

# YOUNG PEOPLE AND AN OLD TRADITION

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## Introduction

Roughly 1% of the 2373 convicts sent from Sydney, Australia, to the northern Penal Colony of Moreton Bay between 1824 and 1839 were Jewish.<sup>1</sup> When free-settlement began in 1842, Jewish families were among those who arrived, hoping to make Brisbane Town their home; since then the Jewish population in Brisbane has grown due to both immigration and local births. However, since the late 1960's the population has been falling, and this has been especially noticeable in the young-adult age-group.<sup>2</sup> Many young people have been leaving. Why (and where) they go was a central question in a research project carried out in Brisbane from December 1974 to January 1976.<sup>3</sup> It was answered within the context of a general anthropological description and analysis of what being Jewish means for young Jews who have grown up in Brisbane during the 50's, 60's and 70's. Their Jewishness was discussed in terms of six major themes: Religiosity; Family; Marrying-In; Feeling Different; Anti-Semitism; and Israel. While in an important sense, the themes should be understood together, as forming the overall web of ethnic meaning, the present paper gives a brief description and analysis of the first theme only: what being Jewish means in the religious sense.

## Ethnography

Imagine bearded men clothed in black and white. The *Shul* (Synagogue) is packed full of swaying bodies that all face towards the Holy Ark. Their eyes gleam and their voices sing with fervour as their souls beat out their prayers and devotion to their Creator. As the bodies sway they create a rhythm that intensifies as the minutes pass, and from the sides of each concentrating face swing the *peyos* (earlocks) that their God has commanded them to wear. The worries of the week are forgotten, for this is the eve of *Shabbes* (the Sabbath) and all minds focus on the beauty and splendour of the arriving *Shabbes* bride.<sup>4</sup>

The image is of a *Shul*, a Synagogue, a place of Jewish prayer and religious teaching. But more must be said. For *Shuls* have varied with time and with place. We may be in a Jewish ghetto in Germany or Spain during the Middle Ages; or a *shtetl* community in Russia in the 1800's; or in a religious *kibbutz* in Israel in the 1940's; or perhaps the setting may even be in a small section of modern-day Jerusalem among the extreme orthodox group, the *Naturei Karta*. But certainly, the image does not fit in *Shul* in Brisbane in 1975!

For in Brisbane in 1975 on *Shabbes* eve, there are barely enough men present to form a *minyán* (religious quorum). A few beards are to be seen, but these are much more likely to be the expression of a young man's following of fashion than of a mature man's compliance with the *Talmudic* commandment against shaving. Of course, there are no *peyos* to be seen, and on the one or two days of the year when the *Shul* is packed, the coloured shirts, ties, suits, and shoes — not even to touch on the attire of the women — create an atmosphere rather different to that created by the pious colours of black and white. Eyes do gleam, and voices are certainly used with fervour, but these souls are beating out their devotion more to a social reality than a spiritual one. In Brisbane in 1975, *Shul* is by no means entirely a solemn hall of intense piety and prayer. Some come to pray directly to their God. However, their prayers may be at times nearly “drowned out” by the murmuring of voices that reverbrates sporadically from wall to wall and floor to ceiling, and which at times assumes such proportions among the women sitting upstairs, that energetic banging and annoyed looks emanate from the *bimah* (the central praying platform). In Brisbane in 1975, *Shul* is for most people a highly social experience. This is certainly not, by any means, to say that the experience is somehow superficial or arbitrary. But it is to say that for most, both young and old, the essence of the occasional Synagogue experience is not a conscious intellectual commitment to a *literal* interpretation of *Talmudic* doctrine, but a collective affirmation of the social reality of being Jewish. The important thing is not so much what one *does* at *Shul*, but that one is *there* at certain important times throughout the year.

So things have changed. Perhaps it could be said that religious orthodoxy has been replaced by a form of secular orthodoxy. However, the word secular must be used cautiously, for many aspects of formal Judaism do impose on the life of a modern-day Brisbane child. At his *Bris Mila* (circumcision), eight days after his birth, the male baby is named, blessed, and formally accepted into the “Covenant of Abraham”. Simultaneously, he receives the full weight of familial and communal expectations about what he should do with his life:

Even as this child has entered into the covenant, so may he enter into *Torah* (Law), *khupa* (marriage), and *maasim tovim* (good deeds).<sup>5</sup>

*Torah* refers to the established teachings of Judaism. However, few present at the ceremony will expect that the boy become an orthodox Jew. It is expected that both the male and female child will attend *kheyder* from the age of five or six where they will be formally taught Jewish

religion, Jewish history, and Hebrew language; it is expected that during her twelfth year a girl will celebrate her *Bat Mitzvah*, and that at the age of thirteen a boy will celebrate his *Bar Mitzvah*, both of which mark the child's initiation into adult status in the religious sense, and his or her ceremonial declaration of allegiance to the Jewish community and the precepts of orthodox Judaism. Once again, while it is usually not expected that the young person will follow *Talmudic* precepts in the orthodox manner, neither is it expected that he or she will ignore his or her religious heritage altogether.

Among Brisbane Jewish youth, there is only a very small number of people who adhere conscientiously to the constraints stemming from the orthodox teachings.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, it seems that attempts to do so can mean considerable frustration and loneliness. As one young orthodox man says:

I'm just coasting along this year . . . doing nothing most of the time . . . talking about religion is doing something, but there's no one around . . . you have to be in the right environment for it.

He and several other young people have been trying to stimulate interest in *Torah* by holding weekly discussions; they want to convince the youth, and their parents for that matter, that a person cannot be truly Jewish while not living according to the laws of *Torah*. Yet the response is poor. In the words of the principal convenor of the discussion group, "Religiously, Brisbane is just about dead now". This person subsequently left Brisbane to attend a *Yeshiva* (religious academy) in Melbourne where he knew he could find young Jews who eat *kosher* (ritually fit) food, keep the Sabbath holy, and in general live their lives according to formal *Talmudic* doctrine.

While there are few among the youth who live according to the Letter of Jewish Law, there are many who would claim to live according to the Spirit of Judaism. Not unexpectedly perhaps, this can be made to mean just about whatever one wants it to. It can mean the formal liberalizing of ritual and ceremony in an attempt to make it "relevant" to the modern Brisbane context: for example, by reading the Service mostly in English rather than Hebrew; by editing the ceremonies so as to avoid what is seen as irrelevant; and by relaxing rules such as separate seating arrangements for men and women during the Service. Such a Liberal movement has been operating on a somewhat tentative basis in Brisbane for the last few years, but it is doubtful if it is any more attractive to the youth than religious orthodoxy. One girl's comment is:

The Liberal Service reminded me of a Cathedral Service . . . all in English . . . it's un-Jewish from what we know.

It is often when thinking of the future and of children, that the Liberal *Shul* appeals:

We're all letting our religion go. The responsibility of being a parent might stimulate me. I'll probably send my kids to *kheyder* . . . they'll be *Bar Mitzvahed* . . . I might join the Liberal Service, I don't know.

The primary reason underlying such a reaction is that it is hard to imagine how one's children will develop an affinity for and commitment to, orthodox religious practice, which their parents themselves have failed to develop.

However, rather than this formal liberalizing of the orthodox tradition, the more common way of "living the Spirit of Judaism" is to maintain a general belief in formal doctrine, while not complying with the practical constraints that the doctrine imposes on the living out of everyday life. It is recognized and accepted that the basics of the orthodox literature and its complementary rituals and ceremonies are broadly right and meaningful:

I'm very proud of the Jewish religion, as a religion it's fairly logical, it has a sequency, it's a developed religion . . . it's a belief in God — one God. I guess it's . . . God's just putting a name to a mystery thing — a fairly basic belief.

Yet, the extent to which the doctrine, ritual, and ceremony are practically applied to one's own life depends more on the habits of one's own family than on the vigour of such a personal intellectual recognition and faith:

I believe in the God . . . you have to believe in something; but religion isn't that important for me . . . I do it for my parents.

In the religious sphere, this person is expected to do whatever his parents do. For most young people, being Jewish in a religious sense is inextricably entwined with being a member of one's own Jewish family. The ceremony that is most smoothly accepted and maintained by the majority of young people, while having a formal religious base, is typically an occasion that involves a warm family gathering. Whether it be a gathering of the extended family on important High Holy Days such as *Yom Kippur*, *Pesakh* or *Rosh Hashana*, or of only the nuclear family on the Friday night eve of *Shabbes*, the essence of the situation is once again rooted in the fact that the family is together, rather than what it actually does together at the formal religious level. Indeed, each family has its own version of what is necessary at the formal religious level.

Probably the most common version requires: (i) an annual attendance at *Shul* on each of the above-mentioned High Holy Days — the most important being *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement, when everyone officially fasts and atones for their sins of the previous year; (ii) participation in both the family gathering that follows the *Shul* Service on these days, and the (often smaller) one that takes place every Friday night *Shabbes*; and in many cases (iii) a visit to *Shul* on the *yahrzeit* — the anniversary of the death of a close relative. But this is very general. Different families consider different occasions important, and the formal aspects of the religious tradition are expressed through these differing interpretations. Yet what disturbs many parents is that for a growing number of young people, the general interpretation is an overall lack of interest in any sort of religious involvement. One young person talks of how:

You lose your religious education . . . you do lose your meaning to a certain degree. I went last *Yom Kippur*, and broke the fast at lunch time. I think it's a shame that we've forgotten and lost our religion in that sense . . . but we haven't forgotten to be Jewish, or that we are Jews!

Thus, while this young man has little commitment to observation of formal religious precepts, he strongly identifies as a Jew. The same idea is more directly stated by another young person:

Being a Jew is not a religion. To be classed as a Jew is not a religious phrase. Western Society has tried to tell Jews that Jewishness is just a religion. While it isn't — it is something far more than that!

The limited space precludes description of the various themes which constitute that “something”. However, what can be investigated briefly is an interpretive analysis of Jewish religiosity in terms of certain broad cultural traditions which generate it.

### Analysis

Hear! O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is One.

(First line of the *Shema*; Deut. 6:4)

Literally, the *Shema*<sup>7</sup> is an affirmation of faith in the unity of God. Highly orthodox Jews recite the passage twice a day, morning and evening. To them, it stands as one of the most important religious expressions of the Jewish faith in the everlasting unity of purpose in the Universe. It also stands as an expression of something else in the Jewish “faith” — and not only for the orthodox minority, but for the great mass

of Jews. For the *Shema* expresses the way in which the Jewish tradition is conscious of itself. At the level of its conscious belief system, and perhaps more importantly, at what is often the unconscious level of mythologised belief, the Jewish ethos sees itself as having remained intact — unified — over thousands of years and thousands of lands. The Jewish tradition is perceived as historically continuous — as “One”. In a sense, it is seen as a single immortal individual<sup>8</sup> that transcends all time since the acquisition of the Covenant at Mount Sinai and all the space over which it has dispersed since then.

The young Jew feels — often he is directly told — that he is the most recent link in the long Jewish chain that stretches back through history. The chain is strong. It stretches through violent persecutions and oppressions. Many vicious anti-Semites have tried to break it. Yet still it flows on! The most recent link has a great responsibility to continue the chain, to maintain the unity of the tradition, the unity of “Israel”. He bears the responsibility not just for himself, but for all of his People. Indeed, in the terms of his tradition, what right has he to break the chain when so many Jews have suffered and died so that it could continue?

The religious experience is given to the child not merely to be pursued in the interests of his own personal destiny. The young Jew learns that his religious experience symbolically identifies him with the great chain that is the Jewish tradition. The Covenant and all that goes with it, is seen to have been given not just to the one ancient Exodus generation, but to all Jews who should ever inhabit the earth. Thus, through maintaining his family’s version of religious practice, the young person can relate to all the Jews who have gone before him, all who are now alive with him, and all who will ever come after him. Seen in this context, the essence of Jewish religiosity need not be literal and conscious prayer that revolves around the individual. It can matter very little that the *Shul* reverbrates with murmuring voices during the Service; for simply by being there at the Service (or for that matter at the religiously-based family gatherings), even if only for a short time, the Jew can fulfil his obligations to his tradition and to his heritage.

For the very orthodox, few in number, there is the added intellectual satisfaction and stimulation that stems from knowing that one is literally and conscientiously following every *Talmudic* Law to the Letter. But for most, this is not primary. For most, it is enough that a general belief in the basic truth and validity of the tradition exists. To express the belief, the individual does not need to follow the intricate precepts of the *Talmud*. In fact, one is not really even a “better Jew” for doing so; one is a more “orthodox Jew”, but not a “better Jew”. For ultimately, all links in the chain are equally valid — and equally Jewish.

In Brisbane, there are many young people who embrace this form of religious life. Like many of their parents, the justification for continuing the experience is seen primarily in terms of keeping the overall tradition alive. Belief in the very basic tenets of formal Judaic doctrine is entwined with the notion that the tradition must be maintained. "My father was Jewish and now my son shall be Jewish". Collective affirmation of the tradition through attendance at religious rituals is seen as the formal basis of the process of maintenance. As long as there is a Rabbi and a few orthodox others who maintain the tradition literally, and to the Letter, one can maintain one's personal religiosity by being present at such times as they designate. For by affirming one's family's version of the formal aspects of the tradition, one formally maintains one's own Jewishness — most importantly, one extends the chain (personified by one's parents and grandparents) through oneself.

However, it is noticeable that some young people feel much less comfortable in embracing this form of religious life than their parents ever did. An increasing number feel a need for something more than what seems to them a fairly arbitrary set of token ritual behaviours. They appear to be looking more critically than their parents at the quality of the chain — the nature of the tradition. They are asking what it is that is being maintained. Undoubtedly, their parents also enacted similar concerns in their own youthfully rebellious days; but perhaps not in the same way. For the parents (and grandparents) of young Jewish adults today, almost had an automatic reason to continue their religious practice as so far described. They were faced with a real and determined threat to break the chain. Regardless of where in the world they lived, anti-Semitism was perceived as a dynamically real threat. Their experience as Jews (at religious ceremonies, and elsewhere) was in a way supplied with meaning from the hostile outside. The *meaning* of the experience was directly tied to a deliberate attempt to stop the chain from being broken. The fact that the meaning was rooted in forces that were outside the tradition did not matter. Then, young people had a reason to be formally Jewish. It mattered little that they did not understand the Hebrew prayers. For they embraced their religiosity simply because it was theirs, and they would maintain it at all costs in the face of the terrible anti-Semitism.

Today, "terrible anti-Semitism" is no longer such a patent reality. The religious experience no longer has such automatic meaning. Young Jews still perceive it as theirs; and they still feel the weight of responsibility for maintaining the chain. But today, it is no longer as *urgent* that the tradition be continued. Especially in the realm of formal religious ceremonies, young Jews have time to "sit back" and look for meaning

*inside* their tradition — for such meaning no longer flows from *outside* in a way that would compel them to tie their Jewishness to it. And sitting back looking, they find that the religious occasions often lack positive meaning. The reaction of most is to look elsewhere in their tradition for a medium through which they can be *meaningfully* Jewish.

Some, however, are undertaking a re-examination of their specific religious heritage to discover within it some relevance to their present-day lives. Only a small pocket of young Jews in Brisbane have committed themselves in this way; those who do, find their parents' (and most of their age peers') version of religious observance distasteful, hypocritical, and meaningless. They see their fellow Jews as participating in a form of token Judaism that secularizes what is meant to be experienced as sacred, in an attempt to justify the survival of a lifestyle that is basically devoid of authentic Jewish meaning. They perceive their parents' religiosity as a series of over-stated and highly secularized events such as the circumcision, the *Bar Mitzvah*, and the wedding, that are designed to signify to their children and to the world, their commitment to the survival of the Jewish tradition. They find little meaning in that version of the survival of the tradition.

It seems that there is considerable misunderstanding here about the meaning that people can, and do, and always will, derive from the version of religious life that has always surrounded them. It is not a hypocritical enterprise. It simply must be understood in terms of the wider life experience that has created it. For in terms of this life experience, the time and place of a religious occasion, the people who are there, and the basic knowledge of the formal significance of the ceremony, all combine to generate meanings central to the intellectual, social, and emotional processes of identifying as a Jew. The essence of this meaning has been discussed above. But the point is that present-day Jewish youth do not share the same life-experience. The conditions and circumstances of their lives as Jews are different from those known by their parents and grandparents. Thus, while the panacea of a return to a more literal adherence to, and examination of, formal Judaic doctrine, only appeals to a minority of young Western Jews (Brisbane included), it is an argument which points to a valid and interesting criticism concerning the sort of religiosity that *is* going to be embraced by future Jewish youth. Will the orthodox religious ceremonies become so arbitrary that they will be ignored altogether? Will the majority of Jewish youth eventually mould their expectations of what constitutes authentic Jewishness sufficiently so as to embrace a Liberal version of religious experience?



## Conclusion

Answers to these questions involve much more than the future of Jewish religiosity, for they depend on all the other themes which combine to form the complex system of ethnic meaning. The present paper has argued that the Jewish religious experience can not be understood as merely a conscious and literal adherence to the written Judaic traditions expressed in the *Torah* and the *Talmud*; for it means for the young Brisbane Jew both conscious and unconscious identification with knowledge of much wider cultural traditions that are undeniably connected to him; in this sense, it means the embracing of the collective past, present, and future of his People.

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## Notes

1. See Bergman and Levi (1974:308).
2. See, for example, Tuck's interpretation of Census material (1973:49).
3. The study was carried out as partial requirement for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts, Honours in Anthropology, at the University of Queensland. Foremost among others, I wish to acknowledge those young Brisbane Jews whose participation made the study possible.
4. In orthodox Judaism, the Sabbath is portrayed symbolically as a beautiful and peacefully arriving bride.
5. From "Service At a Circumcision" (See Singer, 1962:402).
6. Where used throughout the paper, the ethnographic present refers to the time of the study.
7. See Singer (1962:181).
8. See Wouk (1961:82).

## Glossary

The glossary in Zborowski and Herzog's *Life is With People* (1962), served as a paradigm for what is presented here. Thus, the system of transliteration generally followed is that used by the Yiddish Scientific Institute — Yivo, in New York City. However, where pronunciations in the Brisbane study were thought to differ from those represented by Zborowski and Herzog, changes were made to account for the difference.<sup>1</sup>

**BAR MITZVAH** — (Son of the Commandment) A formal religious ceremony which initiates the son into adult Jewish status.

**BAT MITZVAH** — (Daughter of the Commandment) A formal religious ceremony which initiates the daughter into adult Jewish status.

**BIMAH** — An elevated platform in the centre of the Synagogue, from which the *Torah* is read.

**BRIS MILA** — (Covenant by circumcision) The act and ceremony of circumcision.

**KHEYDER** — (Room) Jewish school attended by children until they are 13 years old.

**KHUPA** — (Canopy) Canopy under which the bride and groom are married.

**KIBBUTZ(IM)** — Collective farm in Israel.

**KOSHER** — Ritually fit to use. Food prepared according to the dietary laws.

**MAASIM TOVIM** — Good deeds.

**MINYAN** — Quorum of ten males for public religious services.

**NATURE(I) KARTA** — Extremely orthodox religious group in Jerusalem.

**PESAKH (PESAH)** — Passover. Religious holiday commemorating the Exodus from Egypt.

**PEYOS** — Earlocks; locks of hair worn in front of the ears.

**ROSH HASHANAH (ROSHHASHONEH)** — (Beginning of the Year) Religious holiday celebrating the beginning of the Jewish New Year.

**SHABBES** — Sabbath (Yiddish pronunciation).

**SHEMA** — Important Jewish prayer.

**SHTETL** — Small town, village, in Eastern Europe.

**SHUL** — Synagogue.

**TALMUD** — The basic body of Jewish oral law consisting of the interpretation of laws contained in the *Torah*.

**TORAH** — The Teachings. The Law. The Old Testament.

**YAHREZEIT** — Anniversary of the death of a close relative.

YESHIVA — Rabbinical academy.

YOM KIPPUR — (Day of Atonement) Religious holiday when one fasts and atones for one's sins of the previous year.

### Note

1. When known, the literal English translation is given in parentheses.

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