

## *Jewish Identity in Australia*

The past two decades have witnessed an intense preoccupation with 'Jewish identity' in the Australian Jewish communities. Fear for the survival of Jews as a distinct minority group verges on an obsession with Jewish identity. The discussion has focussed mainly on definitions of Jewishness and on devising strategies for encouraging active forms of Jewish identification. There has been much less effort to understand why Jewish identity has become a problem.

### *General Factors in Modern Society*

Jewish identity has become a problem throughout the English speaking world for reasons associated with the modern 'open society'. Life in a society based on liberal notions of minority emancipation and equality creates problems for Jewish

identity, both in principle and practice.

In pre-emancipation corporate closed societies, identity was a public matter. Jewish identity was defined by birth, a specific way of life, and sets of values which gave the Jew both his formal identity and his identifiability. Identity and identification were almost perfectly correlated.

In open societies minority identity is a matter of private choice and public indifference. This allows an option between Jewish identity or non-identity, so that Jewish identity has come to be defined by personal decision and voluntary commitment, rather than passive acquiescence to an inherited attribute over which the individual has no control.

What constitutes the 'Jewish' part of identity becomes an issue for further discussion. In fact much of the debate in Australia has concentrated on attempts to define how Jewishness should be expressed. The focus has been on isolating the individual components that separately or together comprise Judaism. There appears to be a general consensus that Jewishness is composed of three major cultural factors:

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nationality, religion and community. It is through one or more of these components that Jewish identity is expressed. The open society, by its very nature, obstructs the 'Jewish' aspect of Jewish identity by undermining each of these main components.

The 'nationality' component of Jewish identity is undermined by the tendency to confuse or even ignore the distinction between nationality and citizenship. [This is not the problem of conflicting dual loyalties which is usually raised in connection with Jewish attachment to the State of Israel.] The problem is that in open societies such as Australia, nationality and citizenship are synonymous. Australian Jews are Australian citizens, so that distinctive Jewish national identity is impossible. The second aspect of the problem is that the concept of Jewish nationality itself defies definition in the modern political sense. Jewish immigrants to Australia usually do not see themselves as nationals of the countries from where they migrated, as other ethnic groups do. Polish Jews, for instance, see themselves as part of a Jewish 'nation' rather than as former Polish nationals. Australian-born Jews, also, see themselves as part of a Jewish nation.

This raises the question of how one can identify with what is actually a 'supra-nation' which has no political sovereignty but which nevertheless involves allegiance, historical continuity, and international credibility. In practice, where nationality and citizenship are identical, Jewish nationality is reduced to a spiritual affinity or an emotional, historical notion of peoplehood.

The religious component of

Jewishness, which is the basis of spiritual supra-nationality, is also undermined by the liberal nature of open Anglo-Saxon societies. In the 19th century, liberalism had a positive influence on Jewish minority existence. The separation of Church and State, with its corollaries of religious pluralism and toleration, brought freedom and equality for Jews in the political, legal and religious domains.

Liberalism has nevertheless been a negative influence on religion. On one hand, society has remained regulated by Christian culture and values, creating difficulties for Jews as 'eternal nonconformists'. On the other hand, liberalism has relegated religion to the private domain. An individual's religion is a matter of public indifference and has ceased to be a distinguishing characteristic or an essential personal guiding force. The extent to which Jews have been thus influenced is demonstrated by surveys which indicate that over 80% of Australian Jews neither regard themselves nor behave as religious people.

Finally, modern society undermines the component of 'community' in Jewish identity. The sense of community, of Jewish peoplehood and of interresponsibility between Jews is fundamental to the concept of Jewish group identity. But this feeling of community is eroded by the mass nation-state and by the anonymity and alienation of the individual in urban society. This is aggravated by other negative influences associated with liberalism which encourage economic success, individualism and personal development rather than collective social responsibility. Where there is

scant respect for the notions of collective identity and community responsibility, the sense of community which is an essential component of Jewish identity only flourishes with difficulty.

It is worth noting that the sense of community flourishes best in small scale societies such as East European *shtetls* and rural tribal states or in societies with a collective ideology, such as China or the Israeli kibbutz. This also occurs in countries whose physical survival is threatened such as Israel. Liberalism is indeed a vital component of any modern democratic system. Yet the boundaries of liberalism have to be set so that it does not erode collective consciousness or corporate responsibility. Otherwise the society or community may be in danger of disintegration.

These factors constitute elements which render the environment unfavorable to the development and expression of Jewish identity. In addition, Jews themselves adopt the values and way of life of the societies in which they live. Thus Jewish identity is a problem created both by non-Jewish life and by Jews themselves.

### *Specific Problems of Jewish Identity in Australia*

The tendency among Jews to concentrate on analyzing varieties of Jewish identification is predicated on the assumptions: (a) that identification confers identity, and (b) that if one can identify the components of Jewishness, then the problem of identity becomes practical: how to encourage commitment to the various components. These assumptions ignore some of the

basic facts of Jewish life in Australia which suggest that the problem of Jewish identity may actually be insoluble. In other words, the prospect for Jewish identity to survive in Australia is poor. Perhaps the real issue is not how, but for how long can Jews survive as Jews.

Jewish identity in Australia is developed in response to two stimuli: the environment created within the Jewish communities themselves and the environment created by the host society.

### *Factors Within the Jewish Community*

There are many factors within the Australian Jewish communities which create obstacles for the development of personal and communal Jewish identity, and the answer may not be simply to encourage Jewish identification. These are factors over which the individual and the group could have some control, and some ways of minimizing them are suggested.

A basic factor creating problems of identity and survival is the small size of the Australian Jewish communities. Apparently, minority communities need to be of some minimum size in order to be viable and to maintain a distinctive identity. Corporate consciousness is undoubtedly related to numbers and to strength as a pressure group. Thus Jewish identity in the United States is directly related to the fact that there are some five million American Jews there, and the growing assertion of Greek minority identity in Melbourne is a function of the size of the Greek community, now estimated at 160,000.

Examples of the Australian Jewish communities, of which none has survived on a permanent organized basis, demonstrate the tendency for a numerically small minority to disappear either by assimilation into the local society or by transfer to a larger Jewish community. Unfortunately we do not know what minimum population is required for Jewish identity to survive, especially in isolated circumstances. Given the pessimistic prognosis for the survival of small communities such as Brisbane (1,500) or Adelaide (1,000), one wonders whether Jewish identity even in communities of 30,000 such as Melbourne or Sydney is viable in the long term.

The encouragement of a sense of Jewish identity is particularly a problem in the under-30 age group. If group identity, especially among young people, is largely a response to peer group relationships, then it seems desirable that there should be maximum opportunity to establish friendship and common-interest relationships. This might well be one of the major, if often overlooked, functions of the Jewish day school. The fewer Jews there are in one's age group, the scarcer the opportunity for finding peers with whom to identify. Consequently, the individual would be much less likely to develop a personal Jewish identity. Indeed, many young Jews reject a Jewish identity simply because they dislike or have little in common with the comparatively few young Jews they know.

From this perspective, it is disastrous that the Jewish birth rate in Australia has declined so drastically. As in the 1920's, we are again dependent on pos-

sible immigration for our numerical strength. Therefore, we should be encouraging the full absorption into our communities of Jewish immigrants whatever their motivation wherever they come from, be it Russia or South Africa.

Furthermore, we should be placing much more emphasis in Jewish education on socialization. The social role of the school in fostering friendship groups and discouraging intermarriage is often denigrated and mocked. Yet, schools, along with the family, youth movements and other communal organizations, are socialization agents. They help young people to feel comfortable with other Jews and to form close personal bonds with them.

Our residential patterns also hinder the development and maintenance of Jewish identity. Historically, Jews have maintained their identity best when they have lived closely together, despite their consequent physical vulnerability. This was not only in order to have access to Jewish institutions like synagogues and kosher food. Personal involvement in a community and identification with a community are closely related to neighborhood proximity.

In Australia, community identity and involvement require considerable personal effort. The pattern of Australian town planning involves long traveling distances between suburbs and central areas. Moreover, the Australian culture itself has little community tradition; whatever inchoate community identity exists is very much on the neighborhood level.

As Jewish families prosper, they tend to move into 'better class' non-Jewish neighborhoods. This pattern is particularly noticeable in Sydney where

Jews live isolated from other Jews or in relatively small pockets interspersed among non-Jews. The tendency is not as marked in Melbourne where Jews have moved to more prestigious Jewish neighborhoods in groups or waves.

The reputation for stronger Jewish identity among Melbourne Jews is directly connected to their pattern of residing in voluntary ghettos such as Carlton in the 1920's or Caulfield since the 1960's. This has minimized the personal effort required for developing Jewish identity, because it has fostered the development of community on a local neighborhood basis. It has especially facilitated social relationships between Jewish children and adolescents and has encouraged a situation where young married couples also opt to live in established or newly emerging ghetto communities such as East Brighton in the 1950's and Doncaster since the 1960's. But in the outer suburbs, where Jews live isolated from the active ghetto community, Jewish identity requires greater personal effort, and the problem is similar to that in Sydney.

One cannot avoid the conclusion that Jewish identity is helped when Jews live in concentrated voluntary ghettos that facilitate both community involvement and personal inter-relationships. Indeed, one explanation for the intense community spirit in Israel is that it is actually a large-scale ghetto.

Changes in the ethnic background of Australian Jewry also work against the long term development of Jewish identity. Identity in the Diaspora had always been based on Jewish distinctiveness because Jews are culturally different from the host society. But Australian

Jews are becoming less different as they become more Australianized. More than 50% of Australian Jews were born in Australia or England, and they are moving away from the non-Anglo-Saxon cultural roots which gave them much of their distinctive quality and character. In Australia, distinctiveness is associated with foreignness. But Australian Jews are no longer a foreign or migrant minority group, and the remaining issue is whether they are an *ethnic or religious group*.

Other minority groups have come to realize that culture is inseparable from language. The Greek community in Melbourne, for example, has become aware that authentic Greek identity deteriorates as Greeks lose their language in its classical literary or its modern spoken forms. It follows that if Jews are to preserve their cultural identity, then Jewish languages must be actively promoted, not as foreign languages but as active vernaculars. This includes Yiddish as well as Hebrew. In the past five years there has been a revival of Yiddish as a language of Jewish culture and as a respectable vernacular, in Israel and the United States. Even in Melbourne this has occurred on a small scale, as reflected in the establishment of a Yiddish day school and a popular Yiddish language course in the Jewish Studies program at Prahran College.

The fact that language is both the key to minority identity and the tool by which cultural assimilation is achieved is well understood in our society. Despite all the lip service paid to the ideal of a multi-cultural society, the Australian culture is Anglo-conformist. English is

the sole vernacular. English is the key to 'getting on' in our society. It is the essential tool for entry to higher education, the professions and for social advancement. The immigrant who does not acquire English remains a 'guest worker' on the fringes of the culture. The Australian ethos exerts pressure to acquire English, usually at the expense of the former vernacular. When one hears teachers discuss the negative effects of the home vernacular on a child's mastery of English one quickly realizes the pressures towards Anglicization and a monolingual society being fostered in schools, which are, in Australia, the main socialization agencies.

Culture is also a way of life, a process expressed by ritual and behavior. There are many Christian critics, for instance, who see the lack of ritual in Protestantism as a hindrance to the development of Christian identity. As Judaism moves away from its own orthodox religious base, some adherence to distinctive ritual becomes more necessary if Jewish identity is to involve a distinctive way of life. While modern society tends to reject the notion of mechanistic ritual, we need to rethink the role of ritual in Jewish identity.

One of the major reasons for the difficulty of developing a Jewish identity in Australia is that we are a Jewishly ignorant community. The lack of a Jewishly educated 'proletariat' is due to our mode of migration and to a poor Jewish educational system. The mass of Australian Jews do not know the content of Judaism, nor the values, attitudes and behavior appropriate to Jews. They are what might be called 'residual Jews', and many are already on the way to be-

ing 'terminal Jews'. It is because of this prevailing cultural ignorance that there is no unity among Australian Jewry. An *internal pluralism* has developed that maintains fragments of identity. Thus, we have Jews whose identity is either religious, historical, Zionistic or organizational. Jewish identity has become largely sentiment, loyalty and nostalgia. We are unable or unwilling to rethink fundamentals and even explore the unthinkable. This makes us vulnerable to the increasing influence of the dominant contemporary culture. We find ourselves unable to grapple with defining, let alone forging, a concept of modern Australian Jewish identity.

One practical consequence of this mass Jewish ignorance is that the Jewish family can no longer fulfill its traditional role as the primary Jewish socialization agent. In the Australian Jewish culture this role has been relegated to the Jewish school, the institution which is now expected to "make the child into a Jew," rather than to educate him as a Jew. Whether Jewish schools can in fact provide a sense of Jewish identity is problematic. Jewish schools in Australia are themselves adaptations to the values and institutions of the dominant Australian ethos. Far from conflicting with the home influence, they reinforce it.

We must attempt to re-Judaize the adult community as well. Education should not be regarded as limited to children and adolescents. We must have formal programs for adult Jewish education. This will promote the idea of a learning-oriented community, which is central to Jewish identity. It will also

revive the idea of a natural Jewish culture where we do not confuse the means whereby we express our identity with the identity itself.

Another major difficulty in developing a concept of an Australian Jewish identity is its lack of a Jewish intelligentsia. In this respect we have something in common with the Moroccan Jews in Israel. A Jewish intelligentsia could provide personal and collective leadership for the creative formulation of future directions based on authentic Jewish knowledge and tradition. It would help forge the concepts of Jewish identity which would be attractive and meaningful in the local context.

Australia does have isolated Jewish intellectuals who are often regarded as eccentrics or freaks. In the main, however, we have Jews whose intellectualism is secular rather than Jewish. They may retain some minimal Jewish identity, but few could be classified as actively ethnic. It is a reflection of our Jewish deterioration that our secular academics and professionals enjoy the highest status in our community, even when they are ignorant of Judaism.

The vacuum created by our lack of a Jewish intelligentsia means that we are led either by exotica, such as the Lubavitch, whose appeal is emotional and sentimental, or by organization men who are selected as leaders because they have the time and money.

We have become an *organization-centered* community, in which the various Jewish organizations are Jewish culture. What began as *ways* of expressing Jewish identity have become the final *goals* of community life, synonymous with Jewish identity itself. The

organizational activity has become an end in itself, without concern for the values or aims which it allegedly serves.

This organizational culture lacks Jewish intellectual leadership as well as a 'Jewish professional class' (as distinct from professionals who are Jewish). Our organizational executives are employed community workers who happen to be Jewish. However, only the 'Jewish professional' can apply an authentic Jewish perspective to secular professional theories and can distinguish between the activities themselves and their underlying values and goals. In the long run, Jewish identity cannot be left to amateurs. When the community is led by people whose Jewish identity is satisfying, fulfilling and inspiring in an ideological sense, then we may attract those who are in search of their own identity.

Questions such as "Why be a Jew? Why opt for a Jewish identity?" have been posed making it obvious that there are many features in Jewish life with which many people, particularly the young, cannot identify. In an era and an environment which encourages respect for academic excellence, they cannot identify with the uneducated amateur. In a society which promotes the notion of individual ideals and personal identity, they cannot identify with an organizational community and culture. For most young people, participating in routine organizational tasks is hardly a fulfillment of their Jewish identity.

Our organizational structure has led to internal schisms and rivalries. Diversity and dissent are not in themselves detrimental to Jewish identity, but the issues over which we actually argue are

rarely significant. Nor are our schisms ideologically productive. On the contrary, our internal disagreements are neither creative nor attractive. There is no inducement to identify as a Jew when all that that seems to mean is taking sides in sterile or destructive factional disputes.

Moreover, we have not developed modes for expressing identity which appeal to individuals who are undecided about their Jewish identity. The chief expression of Jewish identity in Australia seems to be organizational membership and fund raising. This is unfortunate for many reasons. First, it restricts identity to 'joiners,' virtually forcing non-joiners into a marginal class excluded from the benefits of membership. Second, fund raising places Jewish identity on a materialistic basis, dissatisfying to those seeking other modes of identification and discouraging to those who cannot afford to identify by primarily financial means.

Essentially, our organizational community stresses participation and attendance as the accepted modes of Jewish identification. There is little scope for expressing Jewish identity on a personal or informal basis. Yet what is Jewish about an identity expressed by belonging to a committee, discussing menus for forthcoming functions or listening to a synagogue sermon which is mediocre and boring? We have not even begun to develop ways in which individuals can find a sense of personal Jewish identity, or which can help them feel that Jewish identity has a value to themselves as individuals, that it is indeed a part of their personal development and self realization. This is an aspect of Jewish identity

with which Australian Jewry has never grappled.

### *Problems Created by the External Host Society*

Apart from the difficulties which our particular forms of community existence pose for the development of Jewish identity, Australian society also constitutes a hostile environment. It is suggested that the Australian culture and characteristics which are increasingly adopted by Jews are, in fact, opposed to the development of an authentic, distinctive and viable Jewish identity.

Perhaps the dominant value emphasized in Australian culture is self-orientation as opposed to group orientation or collectivity. Australian culture has its roots in a philosophy that is highly individualistic, self-centered and egoistic. The individual is supposed to be self made and the sole source of all moral judgment. This reflects an asocial spirit. This is contrary to the sense of community which is basic to Jewish identity. Jews have adapted to this culture: They are reluctant to sacrifice their individuality for the good of the group; they increasingly accept inter-marriage; they frequently say "We're all human beings," or, "I'm Australian"; and they attend Jewish day schools more for the status than the group fulfillment.

The ultimate institution of Australian individualism is the nuclear family. It is primarily an economic unit with no stress on the function of developing co-responsibility. This institution is replacing the traditional Jewish religious family. It is an example of the ways in which the Australian ethos is hostile to the



development of Jewish communal identity and the principle of mutual responsibility.

Although nominally a Christian society, Australia is more accurately a secular or humanist society in which the individual has an option for rejection. The culture is areligious, in that religion is not acknowledged as a consciously cultivated and essential aspect of identity, yet, to cite but two examples, life is regulated by the Christian calendar and Rabbis resemble Christian ministers.

Jews have adapted to the Australian culture. They no longer regard religion as an integral aspect of their Jewish identity. This is demonstrated both in the shearing away of traditional rituals in the process of adapting to modern life and in the rejection of religious identity altogether. One only needs to look at the state of religion in our community, notwithstanding nominal synagogue membership. Less than ten per cent of Jews could define themselves as religious in the formal orthodox sense.

Therefore, we are forced to define Jewish identity by other criteria, such as community, culture, ethics, or pseudo-nationality and commitment to Israel. And even these do not all harmonize with the Australian environment. Pseudo-national identity also fluctuates with the degree of sympathy for Israel in the general society. It is more difficult to identify with Israel when it is less popular. This suggests that ultimately Jews are influenced by non-Jewish considerations.

The Australian culture is anti-intellectual or, at best, nonintellectual. Jewish culture is bookish and learning

oriented. Australian culture is based on materialism rather than on respect for knowledge for its own sake. In this area, too, Jews have been influenced by the dominant attitudes to culture and education. Traditional Jewish respect for knowledge now tends to be concentrated on secular and vocational knowledge, because these are the avenues to material advancement and social status. Jewish knowledge, which was the foundation of Jewish identity and loyalty, is now seen as practically useless, belonging to a marginal area of life, intellectually unsophisticated and unchallenging.

Australia is essentially a middle class society, and Jews exhibit the predominant middle class Australian traits in a more integrated fashion than any other group. Australian Jewry has adapted to the dominant behavior patterns within the general community so well that it is often hard to tell which are Jewish values and which are secular middle class values.

Middle class values make inroads at all levels of Jewish life. On the individual level, the modern Jewish mind is shaped by secular education according to three principles, all of which erode the development of a concept of personal Jewish identity: the principle of secularization and free inquiry that gives the individual the option of rejection; the principle of empiricism that makes belief irrelevant to experience; and the spirit of humanism and rationalistic speculation that undermines the concept of complete authority and ultimate values, and heightens the sense of individuality and the final authority of the human being.

Jewish educational institutions and attitudes also reflect the dominant middle class pattern. Jewish visitors to Mount Scopus College and Moriah College may be impressed by these schools as Jewish institutions, but non-Jewish observers remark on the striking similarity of these Jewish schools to their Christian equivalents. Similarly, the propensity of Jews to obtain higher education and professional careers is due less to their traditional esteem for knowledge than to their view of education as an avenue for acculturation and material success. Furthermore, higher education is common to both Jews and non-Jews, indicating a predominant general value pattern.

At the Jewish organizational level, competition, rivalry and lack of systematic co-operation reflect the competitive values which affect organizations as well as individuals in the Australian culture. Fund raising, membership recruitment, and attracting large audiences to functions are all quantitative measures of success. Communal organizations not only fail to discourage middle class and mass cultural values, but their very success depends on furthering their growth.

### *Conclusion*

Jewish life under minority conditions in modern society where the 'natural'

culture is not Jewish has created a crisis of belief which has led to a crisis of identity. While the development of Jewish identity in modern society cannot be based on natural Jewish culture, it can not, nevertheless, be based on a synthesis of Jewish and Australian cultures either. Such a synthesis is impossible because the specific characteristics of the Australian culture are fundamentally hostile to the values underlying Jewish identity and culture.

It follows that any prognosis for Jewish survival in Australia would have to be negative. It is only a question of how long before the Jewish identity of Jews in Australia disappears. Generally, the long term prospects for the development of viable Jewish identity when Jews are a minority in an open Christian society appear minimal.

Only where Jews are themselves the dominant majority and only when the dominant culture of their environment is Jewish, can they live in circumstances favorable to the development of a meaningful and creative Jewish identity, based on a synthesis of all the components of Jewishness. Clearly, the only country where this is possible is Israel. *Aliyah* seems to be the only way in which Australian Jews can ensure that they and their descendants can hope to forge a meaningful Jewish identity.