Jewishness in a New Era: Continuity, Discontinuity or Transformation?

By Irwin Kula

There are two assumptions held almost universally by Jewish continuity specialists, be they day school devotees, synagogue transformers, Israel experience enthusiasts, spiritual renewal champions, or denominational loyalists.

The first assumption is that there is a terrible crisis in American Jewish life, an erosion of Jewish identity. This is characterized by some, in the most extreme and offensive way, as another Holocaust, as if the free choices made by some Jews to live in ways that other Jews regard as insufficiently Jewish could be equated with the deaths of those who were murdered because they were Jewish. Most others describe this erosion of identity in a less inflammatory way as assimilation.

The second assumption held almost universally by the players in the new Jewish continuity industry is that there is a solution to the problem. While they disagree among themselves as to how this "terrible erosion in Jewish life" is to be corrected, each presumes to know what needs to be preserved from the inherited tradition, and how it ought to be transmitted programmatically or institutionally.

For these continuity "experts," preservation generally entails transmitting some predetermined "essence" of Judaism or ostensibly "core" Jewish experience to the "assimilated"--an essence or core that has been decided upon by rabbis, educators and major philanthropists. The continuity crisis is thus understood as a failure to transmit this core or essence of Judaism, a failure that can be corrected if more money is channeled into the right kinds of programs and institutions. To this end, in recent years we have witnessed a major increase in the funds made available to the kinds of programs (e.g., adult education, Israel experience) and institutions (e.g., synagogues, day schools, etc.) that are supposed to be capable of instilling strong Jewish identities.

With some justification, this redirection of communal resources has been touted as a revolution in Jewish life. But all the fanfare must not obscure the fact that this redirection of resources is hardly radical in a qualitative sense. Most of the new money is being invested in programs and institutions that rely on methods and approaches that have long been familiar.

Interestingly, the one thing that almost never takes place in the Jewish community's efforts to get a handle on the continuity "problem" is an open-ended conversation between those on the "inside" of the Jewish community and those the insiders have defined as "assimilated" and in "need" of outreach.

Conversations between these two groups would not only help the "insiders" to better understand the real needs of the "assimilated" but would also help them to understand the various ways in which the latter experience and think about their Jewish identities.

Over the past few years, I have been engaged in just these kinds of conversations. In the process, I have discovered that it may well be that these two assumptions so central to the Jewish continuity industry are not only false but actually undermine our collective efforts to build rich Jewish identities and compelling communities in an era of great change and transition.

These conversations suggest the following:

What if there actually is no crisis in Jewish life, at least in terms of individual Jewish identity? After all, according to a recent study by the American Jewish Committee, more than 90 percent of Jews told researchers that they are proud to be Jewish. And yet, at the same time, the AJC survey (1998) found that less than a third of all Jews felt it was important to belong to a Jewish organization, to participate in synagogue services or to travel to Israel. This seems to indicate that the continuity problem may be bound up not so much with the dissolution of individual Jewish identity, as with the inability of so many existing Jewish practices and institutions--institutions and practices created in another era--to connect with and mobilize that pride which most Jews continue to feel today no matter how assimilated they happen to be. Perhaps, what the continuity industry depicts as a weakening of Jewish identity manifests not its attenuation as much as a change in its modes of expression. And this change corresponds to the changes in the outward and inward circumstances of Jewish life.

One might describe these changes as the normalization of the Jewish condition. If this is correct, the behavioral changes that are usually cited as evidence of the "erosion" of Jewish life must be reinterpreted as evidence of the fact that Jews are living in a context far different from the one in which the behavioral norms that have eroded were socially viable. In a different place and time, when Jews were still separated from the wider society by law, social prejudice and oppression, a range of boundary-maintaining Jewish behaviors made sense, sociologically and pragmatically. But as Jews have increasingly come to experience themselves as fully at home and integrated in America, it is not surprising that behaviors experienced by most Jews as socially marginalizing have lost their power and declined.

When statisticians measure for these behaviors--as if these behaviors alone were to be equated with the essence of Jewishness--they find them in decline and declare that we are in the midst of a full-blown continuity crisis. To measure the vitality of Jewish life in the present age by the persistence of these traditional behaviors is as myopic today as it would have been to measure the strength of Jewish identity 200 years after the destruction of the Second Temple by the

persistence of animal sacrifice (or belief in its being irreplaceable). Had the statisticians of that era, and the institutions employing them, focused their attention upon the identity markers of Temple Judaism, there is little doubt what their conclusion would have been: "Sacrifice, and the belief in its continued importance, are way down," they would have announced, "thus Jewish identity and continuity are fast eroding." Of course, by framing their research agenda in this way, the statisticians would have missed the most important phenomenon of the age: the rise of Rabbinic Judaism, a Judaism built upon a very different set of behaviors and practices.

In a more pernicious and less accepting social context than the present, the rejection by individual Jews of practices that marked them as different and made them objects of prejudice and discrimination could be legitimately understood as born of the individual's desire to shed the burden of being outwardly identified as a Jew. But the "assimilation" of the present era ought to be understood as something else entirely, not as a flight from Jewishness but as its healthy normalization in an era of genuine acceptance of Jews as Jews. This normalization is in fact the necessary condition for the full realization of Jewish consciousness.

Normalization invites greater responsibility and initiative and a much wider framework in which to live out and express the full meaning of our individual Jewish identities. Normalization prevents Judaism from being defined exclusively as a culture of learning and prayer and expands the range of Jewish behavior beyond the circumscribed borders of home and synagogue. The culture of learning and prayer and symbolic holy time (though still an important way to express Jewishness) is simply no longer the exclusive defining framework of Jewish identity.

In this new era of normalization, Jews do not simply become like everyone else. Rather, the expression of their Jewish identities finds new forms that are appropriate to their full and equal participation in a broader human community. Kashrut, for instance, ceases to be a means of social separation in this era, and becomes for many an expression of our endeavor to create a world of social justice and environmental sustainability. Tzedakah is similarly transformed in this era of normalization, as Jewish philanthropic concern expands to encompass the needs not of Jews alone but of all whose basic human needs are unmet. This increase in tzedakah to charities outside of the Jewish world may appear as a net decrease (or as "erosion") if one narrowly equates tzedakah with gifts to Jewish organizations. But in an era of Jewish social acceptance and affluence, this decrease ought to be understood not as indicative of a weakening of Jewish identity but as a sign of its ongoing and healthy transformation.

If in fact what has been dubbed the continuity crisis is rather a sign that Jewishness is now finding new forms of expression in a new social context, then the assumption that any one of us knows exactly what it is that needs to be

preserved from the past becomes problematic. A new context inevitably will demand far-reaching changes in the very nature of Jewishness and its institutional expressions. In this respect, our time is like the continuity crisis in Jewish life that followed the destruction of the Temple in the first century c.e. That crisis compelled the thorough re-imagining of Jewishness in both its individual and institutional expressions, the re-imagining that we know today as "Rabbinic Judaism."

The tacit assumption of continuity specialists, especially within the various denominations, is that the Jews whom they are trying to engage are not expressing their Jewishness according to the continuity specialists' own definition of normative Jewish behavior. Statutory prayer, extensive Talmud study, and zealous ritual observance--all of these behaviors are indeed important and historically (at least during some periods of Jewish history) they were normative expressions of Jewishness. But it may well be that these long established forms of Jewishness, even if upgraded, are too circumscribed for this new era in Jewish history. Perhaps we need to create a pluralist and democratic environment of experimentation that will foster the emergence of new expressions of Jewishness and new kinds of Jewish community that are more attuned to the era in which we live.