

Jewish Boundaries and American Openness

BY HERB LEVINE

My wife and teen-age daughter are co-authoring a book of short stories about the problems faced by contemporary Jewish teens. For a story that focuses on inter-dating, my daughter suggested the following plot element: the Jewish heroine sneaks out of the house to pursue what has been forbidden her—dating a non-Jewish boy. When they meet at a local hangout and he orders a pepperoni pizza, she realizes she can't go any further with the date. She can socialize with this non-Jew, perhaps even be romantically inclined toward him, but the pepperoni pizza is too much. It represents a line she just can't bring herself to cross, a taboo that reminds her that she is a loyal Jew.

This story illustrates the power that inculcating Jewish boundaries can have in shaping our identities. Our concern for boundaries makes Jewish life distinctive and substantial, communicable not as abstraction, but as deeply engrained, lived experience.

No cultural group can long survive without a boundary that defines who or what is inside and who or what is

outside. Such boundaries are not facts of nature, but rather, are socially constructed and maintained by human cultural practices and symbolic representations, such as are fostered by religions and governments. Those representations and the boundaries they make possible vary in their strength from culture to culture and within a given culture. But one fact about cultural boundaries is universally acknowledged: the more a group feels itself threatened from without, the tighter it draws the boundaries around itself.¹ Boundaries demarcate the limits of what is known, safe, home, while marking the outside as alien, other. Often such boundary rules focus around issues of food and sexuality: what can be eaten and who can be married are not just Jewish obsessions, but, as British anthropologist Mary Douglas has shown, concerns shared by tribal cultures around the world.²

Ancient Boundaries

Writing about ancient Israel, Douglas stresses how much that society felt itself to be at risk as a small monotheist nation in a sea of polythe-

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ist neighbors.³ The great national sin throughout the Hebrew Bible is worship of foreign gods, some of them brought in by the foreign wives of Judean and Israelite kings, some of them connected to pockets of indigenous peoples remaining in the land after the Israelite conquest. On his return from Babylon, the priest Ezra, the disseminator (and perhaps editor) of the Torah, found in Judea a tremendous amount of intermarriage, both on the part of those who had stayed and those who had earlier returned from exile with foreign wives. One of his most significant and dramatic acts was to mandate that all men with foreign wives divorce them and expel their children (Ezra 10: 3-5). We cannot know the degree to which this plan was carried out, but its prominence in the narrative of Ezra indicates how very threatened was Israel's identity in the early post-exilic period. If this was indeed the period in which the Torah took its final form, as most scholars think, then it is little wonder that the boundary issues of maintaining a distinctive Israelite identity and theology should so thoroughly permeate the Torah traditions.⁴ Of central concern are not only political boundaries, but also social and bodily ones that could be maintained by pollution rules. The priestly legislation of Leviticus sets forth purity rules with numerous applications of the basic dichotomy, pure or impure, clean or unclean, into which the laws of *kashrut* fall.

What the individual body eats reflects the fundamental concerns of

the social body, because the body, as Douglas and other anthropologists have shown us, symbolizes society in microcosm. Douglas draws analogies between what is permitted for the table and what is permitted for the altar; unblemished animals of permitted species are offered by unblemished priests of permitted lineage. One sort of boundary points to another that is homologous with it. "The perfect physical specimens point to the perfectly bounded temple, altar, and sanctuary. And these in their turn point to the hard-won and hard-to-defend territorial boundaries of the Promised Land...Israel is the boundary that all the other boundaries celebrate and that gives them their historic load of meaning."⁵ In other words, the meaning of a particular practice, such as *kashrut*, cannot be separated from its function in maintaining the separateness and integrity of the people Israel.⁶ I find it striking that while ancient Israel's neighbors had complex codes of justice and morality, none of them, from what we know of their surviving texts, had dietary prohibitions remotely resembling those of Israel, since none of them were as concerned about retaining their separate identity as a people set apart for a holy purpose.

It is just such boundary-maintaining rules that have been most under attack in the liberal movements of Judaism since the Napoleonic Emancipation allowed us Jews to enter the portals of Western (read: Christian) civilization. Concern for what the Christians might think has been cen-

tral in many Jews' shedding of distinctive cultural practices, practices which for centuries had served to strengthen boundaries against social and sexual intercourse with Christians. In the Reform movement's current commentary to the Torah, we read: "Many Christians resented the unwillingness of Jews to eat in Christian homes. The desire to break down such barriers was one of the considerations that led the founders of the Reform movement to rethink the question of dietary observance."⁷

What Will the Gentiles Think?

We can see similar concerns in Mordecai Kaplan's promotion of a flexible attitude toward the traditional dietary laws. In suggesting that the main purpose of such practices is "to add Jewish atmosphere to the home," Kaplan argued that "there is no reason for suffering the inconvenience and self-deprivation which results from a rigid adherence outside the home." The Jew should therefore feel free "to eat freely in the house of a Gentile, and to refrain from eating trefa in the house of a fellow-Jew."⁸

Expressed in this double standard, we find Kaplan's ambivalence about Jewish boundaries vis-à-vis American civilization. Jews can and should maintain their own cultural practices with one another as distinctive folkways that are constitutive of their peoplehood, but when with outsiders, they should accommodate the majority culture. A century and a half of Jewish accommodationist thinking

lies behind Kaplan's view. As Moses Mendelssohn argued at the dawn of Jewish modernity, in eighteenth-century Germany, Jews should be Jews at home, and Germans in the street. With such a double standard as Kaplan proposes, "dietary practices would no longer foster the aloofness of the Jew, which, however, justified in the past, is totally unwarranted in our day."⁹

With respect to the non-Jew, it would seem that Kaplan did not see Jewish "aloofness" as neutral, but rather as something that might give offense. Sociologist though he was, Kaplan was not willing to affirm boundary-maintaining devices for their own sake. "If Judaism is inherently so weak that it requires the artificial barriers of social aloofness fostered by dietary laws for its maintenance, the very need for maintaining it is gone."¹⁰

Though he was deeply engaged in strategies for perpetuating the Jewish people, Kaplan was willing to limit the demands of *kashrut* to every meal in which the Jew was at home, or in another Jew's home, where intra-Jewish bonds could be strengthened through dietary regulations. If Kaplan had a concern that this double standard might lead a generation raised upon it to abandon Jewish dietary regulations altogether, he did not express it. What was most important with respect to the larger non-Jewish world was that the Jew should by no means "forego opportunities to enlarge the scope of his usefulness."¹¹

America, Land without Boundaries

Kaplan's ambivalence about rigid social boundaries reflects a deeply-held American attitude, which we have come to understand in the image of America as "melting pot," an idea as old as the Republic itself.¹² Americans are the people who, in embracing immigrants from around the world, created a new universal breed, so the myth goes. American society is open to all comers, to all who are willing to submerge their ethnic identity in the larger identity of Americanness.

Here is a Jewish version of the idea from early in this century, in the mouth of a character from Israel Zangwill's play, *The Melting-Pot*.

America is God's crucible, the great Melting-Pot where all the races of Europe are melting and re-forming! Here you stand, good folk, think I, when I see them at Ellis Island, here you stand in your fifty groups, with your fifty languages and histories, and your fifty blood hatreds and rivalries. But you won't be long like that, brothers, for these fires of God you've come to—these are the fires of God. A fig for your feuds and vendettas! Germans and Frenchmen, Irishmen and English men, Jews and Russians—into the Crucible with you all! God is making the American.¹³

No longer are the Jews seen as the chosen people, because America is now the nation chosen to fulfill God's universal purpose: weakening and

even erasure of ethnic boundaries. Along with every other people of the world, Jews are relegated to their narrow particularism; only the new breed of Americans is capable of embodying the universalist vision of salvation. Remember President Wilson's platform of "making the world safe for democracy," on the basis of which we entered into World War I! Kaplan did not reject Jewish chosenness in an intellectual vacuum. He did so in the midst of an American civilization that had then and still has a powerful competing myth of national chosenness.

Kaplan's reconstructed version of American Judaism proudly chose to face that larger world of America and its universalist values. Practices that solidified the Jewish community from within were all for the good, but insofar as those same practices prevented Jews from playing their part in the scheme of universal salvation which mattered to America, they were to be sacrificed on the altar of flexibility and accommodation.

Two Civilizations or One?

Kaplan's double standard for kashrut provides a perfect example of his attempt to balance the values of living in two civilizations. As someone who was raised with a version of Kaplan's double standard, I understand well how it enabled my family's participation in the cultural life of America, without sacrificing our sense of Jewish distinctiveness. There came a point, however, at which I chose a single standard, when I wanted to live as a Jew at home and on the street. Liv-

ing in the most open society the world has ever known, American Jews have generally not made the same choice. We liberal Jews have largely abandoned *kashrut*, both inside and outside the home, along with most other distinctively Jewish folkways, choosing rather the weak social and ethnic boundaries that are such a prominent feature of American life. I do not doubt that many have made those decisions with considerable care; most, however, have drifted into non-observance either in rebellion against the norms of their boundary-conscious parents, or because they have no experience of *kashrut*. Most Jews have never been trained to respect such a boundary-maintaining practice as contributing to the survival or collective well-being of the Jewish people.

The Jewish people in America is endangered, to my mind, by its propensity to embrace America's boundarilessness. The fifty-two percent intermarriage rate reported by the National Jewish Population Survey of 1990 is eloquent testimony to this danger. I do not pretend that wider observance of *kashrut* will solve the Jewish demographic crisis, though the taboos of *kashrut* clearly offer a powerful, time-honored bulwark for Jewish identity. On a personal level, I do not assume just because my daughter at age thirteen finds pepperoni pizza to be beyond the pale that her ingrained sense of Jewish boundaries will necessarily guide her toward the selection of a Jewish partner. All I can claim for *kashrut* is that because it runs so much against the grain of

American life, it anchors us outside the mainstream culture. Having a set of externally-defined rules for what we can and cannot eat constrains our freedom as Americans to do whatever we want, whenever we want (including marrying whomever we want), just as a discipline of Shabbat observance does. In choosing to constrain our individualism through observance of *kashrut*, we are opting for a communally-defined existence: we enjoy the fullest possible diet only with other *kashrut*-observing Jews.

Though we speak of living in two civilizations, we are far more at home in America than in Judaism, which, for many of us, is often a set of disembodied teachings, rather than a rich tapestry of life. One of the lessons of Reconstructionism has always been that Judaism's teachings cannot be separated from the cultural practices that embody them. I encourage us to resist the suburban homogenization that we have chosen for ourselves through whatever means we can—whether these be Jewish arts, Jewish eating, Jewish ethics, Jewish family life, Jewish neighborhoods, or Jewish worship.

In the McDonaldization of world culture that we are currently experiencing, there is an important role for Jewish distinctiveness. For we have learned through our long history a lesson valuable to the whole world: how to remain a separate people, yet convey through our way of life a universal theological idea, which continually implants in us a yearning for a universal redemption for our planet and all

its living creatures. Can we hold on to that universalism without our particularism? Not if we expect to remain a people, rather than just a collection of atomized Americans. ♦

1. This is the thesis of Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An analysis of the concepts of pollution and taboo* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966).
2. Mary Douglas, "Deciphering a Meal," in *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), 262.
3. Douglas, (1975), 269.
4. Mary Douglas, *In the Wilderness; The Doctrine of Defilement in the Book of Numbers*, JSOT Supplement Series 158 (Sheffield, Eng.: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), notes that the priestly writers of the Torah did not choose to make contact with foreigners defiling, which suggests their distance from the more xenophobic concerns of Ezra and the government party.
5. Douglas (1975), 269.
6. Her functional reading is to be contrasted with Douglas (1966), 54-57, which stresses *kashrut's* cosmological analogies with Gen. 1, and with her recent article, "Holy Joy: Rereading Leviticus: The Anthropologist and the Believer," *Conservative Judaism* 46 (Summer, 1994): 3-14, which stresses analogies with prophetic and priestly ethics. While

there is clearly an ethical dimension to rabbinic laws regarding animal slaughter, finding ethics in biblical *kashrut* must inevitably seem apologetic. In our age, when there is an increasing sensitivity to animal rights and suffering, which has led many to vegetarianism, the only fully ethical dietary prohibition would be one that prevented the taking of any animal life.

7. Bernard Bamberger, "The Dietary Laws" in W. Gunther Plaut, ed., *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1981), 811.
8. Moredecai M. Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life* (1934; rpt. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1981), 441.
9. Kaplan, 441.
10. Kaplan, 441.
11. Kaplan, 442.
12. Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press and Harvard University Press, 1963), 290, cite Hector St. Jean de Crevecoeur, from *Letters of an American Farmer* (1782): "Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men."
13. Israel Zangwill, *The Melting-Pot: Drama in Four Acts* (New York: Macmillan, 1909), 37.