifted at any time. In a culture of choice, there is really no basis for sneering at so-called gastronomic Jews.

Identifying oneself or someone else, for that matter, as a Jew says nothing about the ways in which one is Jewish. It simply says that one *is* Jewish. Whatever the content of someone's Jewish identity, the strength of that Jewish identity depends on that person's continued insistence on identifying as a Jew, even in the face of opposition and especially if there is a cost to doing so. In contrast, the intensity and depth of one's Jewish identity depend on how often, and in which areas of one's life, one makes what one regards as Jewish choices, that is, from categories regarded as Jewish. People who frequently choose actions, objects, attitudes, or beliefs that they regard as Jewish report that being Jewish is important to them and to who they are. In principle, a "thin" Jewish identity can still be a very strong Jewish identity.[14]

In a culture of choice, skilled identity construction requires (1) the ability to increase one's knowledge base, (2) developing an instinct for adapting available options to your changing needs, and (3) a rich, prolific imagination. Its virtues are personal authenticity, openness to new possibilities, and a willingness and ability to take personal risks. Since, for most Jews, highly idiosyncratic practices do not go far in constructing a Jewish identity, skillful identity construction also involves the ability to engage others in one's own individual Jewish projects, the ability to act effectively in concert with others on their (individual) projects, and the ability to organize groups of people into ongoing institutions.

Can we transmit an identity that is rooted in the culture of individual choice? That depends. On the one hand, the more our culture becomes a culture of individual choice, the more difficult it will be to transmit one's own personal choices.[15] But that is obvious. In America today, change is the rule, and very few cultural specifics can be transmitted between generations. Our kids may or may not adopt our music, our political passions, our heroes, and our favorite books, and, similarly, they may or may not adopt our preferred way of being Jewish.

On the other hand, I think that we can pass on to our children a strong sense of how important and vital it is for them to "choose Jewish." After all, although most parents are unable to transmit specific occupational or educational choices, they are generally able to transmit the importance of making good or meaningful choices in these areas. With luck, we can even transmit the values that we think are important in making educational or occupational choices.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Policy implications for strengthening Jewish identity and community follow from this new model. Several of these implications are already being implemented by individuals and organizations who have understood, almost intuitively, that a new paradigm of identity construction exists and have acted accordingly. It should be apparent how these recommendations differ from

[14]One of the striking results of our research on identity is the degree to which respondents will *insist* that they are Jews even if they can't think of almost anything that they do because they are Jews.

[15]It is just such a concern that brings many traditionally observant Jews to raise their children "in house" in order to foster a sense that Jewish identity is not primarily chosen individually; in that culture, identities are constructed by adapting the self to tradition and at the same time adapting the tradition to the self. Of course, personal autonomy exists, but within a far more circumscribed cultural sphere than in the mainline American culture of choice.

those generated out of the older models of assimilation and acculturation.

We need to spend less time creating standards for our existing categories (e.g., Jewish politics, religious practice, music, etc.) and more time increasing the range of expressions in any given category that we regard as Jewish. For example, however odd, strange, or even repugnant some inherited religious practices may seem, we should keep them going as live options for other Jews. Or, why not widen political discussions, even about Israel, so that as many views as possible can be seen as legitimate forms of Jewish self-expression? Can we expand the category of what we consider Jewish art or Jewish music?

We may also need to add new Jewish categories. If a particular action does not seem to fit under an existing category, maybe it can become a category of its own. For example, I already mentioned construing donations to universities, art museums, and symphonies as Jewish and even making a place for them institutionally. For some, this means adding a category—general philanthropy—to the list of categories they think of as Jewish. They might be surprised to learn that a category similar to this existed for earlier Jewries.

We need to proactively connect Jewish identity construction to other significant life choices. Getting a driver's license, taking your first drink, or even putting on cosmetics and other significant turning points in the life cycle could be transformed into Jewish activities (Clapp, 1998). I am not suggesting merely "anointing" these activities as Jewish. I believe that by bringing them into the process of Jewish identity construction, they will be connected appropriately to what we regard as Jewish values. Or, as another example, we might encourage people to think about what is Jewish in their profession. What does practicing medicine or law Jewishly mean? Or, in other areas of importance to them, is there a Jewish dimension to furnishing a house? Surely creativity will be needed here, but experiment and out-of-the-box thinking are exactly what the new reality and the new model of identity formation demand.

We need to begin teaching Jews how to be skillful at proactively constructing and maintaining a Jewish identity across the life-cycle—and how to keep on doing it throughout life. Unfortunately, most of our present educational efforts at cultural transmission are focused on motivating young people to learn and adopt a particular religious or cultural content. Little, if any effort goes into developing a next generation that is skillful in the identity construction process and able to sustain this process on their own after they leave the orbit of Jewish primary education. It seems as if, after the period of Jewish education is over, Jewish identity just happens to people. As adults, we probably need to improve our own skills in this area as well.

We need to stop criticizing Jews for making different identity choices from the ones we have made. Since diversity is most often a community asset, the existence of a range of Jewish identity choices is likely to strengthen Jewish communities. However, even those who are working to advance the cause of a particular kind of inherited language need to understand that, however well that language may work for them, they will be more effective in realizing their own goals if they stop insisting on using a language that is antagonistic to contemporary Jewish identity construction. In a culture characterized by the primacy of individual choice, telling people that, merely because they are Jews, they have specific obligations—community participation, donations, Torah study—is not going to make them feel obligated to do these things or even make them feel more committed to being Jewish. To help others construct a Jewish identity successfully, we must be willing to make the *sources* of our own sense of Jewish obligation available to others as *resources* for their own Jewish identity construction.

In strengthening our communities, our primary concern should not be to get other Jews and the community-at-large to support

only those specific Jewish identities, institutions, and communities that we have chosen to construct. Rather, in addition to strengthening our own identities and communities, we must also be willing to share our power and resources with those who have made different Jewish choices and to support their efforts on behalf of the identities and communities they have chosen to construct.

CONCLUSION

If we are to take account of the cultural changes in contemporary America, we need to develop a new model (or paradigm) of Jewish identity construction. The new model I propose integrates the primacy of individual choice that is presently an indispensable part of how most Americans, Jewish or not, construct their identities. It reveals the irrelevance of many of the criticisms that many affiliated and involved Jews make of Jews who are unaffiliated with or less involved in the life of most contemporary Jewish religious and communal institutions.[16] It also suggests that we need to adopt some new communal policies in the areas of Jewish education and community building. Finally, the new model helps those of us who are at home in the world of received Jewish identity construction become more aware of and responsive to the voices—too often, the communally unheard or misunderstood voices—of those Jews who are more at home in this new process of Jewish identity construction.

[16]Jewish Community Centers are often exceptions to this lack of affiliation and interest. This suggests that JCCs may be a very effective institution for strengthening contemporary Jewish identity construction.

Stephen D. Solender

Leader and Mentor

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