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Identity as Process: An Interview with Nancy Abelman, Ph.D.

Introduction:

From its inception in 1999, the Jewish Public Forum was to be a different kind of Jewish institution. Seeking to generate fresh thinking about the social, political and cultural trends affecting ethnic and religious identity and community, it is an unprecedented effort to broaden the conversation about the Jewish future by engaging leading figures in the worlds of academia, business, the arts and public policy, most of whom have not been involved in organized Jewish life.

CLAL's connection to Nancy Abelman, an associate professor at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, where she teaches anthropology, East Asian languages and cultures, and women's studies, came through the process of network building which is so important to the Jewish Public Forum. Her name was suggested by another participant and she then became active in the Forum's work, serving as an informal advisor to the project. She was a panelist at the Forum's June 2000 conference, "The Virtual, the Real and the Not-Yet-Imagined: Meaning, Identity and Community in a Networked World."

From the moment she came to the Jewish Public Forum, Nancy was struck by the parallels between the Korean-American community and the Jewish

community. In the conversation that follows she expands on this and other themes.

She is the author of *Echoes of the Past, Epics of Dissent: A South Korean Social Movement* (University of California Press, 1996) and *Blue Dreams: Korean Americans and the Los Angeles Riots* (with John Lie) (Harvard University Press, 1995). She is currently finishing *The Melodrama of Mobility: Women, Class, and Talk in Contemporary South Korea*. She will be on leave in spring and fall 2001 to write a book on Korean Americans in public higher education in Illinois.

CLAL: You have made comparisons between the Korean American community that you study and the Jewish community. What are some of the most striking ones? What can the two communities learn from one another?

NA: When I was first invited to the CLAL table through the Jewish Public Forum, I would have never imagined that I would have referred publicly to my own research on and connection with Korean America. It happened because I couldn't stop myself -- the issues were too parallel for silence. And CLAL for its part, or rather the people who are CLAL go out of their way to welcome just that sort of association -- to make you feel that what you do and know in the "rest" of your life is likely an important resource for thinking about things Jewish. And, taken a step further, the CLAL table is one -- has been designed to be one -- where the boundaries between "Jewishness" and the "rest" become fuzzy.

To Korean America then. What struck me most in my initial CLAL encounter, and continues to do so, are parallels in the thinking about Jewish authenticity: what counts, what should count, who are the arbiters of what counts, who should be, and -- in the best of all possible worlds -- what all of this should look like. Broadly speaking, these are matters of boundaries and their border patrol.

Similarly, there is little Korean American consensus as to what Koreanness is or ought to be. For almost every heartfelt conviction (and there are many), there are equally weighty counter-convictions asserting that this or that is not the essence of Koreanness and, regardless, that it certainly shouldn't be.

These struggles over Koreanness are ones waged within Korean American families (across generations and other divides), in Korean American churches (and this is an overwhelmingly church, Christian, attending population), and across numerous divides in the community (of class, gender, regional origin,

immigration history and so on). These struggles -- over that right to claim something as your own with confidence (which, I think, is what authenticity is about) -- are ones that I have encountered in the classroom and in my research. In the classroom, I am often in the interesting situation of introducing contemporary Korean society to large numbers of Korean American undergraduates (there are some 1000 Korean American undergraduates at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign where I teach). And I find these struggles in the research I have been conducting for the last few years on Korean Americans in higher educational institutions in Illinois. Furthermore, I should note that these struggles of identification, over rightful belonging, are not only struggles in Korea's émigré communities, but are "at home" as well in South Korea. What is for some Koreans and Korean Americans the very essence of Koreanness is the very practice or tradition against which other Koreans and Korean Americans want to define their "Korean" identity.

Although I take these sorts of contests over cultural practice and identity to be the stuff of life more generally, for the particular case of Koreans and Korean Americans, chapters in their contemporary history -- especially colonization by Japan (1910-1945) and the (ongoing) division of the Koreas -- have made the matter of "what is ours" all the more charged. The parallel to issues of Jewish identification is clear here.

Let me return then to why conversations at the CLAL table brought all of this to mind -- lest you think I have forgotten the Jewish connection. At CLAL, I found discussions about the ways in which contemporary Judaism, in its myriad of institutional and non-institutional forms and practices, has cast its net -- and in turn about who has felt included or, importantly, cast aside. As an anthropologist generally, I couldn't help but be interested in the ideas of culture and belonging that were in question, and as someone who has been interested in Korea and its émigré community, I couldn't help but notice parallel struggles.

Among the discussions I have been part of at CLAL, I was particularly interested in a tension between, on the one hand, a desire to relax the boundaries of Jewish life and practice -- such that more Jews can more often recognize themselves and their lives in and in relation to Judaism -- and, on the other hand, an interest in rekindling passion for Jewish spirituality and, dare I add, "culture" and "tradition." Clearly, Koreanness is not a spiritual practice, but that more basic tension between revealing and exploring something Korean (be it "culture," "history," or "tradition") and an ecumenical spirit that welcomes a very lack of consensus as "Korean" seems quite parallel.

Another interesting concern for comparison is race: undergirding many CLAL

discussions was the understanding that with the global wane of anti-Semitism (and in the United States with the rise of White racial identification among Jews), old paradigms of Jewish identification (e.g., narratives of rescue) are rendered anachronistic. For Korean Americans, and Asian Americans more generally, the racial realities of the contemporary United States are at the heart of much émigré identification and activism. This reality is not, however, without controversy. Some ask whether the racial lens erases critical historical differences in the immigration histories of a very heterogeneous Asian America. The very boundaries of Asian America are contested. Certainly these discussions are meaningful for any Jewish American dialogue, necessarily a dialogue across many vectors of historical, cultural, and religious difference. It struck me that these sorts of conversations about race and identity in the United States would be very interesting ones for American Jews to listen in on. Here we can imagine a living interrogation of Jewish "whiteness," parallel to the living interrogation of Korean or Asian American non-whiteness. Such conversations are all the more interesting in the light of rich and difficult conversations about the particularity of the ways in which Asian Americans are racialized vis-a-vis White, Black, and Latino/a Americans. Particularly provocative in the context of Jewish American history are discussions of the White identification (by Asian Americans themselves and non-Asians) of Asian America.

Finally, because my Korean American research has taken me into student Christian evangelicalism, I also found interesting points for comparison at the crossroads of belief and ethnicity. Korean American Christians articulate their Koreanness via Christianity in ways that are quite complex, attesting for me to the wonderfully creative processes of identification; identities are processes in motion, not things to classify or describe. Particularly interesting for comparison would be questions of religion and politics. The predominantly Protestant Korean American church is largely socially, culturally, and politically conservative. Furthermore, many have charged that the church is insular -- worried about evangelism and service in its own ethnic community, and rather engaged with the concerns and politics of U.S. racialized minorities generally.

CLAL: What would it be like for the two communities to talk about these things?

NA: Were members of these two "communities" (Korean America/Jewish America) to talk, I think that they would discover very interesting parallels in their respective relationships to Americans of color. In the context of Asian American diversity, Korean Americans are relatively highly educated post-1965, voluntary migrants with middle class backgrounds. In short, Korean Americans stand in sharp contrast to other Asian American communities

whose immigration to the United States came out of greater hardship and dislocation. Also important is the fact that prevailing Korean American identities deflect attention from considerable wealth and status disparities within Korean America. These are tense issues for Korean America, as I think they are -- and should be -- for Jewish America. In this sense, I think that through such dialogues across émigré (and other communities of difference) communities, people would see themselves and their communities anew -- juxtapositions demand this. Some of the connections would be made via very grounded realities, such as the historical parallels between Korean and Jewish American overrepresentation in urban small entrepreneurship (and parallels in the racial geography of entrepreneurship in the American city). There would be further connections through typical American depictions of Jewish and Asian America, among them the matter of education and text-based traditions. I could go on, but suffice it to say that I am entirely convinced that such conversations would be rich, complicated, and productive.

CLAL: Do you see your own work as having any connection to your Jewish identity?

NA: First of all, let me say that my Jewish identity -- and I know increasingly that I am not alone here -- has been forever confused. Much of the confusion of my Jewish identity was quite literally not knowing where my family fit in the Jewish "world." In the home lives of more religious Conservative Jews of my childhood friends, I saw shadows (ones that appealed to me) of shtetl Judaism. While being Jewish was certainly at the center of my parents' identities, it seemed as much a deep-seated rejection of all of that as anything else. I didn't really understand what "it" was to my parents, other than that it was somehow important, and that both of my parents had known worlds -- in the United States for my mother and in Germany for my father -- where being Jewish was the organizing principle of their social lives (entirely removed from any religious practice). Given what I have said, it would be very hard to give a clear answer about the relationship of my "work" (also forever in flux) to my confused and changing Jewish identity. Those caveats aside, on work, on Jewish identity, let me think on it a bit....

Loosely, I would say that my career as an anthropologist and Asianist, and in recent years as an Asian Americanist, is founded in broad interests in cultural differences near and far. That is, I have long been interested in cultural margins at home, and in rethinking what "home" means through the lens of cultural differences far away from home. As I write this, it makes sense to me to assert that these interests and the identifications they entail are inextricable from my Judaism, and from my Jewish confusion.

I will spare you details, but into adulthood, and perhaps via anthropology and my own persistent anthropological interests in history, memory, and identity, I have, like all adults, engaged in a bit of family archaeology. Wonderfully serendipitous for me was the hire of an anthropologist of Jewish culture and community in my department of anthropology. This rather unprecedented hire (for a U.S. anthropology department) brought to Urbana-Champaign, Illinois (of all places!) a Vienna-born and raised anthropologist who, within a year of his arrival, taught a joint history and anthropology seminar on the ethno-history of the German Jewry: on my history. Convergences abound. That class, which placed my family's Judaism in historical perspective, explained so much to me. Quite literally, it gave me the tools to begin locating my family's Judaism. It was when I was auditing Professor Matti Bunzl's course that I met CLAL.

In my own identity work in that class -- on my family's secularism, on the passions and identities of my parents, and so on -- I saw again and again the very questions and inquiries that have enlivened my own research on East Asia and Asian America. (I take identity work seriously, and recognize that it is much of what has brought students to my courses on Korea.) Now, can I assert that those unspoken Jewish questions and interests were there all along, guiding my Asian and Asian American research? Let me beg that question and simply say that my work and my Jewish identity are thankfully still very much in progress and that they are increasingly unfolding through dialogues (spoken and unspoken) that, until some years ago, I could have never imagined. For the unpredictability, for the serendipity, and perhaps even for the hidden logics of it all, I am so grateful.

CLAL: You were invited to take part in CLAL's Jewish Public Forum as one of the so-called "outsiders" -- a Jewish academic with few, if any, organizational affiliations. Why did you agree to take part? Has your understanding of your Jewishness been affected by your involvement with CLAL? If so, how?

NA: It certainly was different to be invited to CLAL precisely for my lack of Jewish institutional connection. Of course, it was a bit disarming; I certainly couldn't counter that I wasn't "qualified" to be there. Of course, as I think back to that strange (and that it was) invitation, and to conversations with others I have met through CLAL who received the same one, I realize that we are all interested outsiders -- interested enough to want to sit at the CLAL table, while at once not quite being able to imagine a seat for ourselves there. So I think I agreed to take part because I had long wanted to take part in Judaism, but had never quite known how. I should also add that in the months before the CLAL invitation, I had also been exploring Judaism through a very informal Torah

reading group in my town -- a group that also extended an invitation to those of us who felt somehow on the outside.

I went to my first CLAL meeting with considerable trepidation: What right did I have to participate? I wasn't convinced that I had any coherent knowledge beyond Judaism that could be of any service to the issues at hand (Jewish leadership). (And furthermore, I couldn't even keep track of the acronyms of the Jewish organizations that were reviewed in the preparatory materials that we had been sent.) And then there were the more banal worries: I had dropped out of Sunday schools, I don't know a word of Hebrew, I am not a member of the local temple and so on. I was, though, intrigued: I was being invited to join where I had long seen no clear place for myself.

So, three CLAL gatherings later, am I changed? Is my Jewishness changed? Yes. It has seemed to me that CLAL proceeds from the understanding that a complex constellation of historical processes have conspired to make the Jewish table one at which many nonetheless self-identified Jews have felt uneasy: Where would I sit? Who would I talk to? What if they found out how little I know? And so on. CLAL is -- and this is how I put it in my own words -- keenly interested in thinking anew about belonging, in thinking differently about how to both recognize and foster Jewish life. CLAL is -- again, my spin -- deeply concerned with changing the places and practices through which people find (and signify) Judaism. I feel all-the-time less shy about my own Jewishness: it's there, it takes a bit of archeology (personal, familial, socio-historical) to get at it, and it's OK. And it's valid and viable and need not be a blueprint of anything, but can be a point of departure for whatever sort of Jewish life and collectivity I want to pursue and participate in. I feel less timid about it, less apologetic for all that I long thought my and my family's Judaism wasn't.

And there is another relevant aside. My meeting with CLAL, perhaps not coincidentally, came just as my twin daughters were becoming a bit more sentient at two years old. The family crucible, this time my own, is of course so important in the life cycle of identifications. CLAL, the people I have met there, the discussions we have had, and the ways it has colored my work are now part of that family-making fabric, something that we seem to be cobbling together, improvising, one day at a time. I suppose, and I hope, that through and beyond CLAL, my Jewishness will keep surprising me.



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