

# Checklist Judaism, Feckless Journalism: There Must be a Better Way to Probe a Person's Jewishness

By Andrew Silow-Carroll

When I was the editor of a Jewish weekly newspaper, I grew so tired of profiles of Jewish celebrities that I once threatened to drop them altogether. It wasn't just the reheated biography and the unenlightening quotes that bored me, but the obligatory "Jewish" paragraph that the genre and our audience seemed to demand:

Wayne 'Lockjaw' Schwartz (rhymes with 'sports!'), thought to be the first Jewish batsman to have hit .300 in two different millennia, grew up in the largely Jewish suburb of Brookcove Hills Heights, the son of Tillie Schwartz, a schoolteacher, and Len Schwartz, a salesman. His grandfather, Yussel, was a rabbi back in Lithuania. Wayne attended Hebrew school and was bar mitzvahed at Congregation B'nai Beth Tikva Shalom. Wayne acknowledges that he rarely goes to services anymore, but 'I still care about the traditions--you know, family, the candles. And two years ago I signed autographs at a Hadassah function. CRUNCH.'

Of course, Wayne didn't say "CRUNCH"; that was the sound of my head smacking the desktop and jarring me awake. In the place of profiles I proposed that we just publish a photograph of the athlete, actor or comedian du jour, alongside a checklist of his or her Jewish bona fides. "Both parents Jewish? Yes. Bar mitzvahed? Yes. Hebrew school? Some. Attends synagogue? Rarely. Yiddish vocabulary exceeds 'chutzpah' and 'shmuck'? No."

That was all our readers cared about anyway, wasn't it? Why punish them with turgid prose when all they really want is an answer to that evergreen Jewish question: "How Jewish is he/she?"

Jewish journalists are not the only ones who are wedded to checklist Judaism. As my colleagues at CLAL have stressed in recent years, the Jewish world in general is obsessed with the "How Jewish is...?" question. It's what most of the major Jewish demographic studies have been trying to get at. Answering "yes" to a certain number of time-honored Jewish practices and attitudes puts the respondent in the "core" Jewish category; if your numbers are low, you are eligible for the "marginally Jewish" category.

The problem is that the checklists miss the kind of Jewishness that may not be expressed in particular, recognizably "Jewish" behaviors--at least behaviors recognized as Jewish by rabbis, communal professionals and other Jewish gatekeepers. Nevertheless, this Jewishness can be a powerful motivating and

self-defining force for an individual. I'm thinking of the kind of person who feels his or her Jewishness so deeply, obviously and organically, that questions about his or her synagogue attendance, gifts to Jewish causes or even marital status are simply irrelevant. For such a Jew, the question "How Jewish are you?" has no meaning whatsoever. How "horsey" is a horse? How "flowery" is a flower? There are some things that cannot be quantified.

That, however, doesn't mean we stop feeling curious about the Jewish lives of celebrities--or that of our neighbors, for that matter. We're all voyeurs, that's part of it. But any good newspaper article, or study, can be an opportunity for readers to learn something about themselves, to see their emotions and prejudices confirmed or challenged. We ask, "How Jewish is...?" in order to reinforce our understanding of what our own Jewishness is, or (better yet, but don't hold your breath) provoke a new understanding of what it could be.

So what might a profile in a Jewish newspaper look like if its author tried to convey the quality, rather than the quantity, of its subject's Jewish attachments? Quite possibly like an article on the presidential elections in Peru that appeared in the May 17, 2000 edition of The New York Times. The article explains how Eliane Kapp, a "strawberry-blond, Belgian-born, naturalized American" had become an asset in the campaign of her husband, Alejandro Toledo, who was President Alberto Fujimori's leading opponent. Kapp speaks to and inspires crowds of Peruvian Indians in their native language, Quechua, and is an expert in the country's folk culture. She's a feminist, speaks out against government corruption and has pledged to push for agricultural reforms if she were to become Peru's First Lady.

You also learn, about one-quarter of the way through the story, that Kapp "found her political identity in her Jewish roots." "My vision of Judaism is one of light and justice that is totally impossible to reconcile with dictatorship," she explains. A "turning point" for her came while studying at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem in the 1970s. "I learned in Israel that you don't take no for an answer."

The article also goes on to explain that her father was a French Resistance fighter before being captured by Klaus Barbie's forces, and that her mother was a Jewish beauty queen in her native Belgium.

Writing for a mainstream newspaper, reporter Clifford Krauss was under no compunction to highlight or celebrate his subject's Jewishness. For him it was an important but not the only factor in understanding Kapp. He didn't care about her Jewish bona fides, only about her experience as a Jew and how it contributed to making her the person that she was, in her eyes and in the eyes of others.

The article does not include the question that prompted Kapp to describe her "vision of Judaism." But I'm guessing it was not, "How Jewish are you?" or a series of questions about the ritual practices she does or does not perform.

The result is a statement of Jewish identity that is neither apologetic ("I'm not very religious but...") nor pandering ("Yes, there will be seder in the presidential palace!"). Instead, Kapp provides an affirmation of Jewishness that is true to her own experience, and no doubt to that of thousands of Times readers.

How many politicians, athletes or celebrities are prepared to define what their Jewishness means to them, and only them? The only way to find out is by asking a new question. Instead of "How Jewish are you?" we might try "How are you Jewish?" And we might need to remind our subjects that there no wrong answers.