

Amish, English. Jewish, Goyish.

By Robert Rabinowitz

I recently traveled to Amish country in Pennsylvania with my wife and parents-in-law who were visiting from England. I guess we were in search of something exotic, although, apart from vague memories of *The Witness*, I had very little idea of what to expect. It turned out to be a beautiful trip. The countryside was very pretty, we bought some wholesome and tasty produce and the horse drawn carriages and old-fashioned clothes of the Amish added an air of rustic simplicity.

The aspect of the whole experience that had the deepest impact on me was the feeling of being on the outside of someone else's social boundary. While we were very careful in our interactions with the Amish to be respectful of their beliefs and practice, I had a strong sense of being excluded from their world in an indefinable way. We were very excited at one point to be invited into an Amish home to look at pillows and covers for sale. But being inside someone's home, however unusual, is different from the sort of deep communication in which you can really engage with someone who sees the world in a different way. There seemed to be some sort of invisible and impermeable social barrier between my family and the Amish people with whom we spoke that was not just a matter of dress and the very short time we had together.

On our first day in Amish country, we visited a tourist attraction that aimed to provide an inside look at the Amish way of life. We watched a multi-media presentation about the moment in a young Amish man's life when he had to choose whether to become baptized into the Church, an act that could never be renounced except at the risk of total social excommunication. As we discussed the presentation with our tour guide afterwards, she began to explain how those Amish youngsters who do not decide to join the Church on becoming adults are considered to have become "English." A little more discussion elicited the information that the category "English" includes everybody except the Amish - the Amish version of the category "gentiles." Now I understood the sense of exclusion that I had been feeling because I could map it onto my own experience. I had grown up in a world in which there was a strong, although not easily definable, divide between Jews and gentiles. My culture passed on the message that there was something viscerally different about gentiles, however much they appeared to be like us.

I had always been struck by the sheerchutzpah of dividing the world up into two groups- Jews and gentiles- with one group comprised of the smallest sliver of humanity and the other group comprised of everyone else. And if it was achutzpah for the Jews to divide the world in this way, then how much the more so for the Amish to do so, being a community of only several hundred thousand members. But, of course, such divisions as Jew/gentile, Amish/English are not

meant to represent some sort of quantitative parity but to establish boundaries that are important to one's notion of one's own identity.

The problem is that our world has conspired over the last century to muddy these neat differences. I remember from my own childhood in Liverpool, a gentile was white, Catholic or Protestant, uncircumcised if male, ate pork and other non-kosher foods, did not observe the Sabbath and was believed to have very different attitudes on a range of issues, but especially about family and education. I also imbibed the view, much traded upon by Jackie Mason, that gentiles were hardier and stronger than Jews. That was certainly my experience when the soccer team from my Jewish school played against teams from neighboring Catholic and Protestant schools. While there were students in my school from Asian and oriental backgrounds, they were too few in number to disturb the neat dichotomy in my head, even if these anomalies conformed to neither my definitions of Jews nor gentiles. University, however, was an entirely different experience. Here I came into contact with a wide range of students from non-white ethnic groups and cultures. They definitely were not Jews but they also did not fit the definition of "gentile" with which I had grown up.

The confusions in definitions of identity caused by social change and immigration was captured superbly if somewhat bluntly by the comedian Lenny Bruce in his famous sketch "Jewish and Goyish." He claims, for example, that "The B'nai Brith is goyish. The Hadassah is Jewish." B'nai Brith's goyishness is due to the pedantic and strictly punctual character of the German Jews who are its members, in contrast to the warm, motherly concern of the women of Hadassah. Bruce also draws on less well-articulated distinctions. "Kool-Aid is goyish. All Drake's Cakes are goyish. Pumpnickel is Jewish and, as you know, white bread is very goyish. Instant potatoes- goyish. Black cherry soda's very Jewish. Macaroons are very Jewish. Fruit salad is Jewish. Lime Jell-O is goyish. Lime soda is very goyish." Many Jews reading this shake their heads in recognition, even if they cannot give a better explanation than "that's just the way it is." For Bruce there seem to be what could be called "canonical" gentiles- WASPs- and then other gentiles who are more like us than them and who therefore become honorary Jews. "Even if you are Catholic, if you live in New York you're Jewish. If you live in Butte, Montana, you are going to be goyish even if you are Jewish."

As offensive as all this boundary-drawing and wielding of Yiddish epithets may be, Bruce's sketch introduces a tension between different definitions of "Jewish." Bruce trades on the dissonance between different definitions of Jewishness, between formal definitions and the informal "markers" of Jewishness that actually form much of the substance of Jewish identity. The effect is to destabilize all of the definitions, making it harder to claim that there is one, unchanging thing called Jewish identity which is fixed in all contexts. It also demonstrates the relativity of all identities rooted in the distinction between the self and the other, for "the other" is plural and always changing.

The first term used in the Torah to describe the families of the Patriarchs is Hebrews or ivrim, meaning "those from the other side" or "those who cross over." It is this consciousness of viewing the world from the other side, or as one who crosses boundaries, that leads to one of the finest moral principles of the Torah - the prohibition against oppressing the stranger, for the people of Israel know from Egypt what it is like to be strangers in the land of another. I am not sure that there are forms of identity that do not make one aware of the boundaries between people like oneself and those who are not. It seems to me that any group identity, by drawing on certain traits and values that the group has in common, can serve to exclude others. So the key thing is not to try to build Jewish identities that have no boundaries, but to follow Lenny Bruce in undermining the idea that identity boundaries are fixed. As ivrim we should acknowledge that, even though the concept of identity presuppose a boundary, the boundary is always shifting, somewhat self-contradictory and, most importantly, is more permeable than neat conceptual distinctions might suggest. Consciousness of this fact entails the moral imperative that we always look across identity's boundary - even when that boundary seems as impermeable and alienating as that between Amish and English or between Jew and gentile - to see the person on the other side.