The Limits of Words

By Shari Cohen

I have been struggling recently with the word Jewish. The word has begun to feel constraining to me. And I don't believe that I am an unusual case; this is something I share with my "secular" friends and colleagues who are not associated with traditional Jewish practices and institutions. The word Jewish has come to evoke a sort of narrowness, which is reflected in many Jewish institutions. I am increasingly wary of ties to Jewishness based primarily on "nostalgia." Maybe one reason that the word Jewish can feel distancing is that none of the words that are ordinarily used to describe Jewishness - "religion," "ethnicity," "heritage," "ethics" -- quite resonate for me in spite of my deep Jewish connection.

I think this is true for two reasons: Jewishness has always been some sort of composite of these concepts. Perhaps more important, we are in a period of change, when we might have to think differently about the categories to which these words refer. I wonder whether we would do better by using other words. The words, or names, we use for the reality we are naming constrain our understanding of that reality and our ability to think about it differently. I would love to find a way to talk about Jewishness that would mirror what that identity evokes. Maybe this brief look at the words we use will help.

"Religion" is clearly inadequate for me. Its association with the notion of a transcendent God, and with rigid norms and rules, simply does not evoke my sense of connection to something larger or to the deepest parts of myself. Nor does the term resonate with an entire generation of Americans who prefer the word "spiritual" instead. But "spirituality" does not work for me either. It evokes an inward self-focus, not sufficiently oriented toward the larger world -- a sense of ethics and the larger good. It has also come to overlap with "new-age" with which I do not associate myself. Again, I know I am not alone in this. Neither "religion" nor "spirituality" captures how I, or how many "secular" Jews I know, would describe our connection to the big issues of life, or to our Jewish identities.

What about "ethnicity" and the whole family of words connected with the tribal aspect of Jewish peoplehood, oriented toward kinship and toward inheritance of something from the past? "Ethnicity" and "peoplehood" feel too tribal, particularistic and focused on survival. "Heritage" seems too bland, and doesn't do justice to the richness of Jewish tradition; it is also strangely static. "Culture" might work, but seems too broad and diffuse.

There is another family of terms that links to the notion of tikkun olam - a term that has come to mean, roughly, making the world a better place. This impulse, combined with the idea of questioning conventions or idolatries, comprises the aspect of Jewishness that links to social responsibility. This is clearly a big piece

of how I think about Jewishness. But what do we really mean by that? Social responsibility might suggest the concept of "civic engagement," a term used in recent discussions about the malaise and apathy that seem to be threatening democracy. But this concept is reminiscent of forms of voluntary activity that I connect with a previous generation, and doesn't describe my engagement with important social challenges. "Ethics" sounds too distant and fixed, "morality" is associated with the Christian right. "Social activism," for me, is too connected in my mind to social movements that have not been terribly effective. I would prefer a term that captures the deep commitment to questioning conventions, the notion of making the world better from tikkun olam, but also the need to ground idealism in the realities of the world. None of the terms we often hear do this.

Perhaps Jewish is as much a "method" for engaging with the world as it is anything else. This means thinking in terms of adverbs and verbs, not nouns. Maybe I'd feel better if Jewish was a word that referred to how we "believe", "identify," have "faith," appreciate the "sacred," "reflect," are "loyal," "engage," find or seek "meaning," challenge "idolatries." And not just how we do each of these things, but how these activities are and will be combined. It makes sense to think this way during a period of change, when the way we form communities, our own identities, and the very way we think about our families, our work, and politics are changing.

I thought that it might be useful to actually look up some of these terms and present their current dictionary definitions.   I was surprised that some of these terms did not carry the baggage I associate with them. I have not come to any conclusions, but simply present the following dictionary of terms for your consideration. The definitions are from the *Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary*, at http://www.merriamwebster.com.

The terms are presented below in the order they were mentioned above.

secular	peoplehood/people	believe
nostalgia	heritage	identify/identity
religion	civic	faith
spirituality	engagement/engage	sacred
spiritual	ethical	reflect/reflective
ethnic/ethnicity	morality/moral	loyalty
culture	method	meaning/purpose
		idolatry