



THE STEINHARDT  
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FOR JEWISH LIFE

# CONTACT

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**WHAT IS IDENTITY?**

**Eli Valley**  
Editor

**Erica Coleman**  
Copy Editor

**Yakov Wisniewski**  
Design Director

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**Phone:** (212) 279-2288

**Fax:** (212) 279-1155

**Email:** [info@steinhardtoundation.org](mailto:info@steinhardtoundation.org)

**Website:** [www.steinhardtoundation.org](http://www.steinhardtoundation.org)

For media inquiries about The Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life, please contact Dan Gerstein at [dan@dangerstein.com](mailto:dan@dangerstein.com).



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The Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life is dedicated to strengthening and transforming American Jewish Life to ensure a flourishing, sustainable community in a fully integrated free society. We seek to revitalize Jewish identity through educational and cultural initiatives that are designed to reach out to all Jews, with an emphasis on those who are on the margins of Jewish life, as well as to advocate for and support Hebrew and Jewish literacy among the general population.

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## WHAT IS IDENTITY?

“Identity” is a nebulous term, almost as difficult to pin down as terms like “consciousness” or “faith.” Informed by history and culture, seeded by global currents as well as personal experience, it is both vast and fluid in its multiplicities. But if identity is difficult to define, Jewish identity can be even more elusive – as hard to pinpoint as are definitions of Judaism itself. Does Jewish identity emerge from religion, culture, a way of thinking, a combination of all three, or something else entirely? How much weight should be placed on each variable? Is it even possible to measure the immaterial?

For several decades, Jewish identity was measured by specific external manifestations of behavior. These manifestations were often but not always based on religious activity. Does a person light candles on Shabbat? Host a seder on Passover? Send money to a Jewish Federation? If it could be seen and measured, it was considered a component of identity; personal perspectives were irrelevant. More recent metrics have expanded the notion of identity to include internal manifestations such as affective emotional connections with being Jewish. How can other criteria, such as knowledge, experience and aspiration, enter into the picture of how we understand identity? To what degree is Jewish pride a sufficient indicator of identity? In a multihued and heterogeneous culture such as America’s, where multiple cultures inform and are informed by one other, can Jewishness ever be fully isolated from other strands of identity? Are there means of defining and measuring identity we have not yet explored? Finally, does the very language we use to talk about identity match the complexity of the issue, or does it need to be questioned, making the very term “identity” possibly obsolete?

The articles in this issue of CONTACT consider identity as it has been understood and as it might yet be understood in American Jewish life. Tackling the concept from multiple perspectives, including gender identity, secular Jewish identity and generational shifts in personal identity, contributors probe the question of what it means to be Jewish and what it means to study Jewish life today. Taken together, they offer a composite picture of a field of research that is as complex, fascinating and ever-evolving as is Jewish identity itself.

*Eli Valley*  
Eli Valley

### I N T H I S I S S U E

- 3 JEWISH IDENTITY AND BEYOND**  
*Bethamie Horowitz*
- 4 ON JEWISH IDENTITY**  
*Leonard Saxe*
- 5 WHAT’S WRONG WITH “JEWISH IDENTITY”?**  
*Steven M. Cohen*
- 6 WORKING WITH TODAY’S FAMILIES**  
*Susan Shevitz*
- 8 UNDERSTANDING SECULAR JEWISH IDENTITY:  
SOME PERSONAL AND SCHOLARLY REFLECTIONS**  
*Kirsten Fermaglich*
- 9 TRACKING JEWISH IDENTITIES**  
*Stuart Z. Charmé*
- 10 THE FUTURE OF “IDENTITY AND CONTINUITY” IN AMERICAN  
JEWISH EDUCATION: PLOTTING A COURSE FOR THE NEXT  
GENERATION**  
*Benjamin M. Jacobs*
- 11 WHAT DOES LEARNING LOOK LIKE?  
QUESTIONS FROM THE AFTERSCHOOL CARPOOL**  
*Alex Pomson*
- 12 GENDER MATTERS: JEWISH IDENTITY,  
INTERMARRIAGE, AND PARENTHOOD**  
*Keren R. McGinity*
- 14 “IT’S A BIRD, IT’S A PLANE...”**  
*Lee S. Shulman*

# JEWISH IDENTITY AND BEYOND

by BETHAMIE HOROWITZ

We still talk about Jewish identity in the American Jewish communal/organizational world, but in the social sciences in the past twenty years, the term identity has been bumped upstairs and replaced by a number of new subordinates. No longer is a single word able to capture the various elements that were once collected under “identity.” It can no longer handle by itself the complexities arising from our membership in categories and our ties to groups that have come to characterize our lives today.

The newer nomenclature is better able to address two different aspects of identity — the shared and the individual. First, there is a cluster of terms that highlights the shared aspects of group affiliation: social, collective or group identities, along with national and transnational ones. Second, there are terms that reflect the more individualized aspects of experience through words like personal or core identities, agency, narrative, journey, consciousness and the self in various forms. The emergence of these newer, more specialized words mirrors changes arising from our expanded mobility across multiple contexts, including wide-ranging webs, networks and crosscutting circles. Each new or changing context creates both a window into something new and a mirror back onto us in relation to it. Some of these contexts are temporary or fleeting, and others more enduring. As these possibilities have multiplied and our world has become more complex, there are more ways for the self to connect and to become involved, related and entangled.

In light of this increasing differentiation of elements once contained by the notion of identity, this is a good time to reconsider what we want to speak about when we speak about *Jewish* identity. The American Jewish community has used that phrase to accomplish something rather specific. In the 1960s, one standard Jewish youth group activity for teenagers was to ponder the question of whether we were Jewish Americans or American Jews. My recollection is that the “right” answer was American Jews, where Jew was the meatier, more substantive noun, while American was the just the mod-

ifier or flavoring agent. It’s revealing to consider that these were actually Jewish identity exercises, designed to strengthen our otherwise slack mental and emotional muscles — which made sense in the context of the concerns about assimilation and the continuing of Jewish identity.

Look what I just did: I used the term in a way that is typical in the American Jewish communal world. You can see that the expression “Jewish identity” contains a concern (intended or not) about its retention. It’s also spoken about as if it’s a thing that can be installed wholesale in a person, like a computer program. Its job is to bind the person to the group in the face of challenges from the larger American environment. Hence the communal concerns about group diminution and dissipation.

In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, there was anxiety about the possibility of living a rich Jewish life in America. Jewishness was set against making it in America, so that many Jews felt compelled to strip away or alter the markers of otherness and ethnicity that were conveyed by names, nose-shapes and other markers of being “too Jewish.” The talk of Jewish identity under these circumstances was another way of saying, how Jewish are you (on the inside)?

Today, we’re far past that kind of binary opposition of Jewish and American in the sense that the societal integration — assimilation, really — has already happened. Being more deeply embedded in America is no longer correlated with the nature of one’s Jewish involvement.

In this contemporary American context where Jews are highly integrated into the societal mainstream, the issue of Jewish identity can conjure up various things depending on who’s asking the question. When Jewish organizations come calling, they are interested in drawing people in, finding common ground and building solidarity. There seems to be an expectation that one’s Jewish identity should prevail and be all encompassing. But whether that is indeed the case will depend on a host of elements that shape the life of the individual.

When we talk with individuals about their lives, we see that they can and do feel open, positive, proud and comfortable about being Jewish in America today — which is a big contrast to the situation 50 years ago,

*The more interesting question concerns how people come to consider their Jewishness as somehow helpfully guiding them as opposed to operating merely as a feature of their backgrounds.*

when ambivalence and self-hatred were more common. And why not? Jon Stewart, Natalie Portman and many other famous people make no effort to hide their Jewishness. Furthermore, the popular culture supports it — kids grow up seeing cartoons where characters have *bar mitzvahs*, and now even people who aren’t Jewish are interested in adopting Jewish practices such as having a canopy at a wedding or sitting *shiva* upon the loss of a loved one. Being Jewish no longer poses a social limitation in America, so being able to identify openly and comfortably as a Jew is pretty much a given.

The more interesting question concerns how people come to consider their Jewishness as somehow helpfully guiding them as opposed to operating merely as a feature of their backgrounds. What circumstances lead people to view Judaism as a resource that they can actively draw upon in making sense of their lives and the world around them? What leads them to see it as a meaningful framework as they move forward in their lives?

As people juggle myriad roles and expectations and pursue varied purposes, they are influenced by prior experiences, by the exigencies of their lives and by their hopes and desires. The important thing to learn about Judaism in people’s lives today is how it fits or speaks to their particular concerns, and through what means, experiences, relationships, communities and contexts it does so. That’s the glue that keeps them connected today. The durability of the connections depends on how well they are working and how meaningful they are. There’s much more of a two-way exchange at work today between Judaism and Jews than there was for previous generations.

The most promising transactions for both Jewish individuals and their Jewish communities (and the broader Jewish community) are those that offer space for people to reflect on their experiences in the context of a Jewish frame, and provide opportunities for integrating their perspectives into a larger shared story. Many people have come to feel that their Jewishness serves them in their lives and that it speaks in terms that work for them. When this happens, they don’t just have a sense of Jewish identity. They also become more active and expressive in their Jewish journeys. You might say they have their own sense of Jewish agency. ■

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**Bethamie Horowitz, Ph.D.**, is Research Assistant Professor at NYU’s Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development.

# ON JEWISH IDENTITY

by LEONARD SAXE

Albert Einstein famously wrote, “The pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, an almost fanatical love of justice and the desire for personal independence — these are the features of the Jewish tradition which make me thank my stars that I belong to it.” (Albert Einstein, *The World As I See It*, Covici Friede, 1934) Einstein was a secular Jew who had little exposure to formal Jewish education, but he nevertheless cherished his Jewishness and felt connected to universal aspects of his heritage. Is that sufficient to sustain an individual’s Jewish identity?

Einstein understood this limitation and wrestled with what it meant to be Jewish. Is a Jew one who “professes the Jewish faith?” he asked. He answered by analogizing, “What defines a snail?” A snail is an animal that has a hard shell, but what, he said, should we call a snail that has shed its shell? It is, of course, still a snail. In his view, Jews are distinguished by multiple characteristics, not simply their faith, and he counted himself as a Jew because he shared values and identified with the community.

When Einstein wrote about his Jewish identity, the Nazis had come to power in Germany. It was an era in which Jewishness was imposed externally, regardless of an individual’s sense of him or herself. To claim Jewish identity in terms of universal principles was a way to defend Jews. To define Jewish identity as not simply a matter of faith but of belonging to a group was a way to express solidarity. We live, today, in a different era — where Jewishness is seen as a positive trait and where individualism is celebrated. Not surprisingly, Jewish identity is experienced and enacted differently.

In the modern era, adopting Jewish identity is, increasingly, a matter of choice. Jews may no longer be highly distinguished by their names, appearances or where they live. Converts to Judaism are called “Jews by Choice,” but in reality, most modern Jews are individuals who have chosen to identify as Jewish. And

those who consider themselves Jewish include those for whom Jewish identity is core along with those for whom it is peripheral.

In contemporary America in particular, diversity is the byword, and there are multiple variants of Jewish identity. Social scientists who study Jewry operationally define a Jew as someone who claims to be Jewish, either by religion or other criteria, but this masks the different ways in which Jewish identity is gained and expressed. The sharp boundaries that traditionally separated Jew and non-Jew have been blurred, and it is more difficult to know what self-identification means. Inter-marriage, in particular, adds to the complexity of describing Jewish identity both for the Jewish spouse and for the children of intermarried parents.

Being Jewish is not only a matter of choice; it has become individuated. Steven M. Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen use the term “sovereign self” to characterize such self-focused Jewish identity. One indicator is that denominational movements no longer have the central role in promoting shared practices; increasingly, American Jews identify as “Just Jewish.” Some of these individuals are highly engaged in Jewish life. For them, “Just Jewish” is a post-denominational label. For others, however, “Just Jewish” signals their identification with the Jewish people, but their disinterest in Judaism *per se*.

To adapt a computer metaphor that reflects our technology-saturated culture, Jewish identity is a program that, for many, resides in memory. Jewish identity is accessed as needed, and only if it is compatible with other programs that are running. Jewishness is thus one of many identities available to a person, and the key is whether it is synchronous or not. It is a choice not only to enact the identity, but also to decide which features of the identity to embrace. Jewishness is one of many identities, each of which is situationally contingent.

The changing nature of Jewish identity in the 21st Century creates both concern and opportunity. Some fear that the blurring of boundaries and the increasing role of choice dilutes the essence of Jewishness, particularly the religious basis of the identity. It is perhaps not surprising that there has been increasing interest in returning to tradition and, in some quarters, calls for vigilance in applying *halachic*

criteria for Jewish identity and practice. The concern is that if we fail to do so, like inherited wealth that only lasts three to four generations, Jewish life in America will slowly disappear.

To be sure, in a sovereign self era there is a danger of losing the particularistic elements of Jewish identity, be it Hebrew language, adherence to *kashrut* or participation in Jewish ritual. But that also suggests opportunity. If Jewish identity is to be salient among the dozens of potential identities available, Jewish education will have to be prominent and effective.

Much discussion of Jewish identity assumes that it is a fixed entity, formed early in life and stable throughout the life course. Engagement with Jewish life is not, however, a straight line, and enactment of Jewish identity has multiple inflection points. What has arguably not been fully appreciated is the role that Jewish education plays, not just with children, but throughout life. Contemporary Jews are not just born, they’re made. Decisions to wrestle with Jewish tradition, to in-marry, be part of synagogues and to contribute to Jewish life are a function of the quality and intensity of formal and informal Jewish education.

The potential of education to make Jewish identity salient is demonstrated in Taglit-Birthright Israel, a program that has brought more than 200,000 young adult Jews from North America to Israel on ten-day educational journeys. Many Birthright Israel participants have not been well-educated Jewishly. They come to Israel wearing their Jewishness as an external identity, like a “shell.” The program fills the shell with some content, but its key function is to raise the salience of Jewish identity, to form the figure, not the background. It serves, to paraphrase the Yiddish expression *Dos Pintele Yid*, to ignite a “Jewish spark” within participants’ souls.

Long-term studies of Birthright Israel make clear that for most participants, the program serves as an accelerant that changes the trajectories of their Jewish engagement. Igniting the spark of Jewishness is critical in this individuated age of choice. Birthright Israel works because it engages individuals’ hearts, minds and bodies. It links the emotional connection participants feel to their heritage with the knowledge and opportunity to enact their Jewishness and feel a connection to a broader community.

We live in an era of unprecedented interconnectedness and human possibility. But it is also an era of fragility, and the limits of our human capacity to live together and create a better world are palpable. The universal principles which Einstein associated with his Jewish identity remain relevant, but they will be sustained only if the shell that identifies individuals as Jews is filled with meaning. Jewish identity is particularistic, but in an era of individualism, helping Jews to feel part of something larger is key to their ongoing survival and their ability to contribute to society at large. ■

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**Leonard Saxe, Ph.D.**, is Klutznick Professor of Contemporary Jewish Studies and Social Policy at Brandeis University, where he directs the Steinhardt Social Research Institute and the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies. He is a social psychologist and is author of numerous articles and books, including *Ten Days of Birthright Israel: A Journey in Young Adult Identity*, with Barry Chazan (Brandeis, 2008).

# WHAT'S WRONG WITH "JEWISH IDENTITY"



by STEVEN M. COHEN

Given its origins in the world and lexicon of psychology, Jewish identity means some things other than those which we (or most of us) want to advance, understand and explore.

I've spent more than four decades investigating "Jewish identity," and I've grown increasingly unhappy with the term — not the actual phenomenon, of course, just the verbal expression. Wherever possible, I try to avoid using Jewish identity, preferring such alternatives as "Jewish engagement" or "Jewish involvement." Why am I so unhappy with Jewish identity?

The key problem is its associational baggage — the images and concepts that Jewish identity implies and connotes. Given its origins in the world and lexicon of psychology, Jewish identity means some things other than those which we (or most of us) want to advance, understand and explore. Specifically, it carries with it three misleading, and ultimately distorting, messages:

1. Being Jewish **resides in the individual**; it's part of his/her identity.
2. Being Jewish is about **subjective feelings**; identity is the stuff that we carry around in our heart and minds.
3. Being Jewish is a **fixed quality**; if it's an identity, it doesn't change much, kind of like what we used to think was intelligence.

Why is all this misleading?

First, Jewish identity is, or ought to be conceived of as, social and interactive — and not individual and solipsistic. Fundamentally, Jewish involvement requires interaction with other Jews — family, friends, neighbors, colleagues, associates and fellow members of groups and institutions. (Living in a Jewish State is, well, better; but that's a subject for a different time.)

The "groupiness" of Jews, Jewishness and Judaism runs deep and wide. *Mishpachah* (family), *minyan* (prayer quorum), *kehillah* (community), institutions (of innumerable variety), State, Peoplehood — all are so critical to Jewish life and living that one cannot imagine Judaism without them. Performing most Jewish practices alone is near-impossible.

The strongest predictors of Jewish engagement are social predictors: Who are your friends? Who is your spouse/partner? Who are your neighbors? With whom do you have your most meaningful conversations? Basically: Of the people closest to you, how many are Jewish and how many are active Jews? A Jew may have founded the Internet's most successful social networking site, but Judaism discovered the power of social networking three millennia ago and has exploited and extolled it ever since.

Being Jewish is not (merely) a philosophy of life, a spiritual practice, a resource for personal enrichment — although it does have the potential for all of that. Rather, its character is well-expressed in the title of a classic anthropological work on East European Jewish culture: *Life is With People* (Zabrowski, Mark and Elizabeth, Schocken Books, 1995). Jewish life is, indeed, life with (Jewish) people. It can't be otherwise.

**Steven M. Cohen, Ph.D.**, is Research Professor of Jewish Social Policy at HUC-JIR and Director of the Berman Jewish Policy Archive at NYU Wagner ([www.BJPA.org](http://www.BJPA.org)).

We may be the only religio-ethnic group that defines our putatively wayward members with a social term, that is, as "unaffiliated." A non-believing Jew is a secular Jew. A heretical Jew is (only) a Wicked Child, very much welcome at the *seder* table. There are indeed lapsed Catholics, and atheists, but none of them earn the sobriquet "unaffiliated," testifying to the centrality of social connection to other Jews.

Second, identity most readily connotes the way you look at the world and yourself, what you feel and how you see and process yourself and the people around you. But being Jewish is incredibly focused on action and acts of belonging. The rabbis emphasized proper action (*mitzvah*) even in the absence of proper intent. Ben-Gurion declared that what matters is not what others say but "what the Jews do." In one of his seminal works, Arnold Eisen has demonstrated that Jews are divided far more by differences over action than by differences over feelings or theology (*Rethinking Modern Judaism*, University of Chicago Press, 1999). Contemporary sociological studies of so-called "Jewish identity" contain long lists of actions entailing ritual practice, affiliation, informal associations (friends, neighbors), learning, donations, political action, social-justice work, cultural consumption, pilgrimage (trips to Israel) and on and on. "Identity" seems to diminish all that when, in fact, engaged Jewish leaders, observers and thinkers are vitally interested in what Jews do and how they connect, and not (primarily) in how they feel.

Finally, identity feels like something very constant and stable and rooted within the self. In fact, Jewish involvement can be, and is, episodic and variable. Jewish involvement and engagement rise and fall with shifting contexts. Changes in people, season, day, place, life stage, income, family configuration, residence, occupation and so much else influence the extent to which people act upon or even feel their Jewish identity.

Certainly, social psychologists and professional students of personality maintain highly nuanced views of identity. They fully understand that all identity is social — shaped by one's social environment and expressed within it. They conceive of identity as an affective/behavioral/cognitive package, just as students of religion speak of the three B's: belief, behavior and belonging. And they understand that identity is subject to change with changing times and context. Fluidity (porous boundaries), malleability (changing meaning) and hybridity (multiple coexisting identities) percolate through the scholarly literature.

But, in everyday conversation, "Jewish identity" is still weighed down with a focus on the individual, an emphasis on feelings and a presumption of stability. It's time we found another term to describe what we really mean. I propose "Jewish engagement" or "Jewish involvement." But, as opposed to the upcoming election, I can entertain many candidates — after all, I'm very Democratic. ■



# WORKING WITH TODAY'S FAMILIES

by SUSAN SHEVITZ

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**Susan Shevitz, Ed.D.**, taught in and directed Brandeis University's Hornstein Program in Jewish Professional Leadership for over twenty-five years and currently works with local, regional and national agencies on planning and evaluating innovative approaches in Jewish education, synagogue life and leadership programming in light of the changing nature of individual and group identity and development.

## THE NATURE OF IDENTITY

Over the last several decades, social scientists have described massive shifts in conceptions of personal identity. Given the emergence of abundant choices about all aspects of one's life, previous generations' assumptions about lifelong, stable, monolithic identities are being replaced by a fluid sense of possibility and choice. Jewish identity is seen to exist alongside other aspects of an individual's identity with which it may not seem easily compatible. Traditions, loyalties and precedents are less salient than what the individual considers her own truths and aspirations. Gay and Orthodox? Temple leader and intermarried? Buddhist, Jew and atheist? What to earlier generations would have been unusual, if not unimaginable, is entirely natural to today's young Jews who are as comfortable with the diversity within their own self-conceptions as within their communities.

These traits are evident in how today's young families look and think. Using broad brushstrokes, parents are Generation Xers born between 1964

and 1984, characterized as having a powerful affinity for technology and skeptical about institutions' claims. Entrepreneurship is high among them and they tend to move easily among employers and groups that interest them. Their slightly younger siblings, collectively labeled the Millennials, grew up with instant access to information and each other through the Internet and mobile technology. According to the Pew Foundation's research, they are the least religiously observant youths since they began charting religious behavior, though many describe themselves as spiritual ([pewresearch.org/pubs/1437/millennials](http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1437/millennials)).

These realities lead to some important ideas about what Jewish community organizations need to do if they are to be effective working with today's families. They need to:

- Recognize that in an open society that presents unfettered access to all sorts of activities and affiliations, all families are "Jews by Choice." They are always choosing whether what is offered warrants their engagement. For most people,

What to earlier generations would have been unusual, if not unimaginable, is entirely natural to today's young Jews who are as comfortable with the diversity within their own self-conceptions as within their communities.

institutional loyalty has gone the way of brand loyalty, so quality, convenience and price matter.

- Understand that families are prosumers who expect to tailor experiences, as they do their computers and televisions, to meet their needs. With this come expectations for excellence and relevance.
- Put the learners rather than the content or the organization at the center of planning for families. This leads to a radical shift in how programs are conceptualized, planned and offered.
- Accept, honor and work with the particularities of participants' identities rather than belittle or ignore them.

These general imperatives lead to more specific suggestions.

#### EXCELLENCE

If loyalty to an institution is insufficient motivation for becoming involved, organizations and groups hoping to work with Jewish families need to determine their distinctive competence and their offerings need to be of consistently high quality.

#### FAMILIES' ASPIRATIONS

In a world where individuals construct their idiosyncratic approaches to Jewish life, families want their specific concerns to be addressed. It is essential that organizations understand what a family needs at any particular time and use all available resources to help it pursue its interests. This might entail complementing set programs or curricula with learning that is tailored to the family. Current experiments using the internet, helping families learn from each other, offering immersive experiences, and creating short-term discussion groups or workshops are taking place in many community settings such as coffee shops and cultural centers — not just at schools or congregations. The idea of a “conierge” who helps families explore their Jewish aspirations and access appropriate learning opportunities is one approach to service delivery. All these efforts require the planners to understand what families need and to think flexibly about options rather than plug them into one-size-fits-all programs.

#### RELEVANCE TO LIFE STAGES

Questions of relevance have special meaning — and often urgency — for families.

At every stage of development, parents face pressing questions about childrearing and the role of religion and ritual in their families. These present rich opportunities to engage with parents around issues of great importance to them and to present a Jewish lens on the issues. Programs dealing with specific stages in families' lives, such as Boston's *Ikkarim* for parents of pre-schoolers, *Parenting Your Teen*, or *Moving Tradition's* gender-sensitive approaches, address families' needs at key turning points.

#### CHOICES

With different priorities, schedules, backgrounds and interests, families need different approaches. This does not mean organizations need to cater to every whim, but instead to build appropriate choices into their offerings so that families can shape the offerings to their realities. Can Jewish values be presented through an ongoing parent-child book group or in an intensive *Shabbaton*? Can Hebrew be taught online for some, in classrooms for others, or in some combination of the two? Can family education happen through the lens of social justice and *tikkun olam* for some and through the arts for others? Families today make sophisticated choices about activities, and these choices can lead to deeper engagement and commitment because they address their lived realities. Families can “co-create” the learning.

#### BOUNDARY CROSSING AND COLLABORATION

Since the range of family expectations and needs cannot be met by any single organization, it makes sense for organizations to collaborate. This fits the orientation of today's parents who do not choose engagement based on denominational or institutional loyalty. It means moving away from the assumption that an organization has to do it all or that organizations are competitors that need to hold on to their own members. Instead, each institution can develop what it does best, resulting in more and better offerings. Program planning and implementation can become collaborative and complementary. As form follows function, organizational arrangements could be adapted to help families cross institutional boundaries and avail themselves of what they need.

#### DIVERSITY

Two types of diversity are at work: within the community and within individuals. Both types need to be understood, accepted and drawn upon.

The community itself is increasingly heterogeneous. Consider the most obvious diversity: race, faith and sexual identity. According to Be'Chol Lashon, at least 20 percent of the U.S. Jewish population is of color (this number includes black and biracial people, non-Ashkenazi populations such as Jews from India and from Middle Eastern and Sephardic backgrounds, and adopted children of varied backgrounds). Since approximately 50 percent of all new marriages involving a Jew are intermarriages, most of today's Jewish children are well aware of other religious and ethnic ties within their own extended, if not nuclear, families. At least 7 percent of Jews are in other than heterosexual relationships (and this is probably a low estimate). An online posting on Kveller.com captures these realities: “How do lesbian parents with interfaith backgrounds raise their black adopted children without getting confused?”

The diversity is internal, as well. Since the range of possible interests and commitments is almost infinite, different aspects of a person's identity might from the outside seem to be in conflict. But to today's young families, this is the norm. Family members bring their whole selves into any event or program. The challenge is to find ways of honoring the different components of the family's identity while being clear about what Judaism offers.

#### CONNECTIONS TO OTHERS

With all the focus on what scholars call the autonomous self, we should not overlook families' interest in being part of groups that can share the pressures, joys and uncertainties of family life. Finding ways to help families connect to each other, much like the efforts in the 1970s and 1980s to establish *havurot* in synagogues, would be welcomed if practiced in ways that make sense to them. In the end, the challenge to those who work with Jewish families today is to empower them to co-create their Jewish paths within a caring environment that connects them to each other and to the Jewish past and future. ■

# UNDERSTANDING SECULAR JEWISH IDENTITY: SOME PERSONAL AND SCHOLARLY REFLECTIONS

by KIRSTEN FERMAGLICH

When I began studying Jewish identity in graduate school in the 1990s, I was struck by how much of the literature emphasized religious ritual and organized communal engagement, since few of the Jews I knew engaged in such activities. I grew up in an upper middle class Jewish home in an overwhelmingly Gentile New Jersey suburb. Although both my parents were raised in the heart of the Jewish Bronx, neither was interested in religion. We joined a Conservative synagogue for the High Holy Days and for Hebrew School, and we celebrated Passover with *matzah* and large family *seders*, but that was about it. My family participated in no organized Jewish activities, and exhibited little religious behavior — certainly none on a daily level. We ate bacon and shrimp, watched Saturday morning cartoons and lived a life of upper middle class Americans, relatively indistinguishable from our neighbors.

And yet. In our minds, we were indelibly different from our neighbors. My dark curly hair set me permanently — and traumatically — apart from the straight-haired blondes who populated my high school. My parents made few friends in our town and instead socialized primarily with Jewish friends from their past, or Jewish couples who lived in surrounding towns. My mother agonized over the fact that she had given me a non-Jewish first name, and so insisted that I wear a *chai*. My brother gloried in the fact that he was our town's "Jackie Robinson," the first Jew to play on the high-school football team. Most devastating for us, our house was vandalized with anti-Semitic graffiti one Halloween when I was in middle school.

It is small wonder, then, that later, when I read sociological works that defined Jewish identity using Sabbath candle-lighting or B'nai B'rith membership as their benchmarks, I was surprised and unsettled. These acts did not define my family or friends, nor did they define the intellectuals I chose to study for my dissertation (historian Stanley M. Elkins, writer Betty Friedan, psychologist Stanley Milgram, and psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton), even though all of these men and women felt that Jewishness was

a significant part of their identities.

Since the 1990s, I have sought to understand secular Jewish identity historically. I have tried to look sympathetically at secular Jews in the United States to understand what Jewishness has meant in their lives. My first book explored the ways that consciousness of the Holocaust had political meaning for secular Jewish intellectuals in the early 1960s, while my current research looks at the phenomenon of Jewish name changing in New York City in the 20th Century.

The most important thing I've learned through this research is that secular Jewish identity is not one thing and that there is not one way to understand it. Indeed, there may be as many varieties of secular Jewish life as there are secular Jews. Scholars have not always focused on these varieties. Traditionally, secular Judaism has primarily been perceived of as a hostile reaction to, or negation of, religion. Many excellent scholars have emphasized secular Jewish intellectuals' active rejection of religion or, for example, Jews' ideological embrace of anti-religious philosophies such as socialism and communism in the early 20th Century.

Although this emphasis on rejection of religion is crucial for understanding many secular Jews, it does not address many other Jews whose secular identity is more understood and implicit, rather than active and explicit. My own work looks more closely at secular Jews' absences and silences. Rather than focusing on those who actively rejected religion, I prefer to look at people who quietly abandoned their Jewish names or eliminated Jewish references in their writing, so that they would not be marked as Jews in public. Understandably, these Jews have frequently been overlooked by Jewish historians, and they have at times been treated contemptuously by their Jewish peers who believed that these silences implied rejection or betrayal. My research indicates, however, that these silences do not represent abandonment of the Jewish community but, instead, different ways of identifying as Jews.

For many of these silent Jews, it is crucial to explore secular Jewish identity from the perspective of emotions and interpersonal relationships rather than looking solely at actions or institutional commitments. Much ordinary life in 20th Century America was lived in private rather than in public, so insti-

tutional affiliations cannot always be used to identify the heart of individuals' commitments. Instead, marital, familial, friendship, work and neighborly relationships all shaped the contours of people's lives. Secular Jewish life has often been sustained by a web of Jewish relationships and living arrangements that has not required religious faith or communal engagement at all.

Secular Jewish identity has also been powerfully shaped by history and culture. The historical moment is central to defining how Jews have seen themselves, regardless of their degree of affiliation with the Jewish community. American Jews living in the post-World War II era, for example, could not help reflecting on their good fortune to have been living on this side of the Atlantic Ocean. Secular Jewish identity is not one thing; it changes as historical events reconfigure Jewish life.

Culture has also played an important role in defining secular Jewish identity. Jewish artists from Leonard Bernstein to Lenny Bruce have created an influential popular culture only minimally attached to religious or communal life, and these artists have served as role models and exemplars of a Jewish secular culture for laypeople. The practice of "Jewhooing" to find famous Jews in popular culture is a much-mocked exercise, but it has helped to shape Jewish secular culture by offering a public definition of Jewishness not linked to either communal or religious life. Jewhooing has also created an "imagined community," a nation of Jews widely dispersed and vastly different, but joined by common ancestry (see Glenn, Susan A., "In the Blood? Consent, Descent, and the Ironies of Jewish Identity," *Jewish Social Studies* 8, no. 2,3, Spring 2002).

Whether or not these connections are truly meaningful is beside the point: ordinary Jews in America believe that these connections are meaningful, and that these scattered examples of famous Jews help make sense of their own lives as non-religious Jews in a non-Jewish world.

Since the 1990s, there has been more sympathetic scholarly interest paid to secular Jews; I am one of many scholars seeking to make sense of people in the United States who identify as Jews without significant religious or communal ties. The lives of the Jews I study — as well as my own life — have convinced me of the value and importance of this work. ■

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**Kirsten Fermaglich, Ph.D.**, is Associate Professor of History and Jewish Studies at Michigan State University. She is author of *American Dreams and Nazi Nightmares* (Brandeis University Press, 2006) and co-editor of the Norton Critical Edition of Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (forthcoming, 2013).

# TRACKING JEWISH IDENTITIES

by STUART Z. CHARMÉ

Over the last decade or so, a number of researchers have begun to rethink the ways we measure and talk about Jewish identity. Traditionally, concern about Jewish identity has been closely tied with anxieties about Jewish cultural survival in the United States, where assimilation and intermarriage have caused some alarm about the possible dilution or weakening of attachment to being Jewish, of identification with the Jewish People and Israel, and of engagement in Jewish activities.

For those concerned about Jewish survival and continuity into the next generation, a top priority has always been to instill a strong Jewish identity in children as early as possible. I started to call this idea the “drink-your-milk” model of Jewish identity, since it emphasizes the importance of the cultural “food” a Jewish child consumes early in life and the belief that a healthy and strong Jewish identity, like a healthy and strong body, requires a nutritious diet of Jewish experiences.

Within this model, the most important issue for parents and teachers is to determine the kind and amount of Jewish milk necessary to build strong Jewish bones. Things like family ritual observance, Jewish camp experience or Jewish day school attendance might provide more than enough of the minimum daily requirements of Jewishness and establish a strong Jewish identity. The implicit assumption of this approach is that there is a recipe for Jewish identity and that it is fairly similar for most Jews. Once in place, a strong Jewish identity will remain relatively secure as one enters adulthood and passes it on to the next generation.

Inevitably, researchers have tried to measure what constitutes a strong Jewish identity by calculating the number of traditional religious practices in which one engages (e.g., fasting on *Yom Kippur*, lighting *Shabbat* or *Hanukkah* candles or keeping kosher), or by the number of one's close friends who are

Jewish, or by how many Jewish organizations one supports. In this way, it has become easy to assume that those who end up doing more have stronger Jewish identities, and those who end up doing less have weaker Jewish identities. Yet such evaluations will always be relative to one set of prescriptive criteria or another. Whose blueprints for normative Jewish identity should be accepted, and on what is their authority based?

In the field of psychology of religion, a long-standing research practice has explored different ways of being religious ranging from, to paraphrase an old joke, those who go to talk to God and those who go to talk to friends. It includes those with absolute certainty about what they believe and those who are seeking and questioning. If religiosity were merely a switch that is either turned on or off, it might be measured by a simple checklist of a person's beliefs or activities. But a checklist of this kind tells us very little about the personal meaning these beliefs and behaviors may have for an individual or the way that Jewish identity interacts with other identities that are also important to that person. We quickly realize how impossible it is to speak of a single, generic form of Jewish identity. In some sense, every Jew is hyphenated, and one's Jewishness is inflected by one's other identities: American, Israeli, straight, gay, female, vegetarian, convert, rural, urban, religious, secular, Republican, Democrat, born, adopted, and so on.

We also find that traditional Jewish categories of religion, culture and people are now more complex and pluralistic than ever. It is quite difficult to stipulate a common core for Jewish identity in different people. This fact creates the possibility of multiple forms of Jewish identities, cultures and religious orientations. Not only are there multiple forms of Jewish identities within the Jewish population at any particular moment, but within each person Jewish identity may be changing and unfolding in a variety of directions over the course of that person's lifetime. Questions of religious belief, ritual observance, denominational affiliation and connection to Israel, among other factors, will vary in significance and salience at different moments in time. For this reason, one of the most promising approaches to understanding

Jewish identity may involve longitudinal examinations of the vicissitudes of identity through different stages of life and moments in history. Many times, I have found that the ideas adolescents had about being Jewish at the age of sixteen changed considerably when I spoke to them again just five years later.

The paradox of Jewish identity is that it can thrive in the presence or absence of any particular beliefs, practices, institutional affiliations, emotional commitments or political ideologies that may be considered indispensable to others. For example, neither atheism nor lack of interest in traditional Jewish observances should ever be treated as disqualifications for Jewish identity or evidence of educational failure, since doubt and questioning may be of equal if not more authentic expressions of Jewish identity for some people. There will always be tensions and dilemmas in Jewish identities, as individuals navigate the parts of being Jewish that may feel dissonant, difficult or in conflict with other important values or commitments.

If teachers acknowledge that contemporary Jewish identities are to some degree always provisional, tentative, shifting and open to change, then how should they approach their role as guides to novices in Jewish tradition? Tradition has often been construed in a conservative way that identifies real, authentic Judaism with immutable and authoritative texts and practices from the past. Today's more fluid forms of Jewish identity are better supported by an appreciation of the intrinsic flexibility of our cultural traditions. Teachers who understand Jewish identity formation as an unfolding, unpredictable process that is inextricably connected with all the other dimensions of a person's identity development face the challenge of responding to multiple, moving targets. They will need to develop strategies to enable students to engage the tensions and ambivalences they may feel about being Jewish, and do so in an educational environment that is both accepting and supportive. They will not rush to reduce or eliminate ambivalent or conflicted feelings about any aspect of being Jewish, for those feelings can often be a source of creative engagement and new forms of authentic Jewish identity. ■

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**Stuart Z. Charmé, Ph.D.**, is Professor of Religion at Rutgers University-Camden, where he teaches psychology of religion, gender and religion, and issues in religion and culture. He is completing a book on the question of authenticity in contemporary Jewish identity.

# THE FUTURE OF “IDENTITY AND CONTINUITY” IN AMERICAN JEWISH EDUCATION: PLOTTING A COURSE FOR THE NEXT GENERATION

by BENJAMIN M. JACOBS

I recently had the opportunity to speak with two groups of Jewish professionals regarding the purposes of Jewish education on the American scene today. The first group consisted of a dozen or so accomplished attorneys, businesspeople and physicians in their fifties and sixties who had participated in an intensive adult Jewish learning experience twenty years ago and were celebrating their reunion. The second group was comprised of about a dozen accomplished young adults in their twenties who are working toward masters degrees in Jewish organizational leadership at a major research university. The first group conversed over deli, Linzer cookies and cream soda, while the second group brought Nalgene bottles of water, baggies of fresh veggies and laptops to the table.

When faced with the question, *Toward what ends does Jewish education aim?*, the first group proffered the following responses: “inspire positive connection,” “ensure continuity,” “inculcate Jewish identity,” “teach people about Jewish religion, tradition and content,” “help perpetuate Jewish culture, life and tradition to the next generation,” and “be able to destroy [non-Jews] misconceptions about Jews.” When viewed in light of policy statements and research studies regarding Jewish education in the United States propagated in the past 25 years or more, these responses were squarely on message. After all, for the better part of the 20th Century, Jewish educational initiatives concentrated foremost on identity formation, common knowledge and values, communal involvement and social cohesion. These priorities were based on the belief that cultivating powerful Jewish identity would lead to Jewish continuity. Faced with the real or perceived threat of assimilation and anti-Semitism, and intent on fostering a culturally pluralist society, Jewish communal leaders felt assured that emphasis on normative Jewish commitments and universalistic Jewish values were the keys to strengthening and perpetuating the American Jewish community in the midst of a secular, volunteeristic and some-

times hostile society. All facets of the Jewish curriculum (Bible, rabbinic texts, Hebrew language, Jewish history, etc.), in both formal and informal educational settings alike, were designed to instill in children a strong sense of identification with the community and its ideals, mores and ways of life. Thus, the Baby Boomers in my first group of respondents, who had been raised on the faith that strong Jewish socialization can be a bulwark against declining Jewish affinity, were inclined to regard identity and continuity as the cornerstones of Jewish education.

By contrast, members of the second group offered a wide range of visions for Jewish education that still recognized the value of Jewish literacy, affiliation and cohesion, but that also emphasized notions of global Jewish citizenship (“being outwardly focused,” “understanding what it means to be a Jew in the rest of the world”), mutual commitment to self and Others (“being able to negotiate Jewish and non-Jewish contexts,” “donating to Jewish and non-Jewish causes,” “active involvement in the Jewish and non-Jewish communities”), and devotion to repairing the world (“*tikkun olam*,” “eco-consciousness,” “humility, compassion and empathy”). The respondents also advocated developing more deliberative models of Jewish pedagogy that embrace as well as wrestle with complicated questions regarding Jewish existence, especially within a postmodern, post-denominational, post-ethnic, post-Zionist, or what we may simply call a post-everything age. Indeed, for American Jewish Gen Nexters, being Jewish is only part of a larger constellation of identities that also encompasses gender, socioeconomic status, education, politics, geography and sexuality, among other factors. They may still identify proudly as Jews; in fact, many Jewish youth think it is actually “cool” to be Jewish (see, for example, *Heeb* magazine). However, with the exception of most traditionalist Jews, the ways in which today’s American Jewish youth identify Jewishly are complex, conditional and increasingly individualistic. Studies show that a shared sense of identity is diminishing among Jewish Gen Nexters, even if they are still seeking ways to connect to their Jewish heritage for the sake of personal fulfillment. In other words, identity and continuity are becoming uncoupled in their minds. Given these circumstances, young Jews have come

to expect that Jewish institutions, including Jewish educational venues, will accept their highly individualized Jewish identities and support whatever directions their Jewish journeys may take them, even if they are somewhat unconventional or perhaps not uniquely Jewish at all. It is no wonder that the Gen Nexters in my second group of respondents urged Jewish schools of the future to be more syncretic, creative and transformative than they may have been in the past.

Although matters of identity and continuity remain salient within the present-day American Jewish establishment, new types of cultural, ethnic, civic and/or religious Jewish affiliation are becoming increasingly appealing to the rising generation of American Jews who no longer regard establishment concerns as relevant. How Jewish educators prepare American Jewish youth for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Jewish commitments must therefore account for 21<sup>st</sup> Century ways of seeing Jewish life. The challenge of Jewish education going forward is to find something meaningful for coming-of-age Gen Nexters who may willingly participate in Jewish educational activities and seek positive connections to Jewish life, but who are not especially motivated by what they have experienced till now.

What might a Gen Next Jewish education program look like? It would begin with intensive Jewish socialization to be sure, but with special emphasis on Jewish current events, social problems, cultural developments and other facets of contemporary Jewish life, so as to attune Jewish youth to the complexities of today’s Jewish world. Next, it would call for developing a healthy skepticism toward narrowly construed Jewish concerns while still maintaining an appreciation for the importance of Jewish community and continuity. The goal is to open students up to a system of classical Jewish values, including mutual responsibility, justice and *tzedakah*, while considering the extent to which circumstances in the Jewish past and present may reflect either the inviolability of these values or their transgression. Finally, it calls for a commitment to engage in a range of social-justice causes aimed at improving not merely the Jewish world, but also the world at-large. In the end, the ideal graduate of this program is someone who is rooted in Jewish life, dedicated to ethical Jewish values and passionately concerned with universal social betterment. ■

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**Benjamin M. Jacobs, Ph.D.**, is assistant professor of Social Studies, Education and Jewish Studies at NYU. He has authored several studies of the history and theory of social education and Jewish education on the American scene. Jacobs formerly taught history at the Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School in Rockville, MD.

# WHAT DOES LEARNING LOOK LIKE?

## QUESTIONS FROM THE AFTERSCHOOL CARPOOL

by ALEX POMSON

### THE BURDEN OF RESEARCH

“What did you learn today, honey?”  
When such a question is posed in a carpool on the way home from school, it doesn't sound like a research question. Yet, in many ways it is a variation on the ultimate question of educational research: how can the measure of what children learn as a result of educational interventions or experiences be achieved?

Parents who ask this question in the car may not be interested in evaluating the quality of their children's education. They may just want to connect or converse with their kids before the kids turn up the volume on their iPods. For parents, getting children's attention is challenge enough. For researchers, arriving at a meaningful sense of what children have learned comes with a barrel-full of complications. In the simplest terms, these include challenges of reliability (so that measurements produce consistent results) and of validity (meaning that what is being measured is what is claimed to be measured).

For researchers engaged in the study of Jewish learning, generic methodological challenges of this sort are further complicated by opaque or poorly operationalized conceptions of the learning outcomes to be measured. Under these circumstances, for example, it is especially difficult to develop measures of Israel engagement, religious purposefulness or Jewish identity.

For the team involved in studying the impact of afterschool programs attended by children enrolled at Hebrew language charter schools, these facts of research life have stimulated an experiment in developing alternative and unconventional means for researching what children have been learning. Because of the afterschool's unusual features, we have been exploring creative ways to capture children's learning so as to properly reflect the program's goals.

### AFTERSCHOOL OPPORTUNITIES

The afterschool programs that serve Hebrew language charter school students have unique advantages over conventional Hebrew schools because of what children bring with them from their daytime hours in school. Children come to the program with an emerging facility in the Hebrew language; they bring some familiarity with the Jewish world from their social studies lessons; and they arrive with an already formed cohort of friends. Built upon a

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*Alex Pomson, Ph.D., is a Senior Researcher at the Melton Centre for Jewish Education at the Hebrew University, and co-editor of the recently published International Handbook of Jewish Education (Springer, 2011).*

platform of these special social and cultural assets, the afterschool has the potential to provide a holistic Jewish experience that is as much about experiencing Judaism and Jewish life as it is about study or instruction. It certainly doesn't mean devoting painful late afternoon hours to learning the *aleph-bet*. By building on the social and cultural assets that children bring from their experiences in Hebrew language charter schools, the afterschool can provide a camp-like experience that includes both formal and informal instruction in a richly Jewish environment.

With so broad a vision, one that includes a mix of cognitive, affective and behavioral goals, our research team has needed to be highly precise about the learning outcomes to be assessed. We have also needed to be creative about the methodologies used to assess those outcomes, especially given the participants' relatively young age. This approach could not employ the kinds of conventional pencil and paper assessment tests that commonly test knowledge and cognition.

The assessment process we have been developing has great potential for the broader field of Jewish education. Still in emergent form, it contains four core elements:

1. A succinct **mapping** of curriculum goals
2. A general **taxonomy** (a categorical listing) of learning outcomes that encompasses the broad range of program goals
3. A **protocol** (a script) for the conduct of carefully designed, game-like activities that provide children with opportunities to display the learning prescribed in the curriculum map
4. An observational **rubric** (a framework of assessment elements) for identifying the learning outcomes displayed during the course of these activities in relation to curriculum goals

In the limited space here, I'll highlight one aspect of this process that has a potential application to a wide range of Jewish educational settings: use of a taxonomy of learning for identifying the great variety of possible program outcomes.

### A TAXONOMY TO CLASSIFY LEARNING OUTCOMES

In the design of our research, once we had completed a map of curriculum goals, we needed to conceive of the range of performances that might be expected in relation to these goals. We recognized that it was important not only to determine what a child *knows* but also what the child *does* with that knowledge. To this end, we found it fruitful to take up a taxonomy of learn-

ing developed by Lee Shulman in his work at the Carnegie Foundation (<http://www.carnegie-foundation.org/elibrary/making-differences-table-learning>). An appealing feature of Shulman's taxonomy is its inclusion of categories that are both cognitive and affective and which also connect with dimensions of religious sensibility and Jewish identity. Shulman's taxonomy consists of the following items:

- Engagement and Motivation
- Knowledge and Understanding
- Performance and Action
- Reflection and Critique
- Judgment and Design
- Commitment and Identity

Shulman himself cautions against hewing too closely to the taxonomy's categories; for him, the taxonomy serves as a heuristic device — a tool for thought. We have not therefore imposed on ourselves a requirement to uncover all of the taxonomy's elements in the children's behaviors, but we do think that this collection of categories enables us to break out of the straightjacket of looking for specifically cognitive or affective learning outcomes, as was the case with Benjamin Bloom's well-known taxonomy of learning outcomes from the 1950s. Shulman's twelve categories call our attention to what he calls “the mutually interdependent facets of an educated person's life of mind, of emotion, and of action.” They enable us to think clearly about what are the multiple desired goals in an experientially rich setting for Jewish education.

### LOOKING FORWARD

Our work is at an early stage but, having now completed two cycles through the design process, we're pleased with the artifacts and models that have been created thus far. We've been video-recording children as they engage in games designed to make their learning visible. We're pleased that these records of performance lend themselves to precise analysis through the use of an assessment protocol structured around elements of the learning taxonomy. Our design challenge now is to develop the activity protocol and observation rubric so that they can serve as valid and reliable tools that can be used by trained personnel to document the behaviors that children display in more than one afterschool program, and perhaps in other settings too. We haven't solved the ultimate questions of Jewish educational research, but we're hoping that the instruments we develop can make the study of Jewish learning sensitive to the broadest range of possible outcomes, outcomes that together constitute a rich Jewish identity. ■



# GENDER MATTERS: JEWISH IDENTITY, INTERMARRIAGE, AND PARENTHOOD

by KEREN R. MCGINITY

Jewish men and women act out their Jewish identities in different ways according to their contemporary gender roles. In a similar way, when a Jewish woman intermarries and becomes a parent and when a Jewish man intermarries and becomes a parent, their experiences are different. The influence of becoming a parent on their respective Jewish identities, however, is surprisingly similar. Studying intermarried women and men elucidates how Jewish identity is maintained, transformed and reinvented in ways that are authentically meaningful to Jews who self-identify. It also demonstrates why intermarried Jewish men raise less Jewishly-identified children than intermarried Jewish women (Sylvia Barack Fishman and Daniel Parmer, *Matrilineal Ascent/Patrilineal Descent*, Brandeis University, 2008).

Between 1980 and 2000, for participants in my own research study, marrying a Gentile combined with motherhood raised most women's consciousness about Jewish identity and about Judaism. Participants described intensified Jewish identities, increased religious practices or both. For example, when Bonnie Aaronson planned her 1981 wedding, she had a very strong cultural and social identity as a Jew, but she was not a religious person. However, in the late 1980s, after Bonnie had two children, she became actively involved in her synagogue and co-chaired a committee that created an alternative High Holiday service. Interviewed nearly twenty years after she wed, Bonnie remarked, "I have changed pretty dramatically in terms of my Jewish practice and observance..." Although Bonnie may have become "more Jewish" once she became a mother regardless of whether she intermarried, representing a typical American Jewish pattern, the extent of her change over time suggests that the paradox created by her marriage to a non-Jew significantly fostered the development of her Jewish identity.

While the juxtaposition of being Jewish while married

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**Keren R. McGinity, Ph.D.**, is the author of *Still Jewish: A History of Women and Intermarriage in America* (NYU Press, 2009) and *Strangers in the Fold: Jewish Men, Intermarriage, and Fatherhood* (Indiana University Press, 2013). She is a research associate at the Hadassah-Brandeis Institute and a visiting scholar at the University of Michigan's Frankel Center for Judaic Studies. Dr. McGinity is also the founding director of *Love & Tradition* ([www.loveandtradition.com](http://www.loveandtradition.com)), a project devoted to understanding gender and interfaith relationships.



*The challenge to intermarried men raising Jewish children is the tenacity of traditional gender roles. By and large, men continue to be the main breadwinners while women continue to be the information gatherers and social organizers, and as such maintain greater influence over their children's ethnic and religious upbringing.*

to a non-Jew usually heightened women's consciousness about being Jewish, having children made the intermarried Jewish women whom I interviewed decidedly proactive about making Jewish connections, about observance and about Jewish education. Becca Tamen's description of how having children solidified her Jewish identity illustrates the impact of motherhood on intermarried women: "I actually don't think I started firmly thinking about myself as Jewish till I had kids, and then started thinking about religion and the future and what they would be and so what I needed to be." The experience of having a child also forced women to come to terms with the inadequacies of their own Jewish upbringing and to look for creative ways to teach their children (and themselves) about Jewish heritage.

Intermarried Jewish women in the 1980s and 1990s increasingly made sure, even more so than their predecessors in the 1960s and 1970s did, that their children received more Jewish religious and cultural education than they themselves had. This illustrates one way in which Judaism continued to be revitalized by women who married "out." Whereas some women who intermarried in the 1960s and 1970s disassociated Jewish education from Jewish identity, women who intermarried at the end of the century were considerably more committed to Jewish identification through education. They seemed less convinced than their predecessors that their children's Jewish identity was absolute. Whether their children would be Jewish depended on the choices these women made about Jewish education and lifestyle. Coincidentally, through this process, Jewish women also became more involved in Jewish beliefs and practices by learning alongside their children. In a poignant example, a woman who did not have a Jewish rite of passage experience when she was thirteen seriously considered becoming a *bat mitzvah* with her daughter.

Like women, men may experience an awakening of their Jewish identity when they marry and become parents, regardless of whether they intermarry or intermarry, due to greater communal opportunities. Historically and today, the organized Jewish community gears far more of its programming toward family units than to single Jewish men or women. Still, my research revealed that intermarriage and parenthood influenced a deepening of men's Jewish identities in relation to their Gentile-born spouses. For Charles Revkin, being Jewish meant being part of a community. He acknowledged that this became more important as he got older. "It was a combination of circumstances," Charles explained, "where I married someone non-Jewish and then...I knew I wanted to raise my kids Jewish. I know mothers tend to play an important role in that. Here we were not gonna have a Jewish mother, so it's almost like an overreaction to make sure it gets done." Hence, assuming a proactive role in the children's Jewish upbringing became a significant component of Jewish masculinity for some intermarried fathers. The shift over a lifespan could be striking. During his college years, Allan Benjamin preferred to "blend in" as a member of the (Christian) majority than join a Jewish fraternity, but after he intermarried and became a father, he accompanied his children to Tot Shabbat and listened to Jewish CDs. He reflected, "As the kids grow, I'm becoming more open, more Jewish. I'm now somehow a board member of the Jewish Community Center. Seven years ago, I'd be looking at you like 'where is the JCC?'"

Although men's Jewish identities experienced reawakening similar to women's, their experience as parents was secondary to their professional pursuits. However much men are invested in trying to balance or integrate their careers with fatherhood, the social reality in which they live makes prioritizing involvement with their

children an uphill battle. For one participant in my study, a man who intermarried in 1997, his wife was glad to have a Jewish family but told him: to the extent that they're Jewish, he would have to do the work to make that happen. The rationale was not, as one might think, a direct outgrowth of feminist thinking. Rather, it was because she was not Jewish and therefore did not know how to go about raising a Jewish family. He pointed out, "the only problem with that theory is that I'm at work 60 or 70 hours every week," which does not leave much time to ensure his children's Jewish cultural or religious education. The upshot is that the children attended a Jewish day school from kindergarten through second grade, where they were exposed to more Judaic content than their father had. The family transitioned the children to a public school in 2010 but their home life does not include Jewish ritual or observance. It remains to be seen to what extent this father will be able to foster his children's developing Jewish identities without the built-in support of a day-school environment.

The challenge to intermarried men raising Jewish children is the tenacity of traditional gender roles. By and large, men continue to be the main breadwinners while women continue to be the information gatherers and social organizers, and as such maintain greater influence over their children's ethnic and religious upbringing. Hence, the presence of men at places where Jewish identity is nurtured (at home, the community center, the school, the synagogue) is more limited. The upside of being an intermarried Jewish woman is therefore the downside of being an intermarried Jewish man. Gender will persist in influencing the disproportionately low transmission rate of Jewish identity to children of intermarried Jewish men compared to intermarried Jewish women so long as "men's work" outside the home continues to be socially valued more highly than "women's work" inside it. ■



# “It’s a bird, it’s a plane..”

by **LEE S. SHULMAN**

**A**s a kid growing up in Chicago, I was always fascinated by those heroic figures in comic books and movies with hidden identities. The most famous, of course, was Superman and his alter ego, the mild-mannered reporter for the Daily Planet, Clark Kent, whose real identity was unknown even by his girlfriend Lois Lane and his editor Perry White. With nothing more than an available phone booth for a changing room, Clark and Superman would alternate identities with ease, and Metropolis would be saved yet again.

Then there was Batman, who in real life was the socialite Bruce Wayne. Through his identity shifts, complete with the Batmobile and other prostheses, Batman would protect Gotham City whenever summoned by Police Commissioner Gordon using the signature beacon of the Bat Signal. I never imagined that these powerful figures had been invented by Jewish cartoonists named Siegel and Schuster (Superman) and Finger and Kane (Batman). Looking back, I don't think their Jewish lineage was an accident. Indeed, I believe that figures with multiple, simultaneous, interacting and mutually enriching identities are a prototype for a Jewish identity. The authenticity of an identity does not lie in its internal consistency, logical organization or ideological coherence. Identity, properly understood, is not a psychological synthesis but a portfolio of grounded possibilities.

What made Superman such a compelling hero? Did he have an “authentic identity?” Was Superman really Clark Kent and only posing as Superman when he needed to fly and do battle with evil? Was he really Superman and only

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**Lee S. Shulman, Ph.D.**, is President Emeritus of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and Charles E. Ducommun Professor of Education Emeritus at Stanford University. Having returned to Stanford, Lee now directs the Consortium for Applied Studies in Jewish Education ([www.casje.com](http://www.casje.com)).

*What made Superman such a compelling hero?*

*Did he have an “authentic identity?”*

*Was Superman really Clark Kent and only posing as Superman when he needed to fly and do battle with evil?*



pretending to be Clark Kent? Did he harbor a meta-identity, that of the baby who had flown through space from Krypton, and could now don both those identities interchangeably as conditions changed? Or was he a repertoire of identities whose mature form was the result of all his “selves” and the experiences, emotions and accomplishments that each made possible for the other?

Like the Jewish cartoonists, William Shakespeare also reveled in dramas of multiple identities, a plot element that characterizes many of his plays, from *Measure for Measure* to *Twelfth Night*. The very act of becoming more than one person, of inhabiting multiple identities, changes those characters fundamentally. In his great comedy *As You Like It*, the enchanting Rosalind spends most of the play in the guise of the youth Ganymede, with whom her admirer Orlando finds himself falling in love. As irresistible as Rosalind may be (and I have fallen hopelessly in love with her through watching many performances of this play), she is actually a good deal more clever and attractive playing the boy. Where shall we find the real Rosalind? Indeed, where can Rosalind find her real identity? To what extent was the invention and playing of Ganymede an essential developmental stage for the eventual reinvention of a much more mature and fully realized Rosalind? And is the notion that anyone has a real identity — even a character created by Shakespeare — itself an invention, a myth and an illusion?

As Jews, who are we really? Do we have a core identity around which swirl a variety of disguises that we don as we move from setting to setting and from mood to mood? Or are we a loosely linked array of multiple identities among which we alternate in different circumstances? I'd like to propose that not only is Jewish identity a loosely connected repertoire of selves, a portfolio of possibilities, but that nurturing these multiple identities is of great value, and educating Jewish youth to

develop, inhabit and nurture those identities is a proper goal for Jewish education.

I often hear my friends in the Jewish community ask themselves “How should a person like me act in a situation like this?” For example, “When I face the newest political crisis involving Israel, should I respond as a historian, a Conservative Jew, a Republican or as the chair of the Federation’s Israel Action Committee?” During studies of how nurses, physicians, lawyers, engineers and clergy develop and deploy their professional identities, my colleagues and I regularly observed professional practitioners actively experimenting with their co-existing identities, trying them on to explore their options in complex, uncertain situations.

The development and elaboration of multiple identities is not a lame response to the complexities of modern life. Multiple identity formation is not an affliction of the spirit, akin in some fashion to the multiple personalities of the Three Faces of Eve or of Sybil. Based largely on those studies of the development of professional identity among professionals — including Jewish and non-Jewish clergy — I have concluded that multiple identity formation is a virtue, a desirable accomplishment in the course of a successful education and a mature religious and personal formation. Being able to both see one’s circumstances and live in the world as both Clark Kent and Superman is a boon to our kryptonite-sensitive superhero, just as it is to Batman and Bruce Wayne, or Rosalind and Ganymede. The different identities permit the protagonist to engage life more fully and with greater versatility than if he or she is shackled with only one “authentic” self.

Since being Jewish is itself a complex set of identity choices and possibilities, some of the most powerful Jewish educational experiences offer opportunities for individuals or groups to experiment with different Jewish identities.

One of the ways to think about such experiments as Birthright Israel is how they provide structured occasions for creating short-term rough drafts of a new Jewish/Israeli/American identity and encourage participants to rehearse those identities with others. Learning to be Jewish is a long, winding and arduous journey at the heart of which is the formation of those identities that together define us as Jews.

An identity is a set of lenses through which people experience themselves and the world. Yet, these lenses are not wholly independent of one another. They interact and influence one another and at times can both blend and interfere. They add complexity and richness to our grasp of ourselves, our worlds and our practices. This complexity can feel like a rich repertoire of capacities and potential; it can also feel like a painful burden. When Mordecai Kaplan asserted that he was developing a theology for the American Jew, he was claiming that Jews in America were both American and Jewish, in both their distinctiveness and their interaction, and incorporating the inherent complexity and confusion that each of those designations entails. At times one aspect of this hybrid will assert its primacy, at other times another, but most of the time the two will fuse, wrestle and surprise. This is a truly authentic identity, but not one that is coherent, neat and consistent.

As Ralph Waldo Emerson observed: “A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do.” (Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self Reliance”)

The formation of Jewish identity gives the Jewish soul plenty to do. Jewish educators and community leaders need to appreciate how demanding this project is, and to support the array of formal and informal programs needed to afford each generation the experiences it needs to shape the complex identities of our people. ■

**The Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life**

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What circumstances  
lead people to view  
Judaism as a resource  
that they can actively  
draw upon in making  
sense of their lives and  
the world around them?

What leads them to see  
it as a meaningful  
framework as they move  
forward in their lives?

— BETHAMIE HOROWITZ