COMPARING AMERICAN JEWISH IDENTITY WITH ISRAELI JEWISH IDENTITY

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This article compares American Jewish identity with Israeli Jewish identity along these dimensions: relationship with the larger culture, the calendar, religion, nationality and ethnicity, universal and particular values, and collectivism and individualism. Identity continues to be fluid in both countries as both confront the forces of modernity.

Jewish identity emerges in every generation in different forms. It is determined by the interface of religion, ethnicity, politics, and nationality in the context of social change. The purpose of this article is to compare and contrast American and Israeli Jewish identity in modern times.

THE NATURE OF IDENTITY

According to Erikson (1974, pp. 27–28), identity is a "sense of being at one with oneself as one grows and develops, and a sense of affinity with a community's sense of being at one with its future, as well as its history or mythology." The self cannot be complete without being located in the larger context of the group. Personal identity is closely intertwined with collective identity. The drawing of boundaries between the self and others and between one's group and other groups is the fundamental task of identity formation (Eisen, 1990).

Three concepts contribute to an understanding of modern identity: boundaries, dissonance, and choice (Linzer, 1996). Boundaries refer to the physical and cultural separation between one group and another. Their two essential functions are to keep group members in and to keep non-members out, thus maintaining the viability and distinctiveness of the group. The higher, more impermeable the boundary, the greater the chance of pre-serving separateness and a distinct identity. The lower, more permeable the boundary, the greater the chance for eliminating separateness and increasing assimilation. For example, a higher boundary is displayed when a Jew speaks Yiddish and wears Hasidic garb; a lower boundary results when one attends a college where there is no Hillel or other Jewish organizations on campus.

Dissonance is an essential ingredient in preserving group distinctiveness. It is the state of discomfort that results from the experience of difference. If group members do not value their difference from others, despite the discomfort it may engender, the group may disappear. The decline of dissonance coincides with the permeability of boundaries (Linzer, 1998). Dissonance might not be felt by the Jewish college student who belongs to an ethnically and religiously mixed fraternity and participates in all its activities without feeling different. It might be felt when the student declines to participate in a fraternity party on Friday night because he desires to attend religious services.

Choice of identity is a ubiquitous phenomenon that bespeaks the modern achievement of identity in contrast with the traditional ascription of identity (Linzer, 1996). Ascription of identity refers to the identity given at birth that one carries for the rest of one's life. Achievement of identity implies that, with hard work and diligence, one can become whatever one chooses.

In modernity, the central components of identity, such as belief, faith, and religious

affiliation, are regarded as matters of personal choice. In their study, Hammond and Warner (cited in Farber & Waxman, 1999, p. 193), found that 77 percent of Americans supported the statement that "an individual should arrive at his or her own religious beliefs independent of any church or synagogue." The variability of religious identity makes it clear that there are no firm boundaries in one's life. Consequently, traditional group controls have less power to keep people attached to a community, even within communities that seek separation from secular life.

The fluidity of boundaries, the decline of dissonance, and the ubiquity of choice contribute to the changing nature of Jewish identity in modern times.

JEWISH IDENTITY AND JEWISH IDENTIFICATION

In American Jewish life, Jewish identity is both a great obsession and a great ambiguity (London & Chazan, 1990). It is a great obsession because there is serious concern about the diminution in Jewish behaviors, inmarriages, and family size (Kosmin et al., 1991). It is a great ambiguity because its components are so intertwined. As an example, the close relationship between Jewish religious practices and ethnic and social-cultural factors makes it difficult to select a single factor for identity analysis (Krause, 1977).

Jewish identity and Jewish identification have been used interchangeably by some (Krause, 1977) but not by others. Levitz (1995, p. 78) defines identity as involving "a complex integration of values, attitudes, knowledge, content, skills, and beliefs that inform specific behaviors"; identification involved "taking on the admired attributes of another individual or idealized person whose characteristics are especially admired." Milton Himmelfarb (cited in Arnow, 1994, p. 29) does not require an action component in identity. Instead he suggests,

> Jewish identification is the process of thinking and acting in a manner that indicates involvement with and attachment to Jewish life. Jewish

identity is one's sense of self with regard to being Jewish. Identification studies ask questions about ritual observance, Jewish organizational involvement, attitudes toward Israel, intermarriage, etc. Identity studies are concerned with what being Jewish means and how Jews view themselves in relation to others.

Krause (1977) contends that Jewish identity in the United States must incorporate several dimensions: tribal—a sense of peoplehood; religious—religious commitments and behavior; communal—social activities within a communal framework; secular—association with other Jews and Jewish culture outside the organized Jewish community; and intellectual—knowledge about Jews and Jewish affairs. His definition of Jewish identity seems to be all-inclusive.

EXPRESSIONS OF JEWISH IDENTITY

Jewish identity is expressed in different ways. For many Jews, the Holocaust and the persistence of anti-Semitism strengthen their resolve to be Jewish; for others, it is the pull of Israel, religious observance, social and political action, and emotional ties (Farber & Waxman, 1999). Shapiro (1997) contends that neither Israel nor the Holocaust can be the core of American Jewish identity, for less than 30 percent of Jews have ever visited Israel and the memory of the Holocaust is a blur for the younger generation. Few Jews will be attracted to a Judaism that reflects victimhood status. Many of the strategies used in Jewish education today as well as the Israel experiences themselves downplay victimhood status and instead emphasize the Sinai experience that represents history, ideas, and values.

Modern Jewish identity stands in sharp contrast to traditional Jewish identity. The traditional Jewish identity that existed in the Eastern European shtetl is no longer a relevant model capable of being replicated under conditions of modernity (Farber & Waxman, 1999). Traditionally, identity, whose core was believed to be unchangeable, was ascribed to an individual at birth. Jewish children were socialized into Jewish life by their parents, teachers,

and rabbis, thus confirming their innate Jewish identities. "The community of belief constituted a *total system* (italics added) that controlled the individual's environment with a detailed pattern of prescribed actions and fixed roles. Group membership was thus clearly defined" (Medding et al., 1992, p. 16).

The total system was dominated by Judaism, which had the moral power to coerce individuals to follow detailed patterns of prescribed behavior. Living in an institutionalized world with clearly prescribed norms of behavior enabled Jews to accept their defined roles without question or thinking about alternatives (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). Thus, choice of identity was non-existent.

Group membership in the traditional Jewish community meant that individual Jews identified with the goals and aspirations, the joys and travails, of the Jewish community as a whole. The destinies of individuals and community were intertwined (Zborowski & Herzog, 1964). Believing in chosenness, Jews were "defined out of anonymity and into a unique fate through identification with the Jewish people" (Eisen, 1990, p. 28). Chosenness served to reinforce the boundaries between Jews and Gentiles and strengthened both individual and group identities. "The self was enlarged through the aggrandizement of the group" (Eisen, 1990, p. 32). The group served as the "plausibility structure" (Berger & Kellner, 1972) that made identity plausible and confirmable.

Jews require interaction with other Jews for their Jewish identity to have meaning. In traditional society, the Jewish community solidified identity and provided a secure sense of belonging. In modern society, Jews who are unaffiliated and who lack significant communication with other Jews would find it difficult to maintain a plausible Jewish identity over time.

An important feature of traditional Jewish identity can be traced to the Jews' "otherness"—"Behold, this is a nation that lives alone and is not reckoned among the nations" (Numbers 23:9). Historically, the Jews' separateness was not only self-imposed but was also reinforced by the nations among whom they lived. This separateness, which led to dissonance, has been diminished in modern times with the Jewish community's greater acceptance into the mainstream of Western society.

In modern times, everything that was formerly in the institutionalized background is shifted into the deinstitutionalized foreground (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). The traditional answer to the question, "Why must we do it this way?"—because "We always did it this way"—no longer suffices. Traditional ways of doing things are no longer normative simply because they are traditional. The authority of tradition has waned (Linzer, 1984; Shils, 1981).

> The contemporary *community of shared individual feelings* (italics added) is a voluntary and partial community of personal choice, with unclear boundaries and undefined membership. It is characterized by emotions and attachments that, while often deep, are not always clearly articulated (Medding et al., 1992, p. 16).

Once the ties binding individuals to the group have been attenuated, the continuity of the group is threatened. Energy that was generated by the group's claim to election is channeled into personal achievement. Jews who succeed in business or professions no longer promote Jewish interests, although their success does foster group pride (i.e., Jewish Nobel Prize winners). "Integration and authenticity are threatened by the invocation of a collective calling to legitimize individual achievement" (Eisen, 1990, p. 32).

The different modes of expressing Jewish identity and the contrast between traditional Jewish identity and modern Jewish identity serve as the backdrop for comparing Jewish identity in America and Israel.

JEWISH IDENTITY IN AMERICA AND ISRAEL

American Jews and Israeli Jews are distinguished in a number of areas that affect the character of their Jewish identities. These include relationship with the larger culture, the calendar, religion, nationality and ethnicity, universal and particular values, and collectivism and individualism.

Relationship with the Larger Culture

Except in Israel, Jews constitute a minority in every country of residence. In the United States, however, as a demographic minority, Jews have availed themselves of the structural opportunities of the majority and have made substantial inroads into American economic, political, and social life.

For many American Jews, possessing a dual identity does not pose any contradictions. In a study of eight American Jewish young adults, Meir (1993) concluded that their Jewish identity was intertwined with their American identity. Neither excluded the other. If this group is paradigmatic of acculturated young American Jews who are actively searching for meaning in their Jewish identity, then being Jewish and American are seen as complementary.

When many in his generation were choosing not to be Jewish at all, one young adult in Meir's study attributes his decision to remain Jewish to his parents' sending their children to Jewish schools and providing a Jewish ambience at home. He learned that being Jewish and being American are not mutually exclusive, though they conflict in fundamental values. "Judaism emphasizes community and belonging; America extols individuality...in America, the freedom to choose often operates to the detriment of the Jewish community" (Meir, 1993, p. 42). His dilemma was that, "In San Francisco I had to choose to be Jewish or choose to let it go; there was no Judaism by diffusion" (p. 58). This statement reflects the trend that Jewish identity "is fully self-chosen, both in terms of the range of viable options available in American society and of the psychological autonomy of today's young Jews" (Reisman, 1992, p. 354).

Minority status subjects American Jews to stages of assimilation (Gordon, 1964). As marital assimilation increases, indicated by a 52 percent rate of intermarriage found by the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (Kosmin et al., 1990), Jews are in danger of moving to the stage of identificational assimilation (Gordon, 1964) whereby they identify more with the values and culture of the larger society than with those of the Jewish community.

Israeli Jews, by contrast, have created and constitute the majority culture. Yet, a dual identity exists between their Israeli and Jewish identities. In a study of Tel Aviv youth, Katz (cited in Krause, 1977) found that among the religious, 86 percent stressed their Jewish identity as primary, 3 percent saw themselves as Israeli (not Jewish), and 11 percent as human beings. Among non-religious youth, 14 percent perceived themselves as Jewish, 46 percent as Israeli (not Jewish), and 40 percent as human beings. Despite the results of the survey, Katz views the identities of Israelis and Jews as virtually synonymous. "For a significant proportion of the population the religious element has been subtracted from both Jewish and Israeli identities, whereas it is present in both sets of identities for the religious. Non-religious Israelis find it possible to maintain their identities as Jews (not just Israelis) without making room for religion" (cited in Krause, 1977, p. 258).

The dual identities of American Jews and Israeli Jews conflict for some, but not for others. Israeli Jews can transform the majority culture that they constitute. American Jews' identification with the larger society makes them very vulnerable to secular influences on identity. But they also have a particularistic identity configuration that complements the secular identity. Synthesis can proceed apace for some as in Meir's (1993) study, but others encounter irreconcilable value conflicts between "the lure of a secular culture that emphasizes individual autonomy and personal gratification over religious obligations and communal commitment" (Shapiro, 1997, p. 19).

The Calendar

The Jewish calendar is a critical component in determining identity and is perceived in strikingly different ways by each group. For American Jews, the Jewish calendar is artificial; for Israelis, it is normative.

American Jews are largely guided in their everyday lives by the American calendar that determines the contours of the week and vaca-

tion times. The American holidays provide a respite from the rhythm of the work week. Jewish holidays demand a conscientious response and are observed infrequently. Sklare and Greenblum (1967) noted that the majority of Lakeville's Jews light Chanukah candles and celebrate a Passover Seder. They concluded that Jews retain ritual when (1) it is capable of effective redefinition in modern terms, (2) does not demand social isolation or the adoption of a unique lifestyle, (3) accords with the religious culture of the larger community and provides a "Jewish" alternative when such is felt to be needed, (4) is centered on the child, and (5) is performed annually or infrequently.

The American calendar reminds Jews of the primacy of their American identity and determines the criteria for ritual retention; the Jewish calendar plays a secondary role. American Jews are Jewish for only a few days a year.

By contrast, the Jewish calendar for Israelis is the determinant of the national and religious life. Both religious and secular Israeli Jews are guided in their work week by the recurring Sabbath, whether or not they observe it. Jewish holidays are observed and acknowledged as religious, historical, or seasonal events throughout the country, and it is difficult to be oblivious to their presence. Trees are planted on Tu B'shvat, Purim is the national fun day of masquerading and parades, Passover is the holiday of spring and the festival of freedom, Shavuot celebrates the giving of the Torah and the ripening of the first fruits, the High Holy Days are a time of introspection, and Sukkot is the farmer's festival of the harvest. For religious Jews, Tisha B'av is the quintessential day of mourning for the destruction of the Temple and is felt most acutely in Israel.

The Jewish calendar reminds Israelis of their Jewish identity; the secular calendar plays a secondary role. Israeli Jews are Jewish for many days of the year.

Religion, Nationality, and Ethnicity

According to Sklare (cited in Krause, 1977), American Jews identify as a religious group without practicing the tradition because they believe that that is the only way the group can survive as a distinct entity. American society, committed to the separation of church and state, justified separatism on the basis of religious commitment and created incentives for affirming religion as the foundation of identity. While the second generation of East European Jews strove to acculturate, the third generation advocated "religion without religiosity" (Waxman, 1983, p. 81) and substituted "symbolic ethnicity" (Gans, cited in Waxman, 1983, p. 85) for religious practices. Jewish parents desired institutions and symbols to maintain and reinforce the ethnic identification of their children. The close relationship between religion and ethnicity makes it difficult to single out the "religious" factor in Jewish identification.

In America, religion is a private matter, and Judaism is a minority religion. American Jewish identity has a centrifugal nature due to the absence of an official rabbinate or politically recognized communal officials who possess the power to determine who is a Jew and what being Jewish means (Shapiro, 1997). Along with the pattern of decentralization, American Jews are increasingly expressing their Jewish identities in religious, educational, and family-oriented activities in the private rather than the public sphere (Kessler, 1999).

In Israel, by contrast, the Jewish religion is a public institution that is the dominant religion of the society, expressed through its official link with the state, the land, and the office of the chief rabbinate. The boisterous, heated conflicts concerning the official role of religion and the rabbinate in the public domain, made more complex by the presence of religious political parties, have had some deleterious effects on Israeli society and on Jewish identification. Many Israelis have been alienated from the Jewish religion by the politicization of religion in the public sphere and its perceived limitation of freedom in the private sphere. However, the disputes have also served to reinforce the importance of religion in Israel.

In America, an alternative to religious expression and observance is ethnic belonging.

Jews who do not practice Judaism can engage in Jewish cultural and social activities and still participate in, and feel connected to, the Jewish community as ethnics. Alternatives to ethnic belonging include secular and humanistic Judaism, i.e., forms of Jewish expression that are closer to universal values than Jewish values.

In Israel, by contrast, an alternative to religious and ethnic behavior is the nationalization of religious culture. This is accomplished by subtracting the religious element from traditional Holy Days and substituting familial, historical, natural, and national elements instead. It is the majority middle section of the population between the Orthodox and the anti-religious who have tended to emphasize the national aspect of the festivals and the historic links with the land. Historic and nationalistic forms of Jewish identity that connect Israelis with their people and their land reflect particularistic values and constitute centripetal, unifying forces.

Universal and Particular Values

A fundamental difference between American and Israeli identity originally lay in the historic claims to a land. Jews were welcomed by the United States to build a new life free from religious persecution. Their struggle for social and economic mobility created opportunities for advancement and eventual integration into the social structure of American society. American Jews are secure in their identity as Americans and feel accepted by the host country, but insecure in their Jewish identity due to the permeability of boundaries and the absence of dissonance.

By contrast, it is the precariousness of Israel's very existence that contributes to the precariousness of Israeli identity. Since identity is, by definition, a boundary formation, the group that seeks to distinguish itself from others must share specific values. Israeli identity is more complex than that of other nations because, in addition to adopting common values, it must also contain a rationale for the moral right to exist when Palestinians claim the same territory (Weisbrod, 1997).

Over the decades, Israeli identity has been influenced by the ideological and political orientations of different parties in and out of government. When the Labor Party was in power, the government defined Israelis as Jews returning to their historical national homeland to till the soil and to institute a just, egalitarian society. Under Likud, Israelis were Jews taking rightful possession of their religious/historical heritage to build a modern technological society based on the Jewish value of mutual responsibility instead of the Western values of consumerism and competitiveness. This identity was heavily buttressed by security arguments. Peace Now chose to emphasize the corruptive influence on the occupier, rather than the injustice to the occupied, a position conceded by members of Gush Emunim as a moral blemish on Israelis.

Affluence and technological progress, as well as democracy and respect for human rights, are laudable universal values, but they cannot serve as the basis for identity as they do not distinguish Israelis from other modern Western societies (Weisbrod, 1997). The values must be sufficiently universal to satisfy modern ethical imperatives of liberal democracy and sufficiently Jewish to make Israelis distinct from others and morally entitled to their part of the Holy Land. "Though the exact formulation of a new Israeli identity is impossible to predict, it is unlikely to be devoid of Jewish values, however these may be interpreted" (Weisbrod, 1997, p. 63).

The political configurations that contribute to the variations in Israeli identity are absent from American identity. Changes in the American political landscape do not affect American Jewish identity. The strength of American Jewish identity is rather inversely proportional to the pervasiveness of assimilation. The more assimilation to American culture, the weaker the identity; conversely, the less assimilation to American culture, the stronger the identity. Significant splits exist among American Jews in the desirability and degree of assimilating to American culture.

While a distinction between American and Israeli Jewish identity can be attributed to

political versus assimilationist configurations, there is an uncanny similarity in the need to balance universal and particularistic values. Israeli society must be based on universal values of democracy and human rights and, at the same time, on Jewish values of homeland, history, and chosenness. American Jews have adopted the universal values of democracy, human rights, and social and economic mobility, but have not yet incorporated the particularistic Jewish values inherent in holiday celebrations, home and synagogue rituals, and Torah study.

Collectivism and Individualism

The need to balance universal and particular value configurations to form American and Israeli identities is complemented by the relationship between collectivism and individualism in both societies. In her analysis of Jewish identity in Israel, Etziony-Halevy (1998) claims that the strong collective Jewish identity that has been common to all Jews in Israel is gradually disintegrating into two separate collective identities: a strident and separatist religious identity and a secular weakened Jewish identity.

Collective identity, comprising memories of the Holocaust and the founding of the State of Israel, has been receding among the generations born after those events. The common Zionist ideology expressed through attachment to a homeland has been reconfigured as an ideology of "belligerent colonialism" (p. 68) that exploits another people.

Collectivist values are being replaced with individualized values by secular Israelis. For the secular left, the state of Israel no longer has any legitimacy as a Jewish state but only as a state for Jews and Arabs alike. The religious, however, express a fierce attachment to the land in the religious-biblical sense. The internal rifts within each camp revolve around the degree of sympathy toward the other camp's point of view. The religious-secular divisions in Israeli society can be understood as representing the conflict between the dominance of collectivist or individualist values (Etziony-Halevi, 1998).

The conflict between collectivist and individualist values also afflicts the American Jewish community but in different forms. In America, the rifts are not between secular and religious Jews but among the leaders of the religious denominations. Significant differences abide among the Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist lay and religious leaders in these areas: whether patrilineal descent confers Jewishness, in conversion policy, welcoming the intermarried and homosexuals into the synagogue, requirements for religious divorce, and the place of religion and ritual in everyday life. Rifts also abound intradenominationally in ideology and practice between the liberal and conservative leaders of each movement.

Recent trends in the American Jewish community point to

> advanced personalization of Jewish identity. Jews are much more concerned about themselves and their families and the few institutions close to them, like synagogues, schools and Jewish community centers. They're less invested in social justice, politics, philanthropy, and Israel....
>
> Your response to these trends depends upon your values. If you care about Jewish peoplehood, you'll search for ways to build connection and community. If you don't, you'll put more emphasis on learning and personalist Jewish activities. Another alternative is to try to discover Jewish meaning in what were collective symbols such as Israel (Cohen, cited in Kessler, 1999, p. 17).

The shift among American Jews from collectivist to personalist expressions of Jewish identity diminishes the traditional emphasis on community and concern for Jews the world over, including Israel. Thus, there is an uncanny similarity between many American and secular Israeli Jews in their view of Israel as a receding collectivist symbol. At the same time, for those American Jews identified with Israel and for religious Israelis, Israel is a strong, unifying collectivist symbol.

CONCLUSION

Comparing and contrasting Jewish identity in America and Israel involves different levels of inquiry. Both are democracies that were built by immigrants that are thriving economically. But their histories are vastly different, as is the relationship between church and state in each country.

In America, Jews are a minority subject to the values of the larger culture. In Israel, they are a majority who has created the larger culture. Most American Jews are not conflicted between their religious and political identities. They welcome the permeability of boundaries between themselves and other Americans, experience no dissonance between being American and being Jewish, and choose to create their Jewish identity in their own idiosyncratic forms.

Many Israeli Jews experience conflict between religion and politics because they have become intertwined. As a group, they have a boundary issue because they need a reason to distinguish their state from other nations. Choice, too, is pervasive. In contrast to Americans, Israelis have nationalized religion into other ritualistic forms, which contributes to the retention of their religious and national identities.

Israel society, as a nation state, is permeated by universal values that need to be balanced with particular values that are decidedly Jewish. Jewish values represent the boundaries that Israel needs to distinguish itself from other nations. Similarly, as American Jews assimilate, they subscribe to the universal values available in the larger culture, but to strengthen their Jewish identities, they too need to promote particular Jewish values that raise the boundaries between themselves and other groups.

The collectivist ideology that has served as a unifying force during Israel's formative years, stemming from the historical events of the Holocaust and the founding of the state, is in the process of waning for the younger, secularist Israelis in favor of an individualist ideology. American Jews also seem to be abandoning their collectivist values that supported community building and a fellow concern for Jews the world over for a personalist ideology that turns inward toward family and local institutions. The fluidity of identity configurations will continue as the political landscape in Israel changes under a new government and Americans continue to struggle with the enticements of assimilation and the complexity of the individual-community dialectic.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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