

Jewish Identity Crisis at the End of the Second Millennium?

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It is not our task to complete the work, but neither are we free to refrain from it

What does it mean to be a Jew? What opportunities and what threats does the great melting pot of America, and similarly the multiculturally diverse society in Australia, represent for a group that has traditionally defined itself as 'a people that must dwell alone'? Although for centuries the notion of 'The Chosen People' sustained Jewish identity, America, by offering Jewish immigrants an unprecedented degree of participation in the larger society, has threatened to erode their Jewish identity and sense of separateness. In addition, there is disagreement amongst the Jewish community itself as to who a Jew is: can the child of a Jewish man married to a non-Jewish woman still be able to name him or herself as Jewish? Such questions give rise to a larger question: are Jews disappearing in America?

It was some sixty years ago that Hansen wrote confidently of the principle of the third generation interest, which, in brief, describes the phenomenon that for the first generation of new immigrants, security comes in the form of attachment to what gave them security in their homeland; the second generation on the other hand, discards the former culture and tries to become part of the new. His argument continues in these terms:

what the son wishes to forget, the grandson wishes to remember. After the second generation, comes the third generation who have no reason to feel any inferiority when they look around them. They are American-born. Their speech is the same as that of those with whom they associate. Their material wealth is the average possession of the typical citizen.¹

The third generation, in short, was able to get rid of the immigrant foreignness, the hopelessly double alienation, of the generation that

¹ M. Hansen, *The Problem of the Third Generation Immigrant*, Rock Island, 1938, p. 7.

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preceded it; it became American in a sense that had been, by and large, impossible for the immigrants and their children.¹

The question that is being raised in the 1990's is a result of the third generation that has gone on to become the fourth and even fifth generation - who are they? And where do they belong? There is an increasing concern amongst Jews writing in the 1990's that American Jewish life is in danger of disappearing, just as most American Jews have achieved everything they ever wanted: acceptance, influence, affluence and equality. As the result of skyrocketing rates of intermarriage and assimilation, as well as 'the lowest birth rate of any religious or ethnic community in the United States', the era of enormous Jewish influence on American life may soon be coming to an end.² Arthur Hertzberg also warns that unless there is a spiritual revival, 'American Jewish history will soon end, and become part of American memory as a whole'.³

Dershowitz identifies problems that seem to be leading to the decline of American Jewry. In his opinion, 'The primary reason why so many Jews, especially young Jews, are marrying non-Jews and assimilating today is that they do not see any positive reasons for remaining Jewish.'⁴ Dershowitz does not offer any positive reasons in his proposals for a solution. He points out that dwelling on anti-Semitism is a poor rallying cry for maintaining Jewish identity. The 'victim' mentality that kept the Jewish people together for so many generations has become irrelevant to younger Jews.⁵ Such a pessimistic viewpoint is in strong contrast with a decade ago, when Charles Silberman's best-seller *A Certain People: American Jews and their lives today*, reassured Jews that fears of intermarriage were greatly exaggerated.⁶

Jews have historically lived within a paradox of faith and fear: faith that they are an eternal people and fear that their generation may be the last. In the United States, the Jewish community has faced to a heightened degree the enduring question of identity and

¹ Will Herberg, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew: an essay in American Religious Sociology*, New York, 1960, p. 30.

² Y. Rosenman, 'Research on the Jewish Family and Jewish Education' in Steven Bayme (ed.), *Facing the Future: Essays on Contemporary Jewish Life*, New York, 1989, p. 175.

³ A. Hertzberg, *The Jews in America: Four centuries of an Uneasy Encounter: A History*, New York, 1998, p. 388.

⁴ A. Dershowitz, *The Vanishing American Jew: In Search of Jewish Identity for the Next Century*, Boston, 1997, p. 14.

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 206

⁶ C. Silberman, *A Certain People: American Jews and their lives today*, 1988.

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assimilation: How does the Jewish community in this free, open, pluralistic society discover or create factors - both ideological and existential - that make group survival beneficial to the larger society and rewarding to the individual Jew?

Statistics

The issue of continuity has become of greater concern since the 1990 National Jewish Population survey. This survey reported that among individuals born Jewish who married between 1985 and 1990, more than 50 percent were marrying Gentiles. The study also found that rates of affiliation with Jewish institutions other than synagogues and community centres were lower among younger Jews than among their elders, as were measures of identification with the state of Israel.¹ By almost any measure, the size of the American Jewish community is in sharp decline while other segments of the U.S. population are growing. In 1937 Jews made up nearly 4% of the U.S. population; today that figure has shrunk to just over 2%, with a group of about 5.8 million people scattered throughout the United States. Projections about the future suggest that if current demographic trends continue, the American Jewish community is likely to number less than one million, and conceivably as few as ten thousand, by the time the United States celebrates its tricentennial in 2076.²

These predictions about the continuity of Judaism are not as clear cut as they seem. The problem of Jewish continuity is not first and foremost demographic. There were times, most notably after the Spanish expulsion, when the Jewish population fell to one-sixth of what it is today, yet the same concerns were not expressed about the future survival of Jews and Judaism. Nor is it simply a problem of outmarriage. It is a problem also of non-marriage, late marriage, and low birthrates. Nor, as recent research by Charles Liebman and Steven M. Cohen has shown, is intermarriage evenly distributed within the Jewish community. Reanalyzing the data of the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey, and categorising Jews as actively, moderately, loosely, or dis-engaged in the Jewish community, they discovered that the intermarriage figures in these four sectors were as follows: among the actively engaged, 5 percent, among the moderately engaged, 10 percent, among the loosely

¹ J. Wertheimer, 'How to save American Jews,' *Commentary*, Vol. 101, January, pp. 47-51.

² E. Bergman, 'The American Jewish Population Erosion,' *Midstream*, October 1977, pp. 9-19.

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engaged, 19 percent, and among the disengaged, 49 percent. Intermarriage is thus only a symptom of the larger problem of disaffiliation.¹

Long Island Jewish World states that 'virtually every organisation and academic program on the communal map has announced new studies or programs involving their particular search for the alchemy of continuity (see Appendix). One example of this is the program of the General Assembly of the Council of Jewish Federations, the largest annual gathering of Jewish communal leaders in North America, which was dominated by the issue of continuity, as was the national priority of the American Jewish Committee. Each of the major rabbinical organisations discussed 'the most complex and far-reaching agenda that the North American Jewish community has taken on'.²

Dershowitz argues that Jewish people need to develop a new state of mind capable of challenging the conventional wisdom that Judaism is more adaptive to persecution and discrimination than it is to an open, free, and welcoming society – that Jews paradoxically need enemies in order to survive; that anti-Semitism is what has kept Judaism alive. He suggests that today's typical non-Orthodox Jew has very little knowledge of the heritage of the Jewish religion. 'Currently, only religious Jews (primarily those who received an Orthodox or Conservative day school education) and university-trained professionals in Jewish studies (many of whom are also religious) are capable of continuing a dialogue' about the Jewish stance on such issues as justice, repair of the world and godliness.³ He cites a lack of 'good jobs' for those who include Hebrew studies on their resumes. In addition, he continues, studies for *bar* or *bat mitzvah* are not well taught by rabbis. Following this ritual, for most Jews it is the end of their education in their religion. For this to change, Dershowitz argues that the best educators should be teaching in Jewish schools so that students will become willing to continue with their studies.⁴ While he offers some convincing arguments as to how the Jewish identity can continue, there are others who go further. Gordis agrees with Dershowitz but includes in his suggestions for 'reimagining American Judaism', adult education programs that continue on from the synagogues, day

¹ J. Sacks, 'Love Hate and Jewish Identity,' *First Things*, No. 77, November 1997, pp. 26-31.

² J. D. Sarna, J. D. (1994). 'The Secret of Jewish continuity,' *Commentary*, Vol. 98, October, p. 55-8.

³ Dershowitz, *op. cit.*, p. 293.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 303.

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school, summer camps, youth groups and other programmes. He argues that perhaps Jews need to see their education as Jews to be 'minority education', as a way of transmitting a culture that is at risk of being swallowed up by the American society and culture around it. He adds that most Jews know little about serious and sophisticated Jewish life and so teachers are needed who can make the tradition come alive, not simply as a *Reader's Digest* style of knowledge, but in order to develop 'a sense of wonder at the sophistication and the richness of the tradition.'¹ It is not so much that Jews have lost their spiritual sense but, as is also occurring in other religious traditions, that the communal basis for worship is no longer as strong or relevant as it was in the past.

Many modern Jews are able to find ways to seek self-fulfillment outside the community, having little or no contact with their religious institutions since childhood or early adulthood. They can be grouped into two kinds: 'seekers' or 'returnees'.² Returnees are those who were once religiously active, then dropped out, but are at present exploring a traditional religious home. Seekers, on the other hand, are those who journey on far-reaching spiritual quests.³

The ways in which these groups reconnect with their roots are quite different. Returnees bring with them 'an open spiritual attitude when they reconnect with synagogues' (or churches, since this phenomenon is not restricted to the Jewish community). They are less likely to take on orthodox doctrines, but are able to combine different beliefs drawn from life experiences and diverse spiritualities. Such people are drawn to small groups within the community rather than being part of mainstream worship.

Seekers on the other hand are those who are at the cutting edge of the contemporary spiritual quest. Roof classifies these people as those who tend to the more highly educated, highly individualistic and inclined to select for themselves what they will and will not believe and practice. At the same time their spirituality is of great importance in their development as a human being. Such people find it difficult to connect with the institution. They may join in and end religious activities at a relatively fast pace. From this there is a picture emerging of a contemporary spirituality that is strikingly similar to the late modern or postmodern culture: 'loss of the grand narrative; fragmented and relative conception of truth; pessimism

¹ Daniel Gordis, *Does the World Need Jews?*, New York, 1997, p. 243.

² Robert Bellah quoted in Fran Schumer, 'A Return to Religion,' *New York Times Magazine*, 15 April 1984, p. 90.

³ Wade Clark Roof, 'Modernity, the Religious and the Spiritual,' *Annals*, July, 1998.

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about progress; science and rational explanation; and search for truth from many sources.’¹ This type of spirituality is driven not just by the failure of the established religion to nurture a meaningful and fulfilling inner life but also by conditions endemic to modernity itself. Heschel² describes such a movement within communities as a restoration of ‘depth theology’ that reaches back into the weight of tradition, to the premodern, beyond dogma and particular expressions of faith and institutional form that have come to be taken as normative in more recent times. ‘Depth theology’ also suggests something collective and not merely personal, that is, a common nourishing of the community memory.³

Wertheimer and his co-authors, in the article, ‘How to save American Jews’, concur, stating that there are many who are actively engaged in Jewish life already, who have consciously or unconsciously adopted a ‘critical stance toward a number of the central values of modern culture’.⁴ But for those on the margin, those who may be suffering from rootlessness and looking for something authentic in their lives, the existence of an enthusiastic and fulfilled core population, a population offering a *genuine* alternative, can become a ‘more powerful lure than the bland nostrums of an establishment that offers in effect, only another version of what already ails them’.⁵ They conclude by encouraging these people to nurture and engage with those at the margins so that a wider and redefined Jewish community can develop. Rather than arguing about what it means to be Jewish in America at the end of the twentieth century, they believe that continuity can be achieved if people can be educated about, as well as involved with, the distinctive Jewish world view, and that being Jewish means, to some extent, being different.⁶ Jewish life asks for a commitment to a way of living that despite past accomplishments, believes that the greatest contribution to the world lies in a world that is still ahead.

¹ *Ibid.*

² Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Insecurity of Freedom*, 1966.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ J. Wertheimer et al., ‘How to save American Jews,’ *Commentary*, Vol. 101, January 1996, pp. 47-51.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

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What is happening in Australia?

The Jewish population in Australia is about ninety-five thousand, with most living either in Melbourne or Sydney. There are smaller groups living in Adelaide, the Gold Coast, Perth and Hobart. The international concern by observers of Diaspora Jewry about unusually low birth rates and high rates of intermarriage and assimilation, has not shown the same escalating trends in Australia. Rubenstein, in his analysis of the 1996 census data, points out that in those areas outside capital cities where there is a small Jewish population there are also higher rates of intermarriage and assimilation. He also points out that if anti-Semitism is minimal, then intermarriage becomes more likely.¹

The rate of intermarriage of Jews in Australia has risen to 14.2%, according to a survey carried out in 1998 which analysed the 1996 census figures.² Of these, 50% continue to remain connected to the community through attendance at synagogue, conversion of spouse and the education of their children in Jewish day schools. Thus, about half of those who intermarry become assimilated. These figures have been the source of debate amongst the Jewish community³ since in some areas the intermarriage rate has reached up to 50%. To counter this, Rubenstein suggests that 'extraordinary efforts [are needed] in the form of the establishment of a widespread day school system', building on what has already been achieved during the last fifty years.⁴

In a report to the Zionist Federation, Weiser describes the survival in Australia of a uniquely independent Australian Jewish community, in terms of 'participation in and contribution to the Australian community but without integration'.⁵ To remain Jewish is to remain as one with the Jewish community in Israel. Weiser states that 'to remain Jewish we must be one People, with one body, one soul, one language, one terminology, one tradition and one common goal'. He continues encouraging Jewish people in Australia not to assimilate but to use education to fight the enemy,

¹ W. D. Rubenstein, 'Jews in the 1996 Australian Census,' *Australian Jewish Historical Society Journal*, Vol. XIV, No. 3, 1998, pp. 496-507.

² *Ibid.*, p. 505.

³ Gariano and Rutland, argue, in a journal debate with Rubenstein, that the statistics provided do not in fact reflect the real story. They argue that the reality is much lower.

⁴ Rubenstein, *op. cit.* p. 507.

⁵ R. Weiser, *Submission on Jewish continuity in NSW*, 1998.

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ignorance. The statistical data provided by Rubenstein is supported in Wieser's report. He suggests some key strategies to ensure continuity from a Zionist perspective. These include informal education techniques through strong programmes as part of the school and extra curriculum activities of schools - camps, organised school visits to Israel and inservice training for teachers in Jewish day schools, taking place in Israel. For adults he suggests leadership programmes for those who are living Jewish lives. He concludes his report by stating: 'We must not look at our job as a daunting one to ensure Jewish continuity for generations to come. Our task is simply to ensure that the next generation will be Jewish and that they will have the tools to pass their Jewishness on to their children.'¹

APPENDIX

Examples of advertisements of programs that are concerned with Jewish continuity

Why Be Jewish?

Organisation

American Jewish Committee
Dept. JCAD 165 East 56th Street
New York, NY 10022

Contact

Steven Bayme, Director of the Jewish Communal Affairs
Department
Phone: (212) 751-4000
Fax: (212) 750-0326

Objectives

- To change the language of Jewish continuity to one of joy and celebration
- To mount a compelling case for leading a Jewish life
- To impact upon the culture of American Jewry to raise the profile of Jewish identification

¹ *Ibid.*

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Program Content

A series of ads is placed in the New York Times and reprinted in college newspapers, alternative singles papers, and Jewish communal organs.

Target Groups

Unaffiliated Jews, Jewish college students, Jewish singles, culture of Jewish organisational life.

Features

The advertisements either tell a compelling story or feature a well-known personality describing what being Jewish means to him/her personally.

Program Success

AJC received about one hundred responses to each ad. Each respondent was placed on a mailing list for additional materials on being Jewish.

Key Factors of Success

These ads have prompted a wide variety of Jews to come forth with their own stories. They have also served as an effective form of outreach by providing appropriate follow-up materials. Additionally, the ads have had an enormous impact upon the culture of the AJC as a Jewish organisation.

Current Status Of The Program

This program has run for two years. A third year of four additional ads is being planned.

Funding

This program is funded by AJC budget.

Evaluation

This program has not been evaluated and there are no plans for evaluation.

Available Materials

There are descriptive and content materials available for distribution to other organisations.

Stepping Stones to a Jewish Me

'Stepping Stones...to a Jewish Me' is a program specifically designed for unaffiliated interfaith children and their families. This two-year program offers them the opportunity to learn about the Jewish part of their heritage in an environment that is respectful of a dual religion background.

Through a course of study that provides exposure to basic Judaism, parents can then make informed decisions regarding religious identity for their children.

Approximately 67% of our families continue with Jewish education after 'Stepping Stones'.

'Stepping Stones...to a Jewish Me' was developed in Denver twelve years ago and has become a national model for effective programming for the interfaith populations.

In the summer of 1988, Sarah, a teenager of 15 years, attended an orientation evening for 'Stepping Stones'. She has come across town on the bus by herself to find out about the program called 'Stepping Stones...to a Jewish Me'. She always knew she had a Jewish mother, but she did not have any knowledge or experiences to help her relate to her own identity. She spoke of a void in her life, a longing to understand what it meant to be Jewish. Sarah made an unusual commitment for a child of her age, to attend classes every Sunday, and to engage on the study of something new and unknown.

In the two years Sarah spent with us, she began to develop her elusive Jewish identity. After 'Stepping Stones', she graduated from Denver's Jewish Community High School and joined other Jewish teens on an Israeli study tour.

Sarah went off to college where she continued her Jewish studies. Four years later, she returned to Denver and applied to be a counsellor on Denver's Israel Study Tour. She also volunteered her time to the 'Stepping Stones' fundraiser. She immersed herself in a community she could NOW comfortably call her own. After completing her tour of Israel, Sarah now teaches in the 'Stepping Stones' program.

Too often, as professionals, we look only at number vs. dollars expended. It is important to translate those numbers into real lives with compelling stories.

*Phyllis Adler
Denver, CO*