

What Should We Know About Jewish Identity?

Steven M. Cohen, Research Professor of Jewish Social Policy, HUC-JIR, New York

Steve34nyc@aol.com 646 284 1932

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Jewish identities in the United States, as elsewhere, are constantly undergoing change. The dynamics of how American Jews conceive of and express their diverse ways of being Jewish inevitably pose new challenges, constraints, and opportunities for Jewish education. Accordingly, an understanding of the changing configurations of American Jewish identity should inform the theory and practice of Jewish education.

To be sure, the implications of any analysis of Jewish identity for Jewish education are far from straightforward. The same findings can lead to dramatically different policy conclusions, given that policy-makers' values and resources inevitably come in to play. For example, understanding the impact of intermarriage on Jewish continuity leads some analysts and advocates to argue for increased investment in educationally targeting the intermarried and their children, those Jews most likely to abandon their sense of being connected to Judaism. In contrast, the same appreciation for the impact of intermarriage leads others to argue for a focus on the “moderately affiliated” as an effective way of building stronger Jewish communities that can appeal to Jews of all levels of engagement (Cohen 1985; Wertheimer et al., 1996).

Nonetheless, research on Jewish identities in America since 1997 (the focus of this chapter) points to several developments that are relevant to educators and policy makers, the most significant of which may be gathered under five rubrics that bear elaboration:

- Declining Social Ties and Weaker Collective Identity
- Intensified Religiosity, Spirituality, and Education
- The Rise of the Sovereign Self
- Younger Adults Crossing Boundaries in People, Culture, and Space
- Entrepreneurial Younger Adults in Culture, Social Justice and Spirituality

A Word about “Identity”

In common parlance, “identity,” has come to be understood as related primarily to intrapsychic feelings – the attitudes and sentiments felt within. It connotes ideas about the self, such as the importance one attaches to being Jewish, or the meaning associated with this label. But, in truth, Jewish identity extends (or ought to extend) beyond the affective. Being an “identified Jew” is not just about feeling Jewish, but about expressing Jewish belonging and undertaking identifiably Jewish behaviors. For good reason sociologists of religious identity speak of the three B’s: Belief, Behavior, and Belonging. As Marshall Sklare observed in his pioneering investigation of Jewish identity (Sklare and Greenblum 1967), Judaism is a “sacramental religion.” It values the performance of certain behaviors, generally in interaction with others. Paraphrasing Ben-Gurion’s remark originally made about Gentiles and Jews: “What matters is not what the Jews say, but what the Jews do.”

If Jewish Beliefs (or attitudes and affect) and Jewish Behavior are constituent elements of Jewish identity, so too is Jewish Belonging, expressed in the full complex of social ties that link

Jews with one another. Jews' social ties, or what Goldscheider (1986) refers to as Jewish social cohesion, are at the heart of any assessment of Jewish identities in America.

Not only is Jewish identity itself rich, ever-changing, variegated and contested, so too is the study of Jewish identity. Before the 1990s, much of the research in the field used quantitative methods, a trend that has been abetted by the large number of population studies funded by the federation system, both locally and nationally. At the same time, recent years have seen a broadening of methods, entailing such qualitative techniques as participant observation, ethnography, and depth interviews that co-exist with, or sometimes intertwine with quantitative data collection. No review of the literature can possibly encompass all the richness and variety of research in the field. Any review, is inevitably influenced by the expertise and interests of the reviewer. Certainly, such is the case here, as I focus both upon the research with which I am personally most familiar (my own included) as well as upon those research questions and perspectives (or biases) that I find most compelling and intriguing.

Declining Social Ties and Weaker Collective Identity

Recent years have witnessed a decline in Jewish Belonging, the extent to which Jews maintain social ties with other Jews. Jewish Belonging is not simply a means to a stronger Jewish identity; it is inherently a piece of Jewish identity. A Jew with Jewish spouse, children, friends, neighbors and co-workers is, ipso facto, Jewishly identified. Conversely, few but the most committed Jews in modern America can sustain strong Jewish identities in near-isolation, without the social networks that make Jewish living possible and plausible.

In this regard, the decline in Jewish social ties over the last several years is of great consequence. Intermarriage (Kotler-Berkowitz et al., 2003) is but one feature of this

phenomenon, but Jewish social ties extend beyond marriage. As compared with ten or twenty years ago, not only do fewer Jews today have Jewish spouses; fewer also have Jewish friends, neighbors, and co-workers. Among older Baby Boomers, roughly two-thirds report mostly Jewish friends; among those their children's age, only one-third report likewise.

The consequences of intermarriage for identity have been rather thoroughly explored (Beck 2005; Fishman 2004; Phillips 1997, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c; Phillips and Fishman forthcoming). Less well-appreciated is that Jewish in-group friendship is correlated with many measures of Jewish identity, including celebrating holidays, practicing rituals, belonging to synagogues and other institutions, supporting Israel, marrying Jews, bearing Jewish children, and providing children with Jewish educational experiences. Jewish friendship circles are also critical to Jewish socialization and education (Fishman forthcoming). Cause and effect are impossible to disentangle; but the centrality of Jewish friendship for a wide complex of Jewish behaviors cannot be denied, and these social ties have been on the wane.

Jewish ties have diminished in the institutional domain as well (Cohen and Wertheimer 2006). For years, Jewish mass-membership organizations have seen fewer young recruits, resulting in aging and shrinking memberships. In 1990-2000, the total number of Jews affiliated with such organizations declined nearly 20%. The Jewish federation movement has been witnessing similar changes. Over the past 25 years, inflation-adjusted giving has declined by more than half a percent a year. From 1990 to 2000, the percentage of Jews claiming to have made a gift to a local UJA-federation campaign shrank by a third, with younger donors far scarcer (Cohen 2004). Those born after World War II are increasingly unlikely to donate to Federation, even as they maintain their support of other Jewish causes and, relatively speaking, increase their support for non-sectarian causes.

Related to and stemming from the decline in Jewish social and institutional ties is a weakening attachment to Israel and the Jewish People. Declining engagement with Israel dates back at least until the late 1980s (Cohen and Wertheimer 2006). Fewer Jews now than in the past care deeply about Israel or feel attached to the Jewish State. Similar trends can be seen when comparing younger adults with their older counterparts. Those who have been to Israel, old or young, maintain high rates of attachment; but, among those who have not been to Israel, younger adults score lower on every available measure of Israel attachment than do their elders. We find similar patterns with respect to feeling a sense of belonging to the Jewish People. Taken together, these declines -- in social ties, in institutional affiliation, and in affective ties to the collective as embodied in Israel and the Jewish People -- constitute a decline in Jewish ethnicity and collective Jewish identity.

Intensified Religiosity, Spirituality, and Education

While American Jews' ethnicity has declined, they have sustained, if not increased, most levels of religiosity, producing a pattern of "Religious Stability and Ethnic Decline" (Cohen 1998) or, as Charles Liebman (1999) observed, as transition from "ethnic to privatized Judaism." Over the last 10-15 years, measures of synagogue affiliation, ritual observance, service attendance, and belief in God have held steady. So too have the overall numbers of Jews belonging to congregations, even amidst a numerical re-shuffling among the major denominations (Cohen 2006a). Moreover, all three major denominations have become, each in its own way, more observant and more Jewishly educated over time. Not only has Orthodoxy been "Sliding Right" (Heilman 2006), but so too have Conservatism (Cohen 2000) and Reform.

One can also make a case for an expanded interest in Jewish spirituality, as manifest in the numerous spiritually oriented publications, with at least one entire publishing house (Jewish Lights) dedicated to books on Jewish spirituality and related sensibilities. On social surveys, most American Jews regard themselves as spiritual. Interest in the study of Jewish spiritual texts and practices has caught on both with celebrities such as Madonna and with a noticeable number of the not-so-famous. Dozens of rabbis now participate in the activities of the relatively well-funded Jewish Spirituality Institute – itself a sign that at least some funders and rabbis now highly value Jewish spirituality.

In parallel with these trends, participation in many venues of Jewish education, itself often a reflection of Jewish religious commitment, has also been on the rise. Over the last 10-15 years, participation grew, or held steady, in Jewish pre-schools, day schools (both Orthodox and otherwise), camping, Israel travel, Jewish Studies on college campuses, and adult Jewish education (inter alia, see, Goldberg 2001; Grant et al. 2004; Heilman 2001; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2001; Sales and Saxe 2004; Saxe et al. 2004). At the same time, enrollment in supplementary schools declined and more Jewish children are receiving no Jewish schooling whatsoever. In the last decade, the Internet emerged as a new Jewish education delivery vehicle, providing news, information, events, graphics, videos, humor, social networking, music, blogs, classes, and more. The explosion in Jewish content on the Internet is palpable. As I write, Google reports over 187 million web-pages for “Israel”, 76 million for “Jewish,” 7 million for “Torah,” 4 million for “Passover,” and over 3 million for “Talmud.”

American Jews’ vigor in the religious sphere is all the more striking when arrayed against the opposite trends in the ethnic sphere noted above. At a time when fewer Jews are maintaining ties with one another, their ability to maintain, if not increase, aggregate levels of religious

involvement and productivity is truly remarkable. If in-group marriage and friendship are so closely allied with religious involvement (as indeed they are), then how is it that Jewish religiosity, spirituality and education have been holding steady or growing as the number of in-married Jews and Jews with mostly Jewish friends have been shrinking?

One reason lies with the growing proportion of Orthodox Jews in the American Jewish population, a figure that is likely to grow even further over time (Ukeles et al. 2006). The Orthodox make up about 8% of Baby Boomer Jews, but comprise about 18% of Jews under the age of 18. Another reason for the stability in religiosity and related domains lies in the more intensive involvement of in-married Jews with children, a group comprised of all denominations. As compared with their parents' generation, such families have become relatively more active in so many ways: more observant of Jewish ritual, more likely to affiliate with synagogues, and more likely to send their children to day schools, to take just a few relevant indicators.

The in-married today are a more Jewishly selected group. When intermarriage was rare and Jews had few opportunities to marry non-Jews, then no special commitment was necessary to marry a Jew – the ethnic social enclave within which most Jews lived until the middle of the twentieth century made it only natural for Jews to marry one another. But, when intermarriage became prevalent, Jewish commitment became more of a pre-requisite for in-marriage. As a result, the in-married and the inter-married now constitute “Two Jewries” (Cohen 2006b) with vastly different levels of Jewish socialization and education, and even vaster differences in practice, association, affiliation, and child-rearing.

These patterns point to the difficulty of assessing the overall direction of Jewish identities in the United States. Some indicators are rising, others falling, and still others holding steady. Moreover, different sub-populations are growing or shrinking, and their levels of Jewish

involvement are moving, at times, in different directions. Adding to the complexity are shifts in the cultural environment and correlative changes in the understanding what it means to be Jewish and how it is to be expressed.

The Rise of the Sovereign Self

Since at least the 1980s, social scientists have been observing Americans adopt a more independent, individualist stance toward institutions in general and toward religious life in particular (Bellah et al. 1985). Americans more readily re-define their identities, move between several identities, blend cultures, and sample and assemble their selves repeatedly. The very titles of some of the major relevant monographs convey this thinking. Thus, Americans are said to maintain only “Loose Connections” (Wuthnow 1998) to family, job, party, hometown, and religious identity. For some, the metaphoric phenomenon of “Bowling Alone” (Putnam 2000) has come to embody the idea that Americans experience less community than in the past. In the religious sphere, they have moved from the dogmatic, communal, and institutional to the autonomous, personal and private (Wolfe 2003). A “Generation of Seekers” goes shopping for religious experiences in the “Spiritual Marketplace” (Roof 1993, 1999). Even with respect to ancestral identity, seemingly an immutable given, Americans display the readiness to fashion their own “Ethnic Options” (Waters 1990), where they choose the group with which to be identified, and invent the content of their ethnicities. In so doing they create ethnic meaning in very personal terms, arriving at what Gans termed (only) “Symbolic Ethnicity” (1979) and then “Symbolic Religiosity” (1994). European-Americans have entered “The Twilight of Ethnicity” (Alba 1986, 1990) in which ethnic identities, though still perceptible, are fading.

American Jews have proceeded along paths resembling those of other European-origin groups in the United States. Their Jewish identities moved inward from the communal and public domain to the personal and private spheres (Cohen and Eisen 2000). They embark upon personal Jewish journeys in which they not only experience rises and falls in the salience of their Jewish identities, but they also continually re-fashion the meaning of their Judaism (Horowitz 2000).

As described in *The Jew Within* (Cohen and Eisen 2000) we are witnessing the emergence of the Sovereign Jewish Self, in which American Jews feel perfectly comfortable deciding for themselves whether, when, where, why and how they will be Jewish. This notion encompasses six thematic observations on contemporary American Jewish identities.

1) It embraces an assertion of the *inalienability of being Jewish*. Jews are in effect saying, “No matter what I do or don’t do, no matter what I believe or don’t believe, I’m still a Jew, and a good Jew – and no one can alienate me from my valid claim to identify as a Jew.” This stance contrasts markedly with previous generations who believed that certain acts (e.g., intermarriage) or behaviors (failing to support the community) in effect placed one outside the boundaries of the Jewish family or community.

2) The Sovereign Jewish Self asserts a strong measure of *voluntarism*: Each Jew may choose how, when, and where to be Jewish. While Jews have made such choices for years, the voluntarism of our time means that Jews make their choices with less guilt than did their parents, acting with a greater sense of entitlement to make such choices without the constraints imposed by tradition or others. As one respondent in *The Jew Within* remarked, “I elect to observe it as I elect to observe it. If something is potentially annoying, I avoid it.”

3) These choices are marked by a new emphasis on *autonomy* which values serious reflection and informed choice, as opposed to a more traditional notion of compliance with

religious law or conventional custom. Not coincidentally, Jewish education moves increasingly toward a stance of helping students make the Jewish choices that are right for them, as opposed to advocating fixed norms. As one respondent said about her connection to ritual observance, “I have to feel like it’s coming inside out, and isn’t just somebody else’s idea of a ritual.”

4) Jews today make such choices motivated by that which is personally meaningful, referred to as “*personalism*,” a term coined by Charles Liebman. Personal feelings provide the rationale and legitimacy of action (or inaction), as illustrated by this respondent’s remarks: “Yom Kippur – and every other ritual occasion, for that matter – is a very personal holiday. So if you’re not feeling very connected to it, it’s hard to observe it.”

5) Sovereign Jewish Selves are *anti-judgmental* – they claim no basis for judging others’ Jewish choices. In drawing upon a cultural resource, a religious and ethnic option, there is no right or wrong choice, representing a tremendous shift. Traditional Jews conceived of Judaism as a system of God-given obligations, governing their relationships with God, and with others. Jewish religious law is detailed, and, at times, quite demanding. Over time, Jews’ conception of Judaism evolved from a system of Divine laws, enforced by human sanction, to a voluntarily accessed cultural resource for providing personal meaning. Consistent with Judaism that is more a matter of aesthetics than of norms, one that allows for multiple religious paths, rabbis and educators come to employ the rhetoric of inclusiveness, one that emphasizes “welcoming” and feeling “comfortable” with one’s Jewishness.

6) The last component of the Sovereign Jewish Self refers to the expectation that individuals and institutions will accept, support, and nourish one another’s highly individualized Jewish journeys – an expectation that constitutes “journeyism” (yet another neologism). As Horowitz (2000, 2002) amply demonstrates, Jews experience twists and turns in their

relationship to being Jewish (as do others; see Wuthnow 1999), and they expect others to recognize and accept the contours of their journey. In speaking about his expectations of a wife, one single young man in *The Jew Within* gave voice to this notion: “I have been in a state of flux and learning. I certainly realize that I am not going to rest somewhere where I can easily say, ‘This is the kind of Jew I am and therefore I need this kind of person.’ ... I am always going to be in exploration, so it will be difficult to do that with someone who does not identify with that in some respect.”

Inalienability, voluntarism, autonomy, personalism, anti-judgmentalism, and journeyism – while all different and all of a single piece – combined to make for a very individual approach to being Jewish among the Baby Boomers, as contrasted with their parents. The next generation – Gen Xers and Yers -- have both moved further along the paths charted by their parents, and charted their own course and begun to leave their own imprint upon the ever-changing contours of Jewish identity in the United States (Cohen and Kelman 2006, forthcoming; Greenberg 2004, 2006; Ukeles, et al. 2006).

Younger Adults Crossing Boundaries in People, Culture, and Space

In one crucial respect, Jews differed from all other major American religious and ethnic groups. As Glazer (1972) observed, in their pre-American environs, Jews were the only immigrant group who experienced systematic exclusion from the larger society, to exercise communal autonomy, and to have developed a group-survivalist ideology. Irish, Italian, and Polish immigrants may have been poor, uneducated, and oppressed in their home countries. But they were part of larger societies – in fact, they were the larger society. They spoke its language,

participated in and shaped its culture, and practiced its religion. In all these respects, Jews – especially East European Jews – were different and apart.

Thus, Jewish immigrants not only proceeded along the modernization track “from fate to choice” (Berger 1979: 11) as did everyone else. They also proceeded along a uniquely Jewish track, one that led them from segregation to integration, from exclusion to inclusion, and from dwelling on the margins of society to participating in its mainstream. As Liebman observed, “The Ambivalent American Jew” (1973) struggled to resolve the tension between integrating in the larger society and surviving as a distinct group.

The growing integration into American society, with its increasing acceptance of non-Jews and by non-Jews, underlies an emerging feature of Jewish identity among American Jews born in the last quarter of the twentieth century. As several recent studies demonstrate (Cohen and Kelman 2006 and forthcoming; Greenberg 2004, 2006; Ukeles et al., 2006), Jews now in their twenties and thirties often view their parents’ generation’s institutions as exceedingly “divisive.” They criticize their apparent tendencies to divide Jews from non-Jews, Jews from Jews (along denominational lines), Jewish culture from other culture, and Jewish space from non-Jewish space. In short, they are bothered by seemingly exclusive group boundaries maintained by today’s middle-aged institutionally mainstream American Jews.

Instead, they prefer to cross all these boundaries as they do in events and institutions organized by their generation. They seek Jewish programs that draw into and welcome their non-Jewish friends, and that appeal to Jews of varying denominational persuasions. They deride attempts to define certain cultural elements as either authentically Jewish or definitively non-Jewish; instead construct a Jewish culture that is infused with a contemporary aesthetic, combining elements whose origins may lie in several cultural traditions. Last, they tend to prefer

events and programs that occur in bars, night clubs, concert halls, and performance spaces – that is, in places other than explicitly Jewish venues (Cohen and Kelman 2006).

Parallel trends in interpersonal relations have proceeded apace as well. Jews have become not merely increasingly comfortable with non-Jews, but increasingly uncomfortable with excluding them – even in overtly “Jewish” contexts. The shift over four generations has been both massive and remarkable. Around the turn of the twentieth century, East European Jewish immigrants – with their quasi-Orthodox upbringing, Yiddish language, and working-class status – could hardly have been expected to socialize much with non-Jews. Their Depression-era children, notwithstanding their social mobility and migration to the suburbs, experienced limits on intimacy with their non-Jewish acquaintances, associates, friends, neighbors and co-workers (Gans 1958; Ringer 1967). In contrast, their children – the Baby Boom generation – with their educational success, professional achievement, and leaps in intermarriage, felt far more comfortable among non-Jews than did their parents or grandparents. Their increasing comfort was in large part due to sharp declines in anti-Semitism and increasing acceptance (Silberman 1985). Ivy League schools went from restricting the admission of Jews as students to selecting Jews to serve as presidents at every such distinguished institution of higher learning. Baby Boomers sharply reduced the extent to which they held contrary stereotypes of Jews and “Gentiles,” the source of much ironic Borscht Belt humor. The fading of these stereotypes testifies to the fading of inter-group boundaries that once more sharply separated Jews from others (Liebman and Cohen 1990).

Today’s young adults, take the process of boundary-crossing and boundary-blurring several steps further. Like their parents, they are certainly comfortable in the presence of non-Jews. But, when almost half may have non-Jewish parents, when nearly half of young Jews

marry non-Jews (and presumably even more have had at one point non-Jewish romantic partners), they feel it makes little sense to curtail or distort their friendship or family relationships to participate in Jewish life. Rather, they seek to “do Jewish” in the presence of non-Jews. Some young Jews today even report that the presence of non-Jews ignites their Jewish identities, giving them opportunities to comfortably share, or even proudly display, their Jewishness. Obviously, it remains to be seen whether the next generation will take the process of boundary-blurring and boundary-crossing much further. But certainly, younger adult Jews today often expect to live their Jewish lives in open, and often intimate, contact with non-Jews – a circumstance their parents, to say nothing of their grandparents could not have imagined.

Entrepreneurial Younger Adults in Culture, Social Justice and Spirituality

Starting perhaps as early as 2002, younger adults have been organizing a wide variety of endeavors, initiatives, projects and communities (for examples, see *Slingshot '05* and *'06*). They include nearly two dozen independent minyanim; cultural endeavors in music, filmmaking, drama and other art forms; initiatives to promote human rights or social justice causes; and diverse learning initiatives, be they festival-like encampments, classes, or stand-alone programs.

At the heart of most of these endeavors are passionate and dedicated social entrepreneurs who in turn energize a small coterie of supportive friends, who in turn engage a wider circle of supporters and participants (Cohen and Kelman, forthcoming). These individuals are marked by a degree of earnestness and search for authenticity, as well as more than a touch of healthy iconoclasm that serves to differentiate their endeavors from the Judaism of their elders (witness *Heeb* magazine as an exemplar). They aim to inspire engagement, if not commitment, while

studiously avoiding the coercive character, in their view, of the Jewish institutions with which they have been most familiar.

These initiatives, in reflecting the next round of shifts in Jewish identity and community in America, set themselves apart from and even challenge prevailing communal forms. At the same time, they are forging new alternatives to existing structures and customs, providing the next generation with new choices of how, when, where and why to be Jewish. In observing a young leader of a vibrant spiritual community, a middle-aged Federation professional remarked, “She’s good; but she’s only a niche phenomenon.” At which point another of his generation commented, “You don’t get it. It’s all about niche phenomena.”

Implications for Policy and Practice

This highly selective review of recent research on American Jewish identities had to make do with a few sweeping generalizations. It could not take into account variations by region (Sheskin 1999), by class and gender (Prell 1999), or by marital status. Cohen (2005), for example, argues for “segmenting the market” by marriage patterns – in-married, intermarried, and unmarried – while Ukeles, et al. (2006) advocate including the Orthodox as a distinctive fourth major segment). The glossing over of these and other variations notwithstanding, this analysis leads to several policy- and practice-relevant implications.

First, the decline of ethnic tissue and of collective identity sets before Jewish educators a new explicit objective: to build the social ties between Jews that make Jewish education possible and plausible. In this day and age, the promotion of Jewish friendships and marriage is not the fortuitous by-product of Jewish education. It is, or ought to be, an inherent objective of Jewish education. Effective Jewish educators must also function as community-builders, be it in the

classroom, camp, or congregation, or by connecting their learners to others, by “Linking the Silos” of Jewish education (Wertheimer 2005).

Second, the vitality in religiosity and spirituality points to opportunities for Jewish education. Obviously, Jewish educators (be they in the role of rabbis, parents, or classroom teachers) have been investing more effort in helping their learners (be they congregants, children, or students) find personal meaning in religious and spiritual practice and study. Effective Jewish education today must, perforce, incorporate the provision of personal meaning in the context of well-functioning social networks and community, suggesting that community-building may now constitute an integral part of Jewish education, and we may need to start regarding community-builders as a new breed of Jewish educators.

Third, with this said, educators need to guard against “over-playing the religious card;” they need to avoid placing nearly exclusive emphasis on educating for the religious life, using primarily religious themes and lexicon. American Jews remain the least religious of all American religious groups and, still, the most ethnically cohesive of all major European-origin ethnic groups. The Protestant religious milieu that has re-shaped the meaning of being Jewish have not in the least transformed Jewish group identity into exclusively (or even primarily) a religious group identity. Jews are prone to say, “I’m cultural, but not religious.” The meaning of “cultural” is not all that clear. But it does suggest a realm of Jewish identity, community and interest that extends beyond prayer, observance, faith, theology, and sacred texts. And it is an area where Jewish education in America, as a discipline, has failed to pay much attention, in part because so much Jewish education takes place under religious auspices, and so many Jewish educators are religiously trained and religiously committed.

These considerations immediately lead to a fourth and final implication: Increasingly, Jewish education is taking place outside of traditional educational contexts. The Internet, newspapers, social justice activities (witness the success of American Jewish World Service), music, films, and all manner of cultural events and pursuits provide the venue for many Jews – especially younger Jews – to express their Jewish interest and, perforce, engage in Jewish learning and Jewish education. In good measure, conventional Jewish educators have, as yet, failed to turn their attention to these domains.

In every generation, the key objectives in Jewish education have shifted in line with the changing needs and interests of students, community and society. As this research demonstrates, these needs and interests continue to change creating both new demands on education and new opportunities as well. In particular, areas of weakness in the complex tableau of Jewish identity point to areas where Jewish educators must devote special efforts – the re-building of Jewish social ties is one such area today, as is the weakened connection with Israel. At the same time, areas of growth or strength point to opportunities for Jewish educational intervention, growth, and creativity. The signs of interest in spirituality, culture, social justice, the Internet, and entrepreneurial Jewish organizing suggest areas where Jewish educators – and all who are committed to strengthening Jewish life – need to devote additional attention and creative thinking.

Highlights

- Jewish identity consists not just of feelings, but also, of behaviors and acts of belonging.

- Jewish social ties (marriage, friendship, neighbors, institutional belonging, attachment to Israel and the Jewish people) are in decline, as is, more generally Jewish ethnicity and collective identity.
- The religious dimension to Jewish identity seems to be stable if not growing, along with most forms of Jewish educational participation.
- Jewish identity takes the form of the Sovereign Self marked by inalienability of being Jewish, voluntarism, autonomy, personalism, anti-judgmentalism, and individual Jewish journeys.
- In response to what they see as the excessive divisiveness of their parents' generation ways of being Jewish, younger adults are engaging in the crossing of group boundaries, those that divide Jews from non-Jews, Jews from Jews, Jewish turf from non-Jewish turf, and Jewish culture from non-Jewish culture.
- More and more Jewish initiatives are being led by individual Jewish social entrepreneurs creating projects, endeavors and communities that differ from those of the previous generation.

Annotated Sources

Cohen, Steven M. and Ari Y. Kelman, "Cultural Events and Jewish Identities: Young Adult Jews in New York," National Foundation for Jewish Culture, 2006.

This study explores the meaning and potential of Jewish cultural engagement for Jewish identity today. A quantitative analysis of Jewish cultural participation nationally finds that cultural participation constitutes a larger share of the Jewish engagement of the less engaged and relatively unaffiliated than it does for the more Jewishly engaged. At the same time, a qualitative analysis of younger Jews attending Jewish cultural events in New York demonstrates that these events enhance Jewish social networks, incubate and develop of Jewish leaders, and nurture newer forms of Jewish life with implications for established institutions and identities. Younger adult Jews are often "unaffiliated but engaged," with an interest in expressing their Jewish attachments in ways that are ironic, iconoclastic, entertaining, aesthetic, non-coercive, and non-divisive.

Horowitz, Bethamie. 2000. *Connections and Journeys: Assessing Critical Opportunities for Enhancing Jewish Identity*. New York: UJA-Federation of Jewish Philanthropies.

This study, combining original survey research of 1500 adult respondents under the age of 52 with 100 in-depth interviews conducted in the New York area, found "evidence of ongoing psychological commitment, even when measures of organizational involvement were declining ... The study uncovered a large number of people whose have active interests in and commitments to Jewishness, but not necessarily in the ways expected by the American Jewish communal-organizational world. ... The study captured the complex, journey-like aspect of identity."

Cohen, Steven M. and Jack Wertheimer, "Whatever Happened to the Jewish People?" *Commentary* 121, No. 6 (June 2006): 33-37.

This article argues that changes in several measures of Jewish engagement point to declining attachment to the Jewish People. Fewer Jews than in the recent past have Jewish spouses, friends, neighbors and co-workers. Fewer belong to Jewish organizations or contribute to Jewish federations, whose campaigns have not kept pace with inflation and whose allocations have shifted dramatically from overseas to local needs. Fewer feel attached to Israel or to the Jewish People. Taken singly, any one of these trends bears several explanations; taken together they point to a broad-gauged decline in ethnicity and Jewish collective identity.

Fishman, Sylvia Barack. 2004. *Double or Nothing? Jewish Families and Mixed Marriage*. Dartmouth, New Hampshire: Brandeis University Press/University Press of New England.

Based on interviews with 254 interviews of mixed married family members in several locations, this study explores how such families negotiate their religious and group identities. Placing these personal narratives in a larger cultural context, the analysis underscores the fluidity

of religious identities today, the thin connections of most intermarried families with Jews and Judaism, as well as the enduring power of Jewish education and parental socialization to influence decisions regarding identity, practice, and child-rearing.

Liebman, Charles S. and Steven M. Cohen. 1990. *Two Worlds of Judaism: The Israeli and American Experiences*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

This monograph examines what being Jewish means to Israeli and American Jews, and how each group has reinterpreted a common Jewish tradition. Jews in both societies share a familial sense of peoplehood and a common past. Yet they differ dramatically in so many ways. Judaism in the U.S. is conducted more in the private sphere than the public domain. They value plural approaches to being Jewish. They live amidst non-Jews who are their friends, family, spouses and children. Israeli Judaism remains more ritualistic and collectively oriented than its American counterpart.

Phillips, Bruce. 2005c. "Assimilation, Transformation, and the Long Range Impact of Inter-marriage." *Contemporary Jewry* 25 50-84.

This study is one of Phillips' several complementary analyses of the impact on intermarriage upon Jewish identity of spouses and their children. Using the 2000-01 National Jewish Population Study, this study explores the variety of intermarried families (and Jews, including "Christian Jews"), and demonstrates how tenuous are the ties of intermarried families to all manner of Jewish engagement, as well as its grave implications for the demographic future of American Jewry.

Prell, Riv-Ellen. 1999. *Fighting to Become Americans*. Boston: Beacon.

Drawing upon a wealth of cultural evidence over the decades, this work demonstrates how gender, social class, and American Jews' struggle to enter the larger society shaped images of themselves and of the other. It demonstrates the power of deeply rooted stereotypes of Jewish men and women and how they reflect and derive from Jews' interaction with the larger society.

Ukeles, Jacob B., Ron Miller, and Pearl Beck. 2006. *Young Jewish Adults in the United States Today*. New York: American Jewish Committee.

Drawing upon local community studies and several national studies, this study of Jewish young adults argues for the analytic and policy-oriented segmentation of this population into four segments: the Orthodox, non-Orthodox in-married, non-Orthodox non-married, and the intermarried. It demonstrates that "substantial numbers of young Jewish adults are being Jewish in ways that are quite different from the ways of connecting of their predecessors. For the younger Jewish generation, Jewish ties seem to be: More personal, more informal, more episodic."

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