A New Jewish Identity… in Formation?

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In August of 1996, the Adolescent Task Force of the Minneapolis Federation for Jewish Service's Continuity Commission contracted with Search Institute to conduct a survey of Jewish adolescents in Minneapolis. Search Institute is a non-profit research organization whose mission is to provide practical research that benefits children. Search was uniquely qualified to conduct this study, as it has surveyed over 200,000 young people in the United States. Four hundred and fourteen adolescents responded to the survey, which served as the basis of a comprehensive report. To date, this survey is one of the most in-depth studies on Jewish adolescents in North America.

While Jewish adolescents in Minneapolis may differ slightly from those in other Jewish communities, we assume that they are more similar than different. Indeed, in several areas, some findings in the Minneapolis study are in consonance with other national studies on Jewish adolescents (Sales, 1996). Moreover, adolescents today participate in a "global youth culture." In other words, despite geographic, ethnic and religious differences, adolescents today share much in common with one another. Therefore, generalizations about Jewish youth in other communities can be made based on the Minneapolis study.

The title of the full survey report is, "Shema: Listening to Jewish Youth." Given some of our findings, the key word in the title is "Listening!" Adult members of the Jewish community may not want to listen to adolescents' reports of Jewish feelings, their anticipated behaviors, and their involvement in Jewish activities because it makes us uncomfortable or anxious about the Jewish future. However, if we can set aside our own identity issues from those of our adolescents, then we might hear them describing a new Jewish identity in the making. Conversely, if we are unable to listen to their feelings, attitudes and values, then we may inadvertently push them away from the Jewish community and validate our anxieties about their future Jewish identity and involvement in the Jewish community.

Alan Dershowitz alludes to how the new Jewish identity may be different from previous Jewish identities:

> My students, my children, my friends' children--our next generation--understand our new status: They do not want to be regarded as victims. They do not feel persecuted, discriminated against or powerless. They want to read the new good news, not the old bad news. A 1988 poll of Jewish students at Dartmouth College made the point compellingly: When asked whether they believed that their Jewishness would in any way hamper their future success, not a single student answered in the affirmative (Dershowitz, 1997, p. 13).

Some current Jewish adult leadership still views the world through the lens of persecution and oppression, while Jewish adolescents generally do so through the lens of opportunity and freedom. Their Jewish value set is different than those of the generations above them. These differences often appear as contradictions to adults, but they are not perceived as such by adolescents. Rather, they reflect a somewhat dramatic redrawing of the

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CONCEPT OF COALESCENCE

A helpful concept for understanding the redrawing of the boundaries of Jewish identity by our adolescents is called "coalescence," recently introduced by Sylvia Barack Fishman (1996). Fishman explores the cultural coping strategies of prior generations of Jews who lived in two disparate cultural realms: the American and the Jewish. Prior strategies included compartmentalization, adaptation and synthesis. Without individually defining each coping technique here, one might point out that all three have in common the consciousness of differences between Jewish and American culture. Depending upon the coping mechanism used, attempts were made either to erect a wall between the differences or to develop ways to allow the differences to exist in a non-conflictual relationship.

Coalescence, on the other hand, can be viewed as the evolutionary end stage of those strategies that sought to harmonize Jewish and American culture. In the stage of coalescence, fundamental cultural distinctions are not just bluffed; rather, they disappear. "For most American Jews today, the distinction between what is Jewish and what is American is not recognized, so the two values systems can hardly be compartmentalized. Rather, in many ways the boundaries have disappeared and the two belief systems have merged into one coalesced whole widely known as 'Judaism'"(Fishman, p. 40).

Explaining the concept of coalescence further, Fishman writes:

> During the process of coalescence ... the 'texts' of two cultures, American and Jewish, are accessed simultaneously, much as one might access two different texts on a single computer screen. These value systems merge, or coalesce. When coalescence is complete, the resulting merged messages or texts are perceived not as being American and Jewish values side by side, but as being a unified text which is identified as authoritative Judaism (p.10).

Clearly, today's Jewish adolescents do not consciously engage in the process of coalescence in attempting to negotiate their Jewish and their American worlds. In fact, as the Jewish adolescents in this study reported, they do not have to negotiate two cultures at all. It was their parents and their grandparents who had that challenge, and met it by adapting and synthesizing their Jewish and American heritage. Their success is what led to today's Jewish adolescents having a merged set of Jewish and American values that are indistinguishable to them. Their parents and grandparents may see the tensions and contradictions between the two cultures, but the adolescents look at the two systems as a seamless whole.

WORLD-VIEW OF ADOLESCENTS

Following, we describe the world-view of the Jewish adolescents who responded to the survey. First, we lay out the contours of their Jewish identity. Then, using the framework of coalescence, we interpret the meaning of that world-view.

Broadly speaking, Jewish adolescents report that they care deeply about being Jewish and about Jewish causes. This is worth emphasizing, for two reasons: First, it may help in understanding apparent contradictions to this with more optimism. Second, it underlines that the adult community is having success in transmitting

to this with more optimism. Second, it underlines that the adult community is having success in transmitting positive feelings about being Jewish. Those feelings can be deepened and broadened by creating experiences and programs that address their Jewish concerns.

However, our findings suggest that maintaining Jewish rituals is not an important value to Jewish adolescents. Moreover, synagogue attendance is not of great interest to them. In addition, Jewish adolescents are increasingly interested in dating non-Jews and in having their non-Jewish friends attend Jewish-sponsored activities. They would like their Jewish-sponsored activities to include not only non-Jews, but Jews from other denominations. They do not like the way that the adult Jewish community segregates both non-Jews and Jews from other denominations from their activities.

Although Jewish adolescents indicate a desire to have non-Jews more involved in their social and personal lives, they overwhelmingly express the desire to raise their own children as Jews. Moreover, they have positive feelings about Jewish holiday celebrations in the home. In addition, a high percentage of Jewish adolescents claim that they pray with great frequency. (Given the low level of synagogue attendance, that means that they must be praying outside of the synagogue.) The Holocaust and Israel are subjects that continue to interest them, although they feel that they have had a thorough exposure to these subjects through their formal educational experiences.

Taken together, these findings offer the adult community three possible conclusions:

- We have failed to inculcate a Jewish identity in our adolescents as can be seen from their indifference toward ritual and their willingness to date and marry non-Jews.
- We have had a mixed record as can be seen from the strong Jewish feelings that Jewish adolescents have about being Jewish and wanting to raise their children as Jews.
- We are seeing a new coalesced Jewish identity in the making.

As each of these conclusions generates a different set of communal strategies in working with Jewish adolescents, it is critical to identify all possible interpretations. Our interpretation of this data is that our adolescents are forming a new Jewish identity. (We want to stress that this is our interpretation. Further studies will have to be conducted over time to see whether our interpretation is valid.) Clearly, we have not failed to inculcate a feeling of Jewish identity, as the adolescents surveyed have very strong and positive feelings about being Jewish. The case might be made that our track record is mixed, if we evaluate the statements of the adolescents from our adult Jewish identity perspective. However, if we listen to the adolescents themselves, then we will hear that they are telling us that they may be rejecting our notions of Jewish identity while they are still constructing their own notion of what constitutes their Jewish identity.

NEW NOTION OF JEWISH IDENTITY

Previous generations of Jews based their identity on affiliation with the Jewish community. “Affiliation with the Jewish community” does not just refer to formal membership in a particular institution. Rather, it encompasses a willingness to sacrifice at least some of one's personal desires and needs for the welfare of the group. “Affiliation with the Jewish community” also implies a willingness to adopt the norms which are particular to the Jewish community.

In contrast, the adolescents surveyed are likely to have a more personal, individualized Jewish identity that is centered more on self and their immediate family instead of the larger community. For today's adolescents, individual responsibility to maintain a group identity has given way to the values of autonomy, so that expressing one's autonomy in all of life's choices is now perceived as a Jewish value. In other words, the American values of autonomy and individualism have become merged with the Jewish values of community and collective responsibility to produce adolescents, similar to those we surveyed, who have strong, personal Jewish feelings but who choose to exercise their faith on their terms and in their own ways.

This merging of values that has created these strong but individualistic feelings helps to explain some of the paradoxes of this new Jewish identity. Because of the coalescence of Jewish and American values, it is therefore not contradictory for adolescents both to be willing to date and marry non-Jews and yet to want to raise their children as Jews. Likewise, it is not inconsistent to disregard ritual (which highlights the distinctive aspects of a group) and to still feel deeply about Judaism and Jewish causes.

The ideal of the merging of values can also help us to understand a specific challenge that one of the findings in the survey presents to the adult Jewish community. Some of the qualitative statements made by the adolescents express a desire to include non-Jews in their Jewish-sponsored activities. To adults, this suggestion is interpreted as undermining the very purpose of Jewish-sponsored activities, namely to impose social boundaries periodically that will allow for the creation of intense Jewish-Jewish friendships, which are not likely to happen in educational and recreational settings outside of the Jewish community.

However, having fully internalized the American values of multiculturalism and pride in ethnic diversity (their own Jewish pride can be seen as an indicator of these values), adolescents do not understand the need to exclude their non-Jewish friends. In fact, one can interpret their wishes to include non-Jewish friends in their activities as a desire to broaden the reach of their own Jewish identity. They do not want to limit the expression of their Jewish identity only to strictly Jewish settings. For them, that would be a return to the earlier coping mechanism of compartmentalization. A recently published study on bar and bat mitzva-age children indicates that Jewish adolescents also have a significantly lower percentage of Jewish friends than do their parents (Kosmin, 1997). This finding further corroborates that non-Jews are an integral part of today's Jewish adolescent universe.

INCLUSIVITY ACROSS DENOMINATIONS

This same desire for greater inclusivity extends to other Jewish denominations as well. Again, the adolescents were very clear about their dislike of establishing what they view as artificial boundaries of denominational affiliation. As one particularly articulate 11-year-old boy noted (and he represents many of the adolescents surveyed), "...it shouldn't matter what temple you go to--just that everyone be together" (Leffert pg. 114, 1997).

In summary, some of the Jewish adults of the twenty-first century will have a Jewish identity which is:

- Heavy in emotional and spiritual feeling;
- Light in terms of traditional ritual practice;
- Inclusive of other types of Jews as well as of non-Jews;
- Individually and family-oriented as opposed to institutionally oriented;

- Mindful of the special role of Israel and the Holocaust;
- Open toward growth through continuing Jewish education; and
- Emphatic in its belief about making the world a better place (a concept known as tikkun olam).

No single phrase can capture the nuanced and paradoxical nature of this new Jewish identity. It is both particular and universal; personal and public.

It is intriguing to note that the adolescents who were surveyed came from highly affiliated homes. Ninety-five percent of their parents belonged to a synagogue and 95 percent of their parents were either born Jewish or converted to Judaism (Leffert, pg. 22). Thus, we cannot dismiss these adolescents as somehow under-representing adolescents who come from committed Jewish families. In fact, it is reasonable to conclude that even adolescents who are raised in ethnically Jewish homes with parents who belong to a synagogue are exhibiting this new, coalesced Jewish identity. This observation accords with Fishman's claim about the extent and depth of the phenomenon of coalescence, which has permeated "all strata of American Jewish fife" (p. 13). One can only imagine what constitutes the Jewish identity of the many children who are being raised in homes where two religious and cultural heritages meet.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY-MAKERS

The fact that this new Jewish identity is found among those adolescents who are involved in the Jewish community raises several critical questions for adult Jewish policy-makers:

Does this identity require adult intervention or, rather, does it merit support? In other words, should efforts be made to attempt to restore more "traditional" expressions of Jewish identity to our adolescents, or are we prepared to foster their emerging identity as it is? Or, do we need to develop multiple strategies for adolescent identity transmission development?

Can we and should we try to engage the high numbers of Jewish adolescents (in Minneapolis, that number is over 50 percent) who have no current involvement with Jewish sponsored activities, although their parents are synagogue members? If so, what set of strategies will best engage them?

Are we setting the stage for a future potential conflict within the Jewish community by supporting multiple identities?

Clearly we will not know the answers to these questions until years after our adolescents have become adults. Indeed, the purpose here is not to answer these questions but to place them on the communal agenda, an agenda that must include the participation of adolescents. Rather, it is our hope to provide the exploration of a new framework for understanding the seemingly contradictory values and practices of Jewish youth today. With the powerful data about Jewish youth that the Minneapolis study has provided, we will surely be capable of developing creative responses to what our young people have told us about their possible new emerging Jewish identity.

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