THE QUEST FOR IDENTIFICATION *

by SAMUEL DININ, PH.D.

Dean, University of Judaism, Los Angeles, California

THERE is an assumption in the phrasing of this subject that there is a group of Jews who do not know what they are and are in earnest quest of identification. The question is who are these Jews in search of identification and why this question has been raised.

If we are to trust the findings of the sociologists, most American Jews have found an answer to this question. In a study of Riverton made by Marshall Sklare and Mark Vosk in 1957,[1] eight of ten parents defined a Jew as one who professed the Jewish religion. However 97 percent of the adolescent Jewish youth stated that a Jew was one who identified himself with the Jewish faith. Among first generation Jews, a small minority still interpret Jewishness in other than religious terms, but among the young people born or reared in America no such interpretation can be found. Thus, collectively, American Jews regard themselves as first of all a religious community. "There is every reason to believe," states Bezalel Sherman in his *The Jew Within American Society* ". . . that a national poll would result in the same findings."[2]

Two observations must be made at this point. First, the fact that American Jews have this self-image of themselves is not always reflected in their religious behavior or in an identification of all Jews with the synagogue. Secondly, American Jews regard themselves as a religious community first of all, and obviously the Jews consider themselves much more than that. What this *more* consists of we shall consider below.

Granted that Jews in communities in other parts of the world, outside of Israel, have this same self-image of themselves as a religious community, but whether Israeli Jews so consider themselves is a question which is not so easily answered in the affirmative. Who is to be considered a Jew has been a subject of heated discussion in Israel and by world Jewry during the past decade. In Israel it is not merely a theoretic question, but a question which touches the lives of many people in real and concrete ways. The case of Brother Daniel is only the latest of the controversies which have focused attention on the question of who is to be considered a Jew.

We must first take note of the fact that Brother Daniel was admitted to Israel and assured he could remain and become a naturalized citizen of Israel. Brother Daniel, however, regarded himself as of Jewish nationality and claimed recognitions as a Jewish immigrant and an Israeli subject by virtue of the Law

* Presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Conference of Jewish Communal Service, Cleveland, Ohio, June 2, 1963.

[1] Marshall Sklare and Mark Vosk, *The Riverton Study*, American Jewish Committee, New York, 1957, p. 22.

[2] Bezalel Sherman, *The Jew Within American Society*, Wayne Univ. Press, Detroit, Michigan, 1961.

of Return.[3] The question raised by his claim was whether an apostate could be considered a Jew by nationality. (A different type of question was raised in the case of Jews not considered Jews in accordance with rabbinic law, but wanting to register as Jews by nationality.)

The historic decision of the Israel Supreme Court by a majority of four to one against the application of Oswald Rufeisen (Brother Daniel) rests on a paradoxical consideration. The presiding Justice Silberg opined that if the concept of the word Jew in the Law of Return was judged in Halachic terms he would have to grant the application of Brother Daniel, but he considered the Law of Return a secular Israeli law, and hence had to make a decision on the basis of what the normal Jewish meaning of the word "Jew" is. "In my view," he stated, "The answer is clear and precise: A Jew who becomes a Christian *cannot* be called a Jew. . .. . . . what Brother Daniel is asking us to do is to expunge the historic and sanctified meaning of the word 'Jew,' to renounce all those spiritual values for which we have been martyred throughout the different periods of our long exile up to this day. The glorious memory of our martyrs of the Middle Ages will fade away to nothing, and our history will lose its continuity and begin its annals only with the emancipation which followed the French Revolution. No one is entitled to ask this sacrifice of us, even a man as meritorious as the applicant before us. . . . One thing is common to *all* those who dwell in Zion, save for an insignificant minority, and that is: we all refuse to cut ourselves off from our historic past, and we all refuse to renounce our ancestral heritage. We all continue to draw our inspiration from our original sources. The form may change; the channels may change; but we refuse to stop up the wells, for without them we will become poor wretches. Only a simpleton believes or thinks that we are creating a *new* culture here. It is too late for that! A people almost as old as mankind itself does not commence from the very beginning, and our new culture in Israel will, even in the most extreme case, be no more than a new edition of the culture of our past."[4]

It would take us too far afield to go into the question of apostasy in Jewish law. What is significant about this decision is that it received the overwhelming approval of the Israeli Jewish community, despite the fact that the dominant party is Marxist and supposedly indifferent, if not hostile, to religion.

The majority of non-religious Israelis exhibit an ambivalence with regard to religious Judaism. They evidently do not want to throw religion overboard. They accept with ready acquiescence the observances of the Sabbath and the dietary laws prescribed by the State and keep searching for the meaning and essence of Judaism. Whether one is religious or not, one has to come to terms with Jewish religious law and practices in matters of marriage and divorce, family relationships and education. But after all it is easy to be a Jew in Israel. It is harder for a non-religious Jew to be a Jew in America. And here we come to the crux of our problem. Who are the Jews in quest of identification? They are the young intellectuals whose response to questions of Jewish identification are solicited in our secular "commentaries." They are for the most part naturalists or scientists who have no use for religion and are self-conscious about it when it is discussed. They are internationalists who, though proud of Israel and its achievements, feel that it

[3] *Piskei Din, Law Reports of Israel,* Vol. 16, 1962, p. 2428.

[4] *Ibid.*

has little relevance or meaning to their lives as Americans or citizens of the world. They are humanists who know a dozen tongues and are heirs to all the great literatures of the world, but do not know Hebrew or modern Hebrew literature, and read the Bible and the Talmud in translation, if at all.

The Jews have always been an enigma to the non-Jew; now they seem to have become an enigma to themselves as well. Judaism to most Americans and to most American Jews may be first of all a religion, but it is more than a religion. It is impossible to speak of Judaism without hyphenating it. To call it only a culture, or religion, or nationalism would be false to its history and to its essential character. One must perforce include all those elements and call Judaism the religio-cultural-ethnic tradition of the Jews.

The Jews are obviously not all citizens of Israel, nor nationals of Israel living outside of Israel, nor members of a unique racial group. They are what they have always been—an *Am,* members of one people sharing a common past, a common tradition, and common hopes for the future. As an international people, with communities in all parts of the world, it welcomes every Jew into the Kneset Yisrael—the Community of Israel —in fellowship and love. Not merely the repentant apostate, but even the sinful apostate who is mourned for as one dead, is still considered a Jew and is afforded certain rights and privileges in Jewish law.

The fact that every Jew is welcomed into the fellowship of the Jewish people, that no Jew ever need be an alien among his people, whether in the synagogue or the center or the Jewish hospital, does not mean that Judaism is what any Jew says it is. When it comes to religious observances, it often seems as if we were back in the period of the Judges, with every Jew doing what is "rite" in his eyes. But the diversity of belief and practice among Jews should not obscure the fact that Jews collectively identify Judaism as a religion and a way of life.

It seems to me that the reason why the question of identification has been raised at this Conference, is that Jewish communal workers, more than any other professional group in the service of the Jewish community, reflect, more than any other group, the doubts and uncertainties of the young intellectuals who participated in the Commentary symposium. The question as to what is Jewish about Jewish social work is not debated with the same intensity as it was a generation ago, but Conference papers reveal a renewed search for a philosophy of Jewish secularism.

The organized Jewish community operates on a principle of separation of church and state. Though congregations are admitted to associational membership, they cannot be aided or subsidized financially. The agencies and institutions of our federated Jewish communities have become almost completely secularized. Even Jewish centers through their adherence to a policy of neutrality, must lay stress on those cultural activities not carried on by the synagogues.

The central Jewish community agency does not represent Jewish life as it is today organized. The synagogue has reemerged as the strongest and most ubiquitous institution in Jewish life. The combined membership of all those affiliated with a synagogue is larger than most of all the other organizations in Jewish life put together. From 80 to 90 percent of our children attend schools under congregational auspices. Increasingly the synagogue is becoming the backbone of all of our cultural and welfare drives, the source of manpower and support, not only for Jewish education and religion and culture, but even for social services and social action.

No wonder the average Jewish social

worker feels lost! Working in a community which is becoming organized more and more along religious lines, which identifies itself more and more in religious terms, where is a disciple of Dewey and Hook, of Freud and Fromm to turn?

If Jewish life is to have continuity and vitality, the Jewish social worker will have to return to the sources of his tradition. What I said in a paper read at the Conference two years ago is pertinent here too. "Sorokin in his *Social & Cultural Dynamics* points out that any socio-cultural system which is a going concern, which works and acts and does not remain in a state of rest, just because it performs some activity, cannot help changing. But this change is an immanent one, occurring within certain limits and conditions. External conditions may retard or accelerate the unfolding of its immanent character; they may weaken or re-enforce some traits, hinder or facilitate the realization of its immanent possibilities, but cannot force a system to manifest what it potentially does not have."[5]

This is in line with what was quoted above from Justice Silberg's opinion in the case of Brother Daniel. As Dr. Gordis[6] has pointed out, the nexus for Jewish groups is a common historical experience rather than a confession of creed. But the national literature developed by the Jews is based upon a solid religious foundation. The Jewish people may have never developed an ecclesiastical structure or a centralized religious authority, but they recognized Jewish law and religious authority. The representative hero of the Jewish people may have been the prophet but the cry of the prophet for social justice was rooted in love and knowledge of God and Torah and Israel.

The Jews were not a speculative people and never developed a systematic theology or philosophy, but that does not mean that Judaism does not have a philosophy. The rabbinic view of life is organic, operating with a constellation of four basic concepts around which satellite concepts by the score are in orbit. The quadrivium around which organic Judaism revolves is God, Israel the people, Israel the Land and Torah. These and the satellite concepts are all in organic and interdependent relationship, and are not induced or deduced through some system of scientific logic.

We may have different interpretations of what each of these concepts means. We may extend the number of basic concepts or of the secondary or satellite concepts. We may as in past generations emphasize one of these elements more than the others. But if Jewish life is to have meaning and continuity, we must be true to the way of life that has developed out of our historical experience.

These basic principles are as operational today as in the past. What we must do is to translate them into the modern idiom and integrate them into a new and organic whole. We affirm, first, the peoplehood of Israel, its unity and common history. The people of Israel is a people scattered all over the world and Jews in America and Israel and the world over care for each other and feel a sense of responsibility for each other. Whether or not you concede the election of Israel, the Jews have always felt themselves selected for a special vocation—to be witnesses to God's revelation in history, to bring nearer the Kingdom of God for all men.

American Jews are an integral part of the American community, but the land and the state of Israel have a special place in their hearts. Without Israel,

---

[5] Dr. Samuel Dinin, "The Socio-Dynamics of Jewish Education," *Jewish Education*, Vol. 32, No. 1, pp. 27–33.

[6] Dr. Robert Gordis, *The Root and the Branch*, Univ. of Chicago Press, 1962, pp. 25–30.

creative survival for Jews in the Diaspora will be all but impossible. It is the one place where Jewish creativity can flourish in an almost all-Jewish environment, and which can stimulate and nourish the cultural and spiritual life of Jews everywhere. We want Israel to be not another state, and the Jewish people to be not another nation. Together with the Jews in Israel and the Jews the world over we want to work for the One World of God, for a world of justice, freedom and peace for all men.

We affirm the centrality of Torah in Jewish life. Torah in its generic sense is the collective expression of Jewish creativity through the ages. But it is not merely an anthology of biblical literature and its Midrashic and Rabbinic commentaries. The Bible, as Rabbi Trattner phrased it, is the autobiography of God. It is the instrument of God's revelation to Israel, a revelation which is a two-way confrontation and communication between God and Man. The confrontation of God and Man, the covenant between God and Man, is the heart of the Jewish religion. Hence the centrality of Torah means the centrality of religion in Jewish life.

Torah in our liturgy is always coupled with Mitzvot, with Hukkim and Mishpatim. The Halacha is the way to God and life abundant. It includes both ethical law and ritual law. The ethical law may be more important in our eyes, but the ritual laws, the Mitzvot, have a didactic, symbolic, regulative and commemorative role to play. The Mitzvot commemorate events in the lifetime of our people and of every Jew. Jewish customs and ceremonies and holidays are not meant to be observed, but to be celebrated with beauty and joy. Many of our rituals and customs have been discarded. Few Jews observe all of Jewish law and most Jews observe little, if any, Jewish law. Yet if the past is to be a guide, it is difficult to see how the Jewish religion can survive without Jewish law, without Halacha, and how Judaism can survive without the Jewish religion and still represent a historical continuum with Jewish life in the past. What relevance and meaning will Judaism have for our children without a pattern and cycle of religious observances to include the Sabbath and the festivals, circumcision and the marriage canopy, prayer and the dietary laws; Kiddush and Kaddish and Yizkor?

But though Torah and religion may be central in Jewish life, the peoplehood of Israel implies a fellowship of all Jews and all Jewish groups, even if they are unable to give assent to the religious practices and ideals of Judaism. The synagogue, by and large, is open to every Jew, not only for prayer and study, but for every associational and organizational purpose of legitimate interest to Jews. It is ready to work with all groups of Jewish life in communal fellowship for the enhancement of Jewish life and toward the advancement of a better life for all men.

The centrality of Torah in Judaism implies a central concern on the part of the Jewish community with Jewish education. We are told in the Ethics of the Fathers, *lo am haaretz hasid,* the ignorant man cannot be a pious man. But if one translates hasid as one who practices *gmilut hasadim,* as one who engages in philanthropy, in short, one who is a communal worker, then what the statement means is that an *am haaretz,* one who is ignorant of Torah in its broadest sense, cannot be a Jewish communal worker.

It is difficult to see how one can be meaningfully identified with the Jewish people without an adequate Jewish education. A quest for identification pursued in ignorance of Torah and the Jewish tradition is a meaningless quest. It is apparent that most of those who participated in the Commentary symposium were not literate Jews. It has been

pointed out frequently in recent years that only seven percent of Jewish children of school age are to be found in secondary or higher Jewish schools of learning. Since most of our college youth receive at best a Sunday school or elementary Hebrew school education, their recollection of Judaism is on an infantile level. It is during these formative years, when our youth attend high school or college and are exposed to new ideas and challenges from science and philosophy, that they should be in a Jewish school.

I can only reiterate what has been said many times by prominent leaders in the field of Jewish communal service. There is need to shift the emphasis of Jewish communal endeavor from social services and defense and leisure-time activities to Jewish education and culture. Lifelong learning is for us not merely a happy alliterative slogan for adult education; the study of Torah is literally "our life and the length of our days." In our anxiety to extend Jewish education to adolescents and adults, however, we must not neglect elementary Jewish education.

The demands being made on our children and youth in general are becoming ever greater and more insistent. There is talk of lengthening the school day and the school year. The time and the energies which will be available to us for the Jewish education of our youth, will become more and more curtailed. It will take all our ingenuity and wisdom and all of the resources at our command to provide a continuing intensive Jewish education for all our children, to get adequately trained teachers and administrators, to get the buildings, the text books, the instructional materials needed to begin to do an adequate job in Jewish education.

There is no reason why Hebrew should not become for our children what Yiddish was to the generation of our parents, the *lingua franca* of the Jewish people, the second language of every Jew. Hebrew is not only the language of our sacred books and of our prayers. It is the language of Israel, the one language which can serve as a bond of unity and a means of communication for Jews the world-over. We are living in an age in which there is a new awareness of the importance of knowing foreign languages and cultures for the achievement of international understanding. Our own government is subsidizing in a substantial way the study of foreign languages, including Hebrew, because of the importance it attaches to having many Americans at home in all the new as well as the old languages of the world. As a wandering people Jews have always had to know several languages to survive. There are many young Jewish scholars specializing in Swahili and Chinese and the tongues of Africa and Asia, who know nothing at all of their own language and culture. No one, a generation ago, could have foreseen that there would be a new climate in America and the world for the study of foreign languages, and that the role of Hebrew would take on new significance.

That American Jewry has but one Hebrew weekly, *Hadoar*, whose existence is a precarious one, and whose readership is small is a sad commentary on the American Jewish community and is indication, if one were needed, of the size of the problem facing American Jews, if we are to make Hebrew the common language of Jews everywhere.

We do not exist as a Jewish community in order to support Jewish hospitals or homes for the orphans and aged or even synagogues. Institutions and associations and organizations are instrumentalities for the realization of ideal ends and purposes, means to the pursuit of the good life. Our generation has made Jewish giving a substitute for Jewish living. But recent studies have shown that even the impulse to philanthropy is

atrophying among Jews, as it must, when it is divorced from the culture and the religion of the Jewish people, from the way of life which gives meaning and nourishment to the institutions and the organizations that we establish.

We do not have to justify our existence to the world or to ourselves. We need no rationale for Jewish survival. But if Jewish life is to have continuity and meaning we have to ask, for the sake of our own direction and growth, what is the meaning of Judaism and of Jewish life, what should be the goals and purposes of our collective life as a people.

The structure of the Jewish community in America has developed as a result of historic needs and challenges in an age of transition. It was an age which saw the unity of Jewish life that characterized the pre-modern period shattered. It was an age which saw the withering away and finally the destruction of the great centers of Jewish life in Europe, with their self-contained communities rooted in Jewish law and tradition. It was an age in which religion was on the wane and nationalism was on the ascendancy. It was an age which witnessed migrations of millions of our people from the East to the West, and the establishment of new centers of Jewish life in America and Israel. It was an age in which a virulent anti-Semitism gnawed away at the vitals of our people.

It was an age in which we had to devote the resources and energies of our people to relief and rescue and resettlement, to adjustment of millions of our people to new lands and to new ways of life, to combating discrimination and anti-Semitism. These problems will continue to be with us for years to come, but we hope that their magnitude and size will diminish and not require huge expenditures of funds as heretofore.

We have entered a new age for our people and for the world. We have two great centers of Jewish life—in America and in Israel, and other less significant but nevertheless important centers. The nature of the voluntary Jewish community in America makes the perpetuation of Jewish life a more difficult and challenging problem than it is for our people in Israel. There has been a resurgence of interest in the Jewish religion and the beginnings of a renaissance of Jewish culture.

We cannot impose an artificial unity on the Jewish people. We cannot impose one philosophy or theology or one way of life on our people. But if we are to continue as one people, we have to keep the various poles of our existence as a people in one gravitational field, so to speak. We have to be united in our search for meaning and continuity. Philanthropy and defense and resettlement are necessary for our physical security and survival. They cannot provide content and meaning for a creative Jewish life.

The time has therefore come for a reassessment of our position as a people, for a new look at the structure of the Jewish community, for a new evaluation of that for which we are expending our monies and our energies. As a people, we have to cultivate the art of being Jews. This means a return to Jewish literacy, to a commitment to the values and ideals which characterize Judaism at its best. This means that Jewish communities and their central organizations will have to restore education and culture to a position of primacy in Jewish communal endeavor. For without vision, vision rooted in knowledge of Torah, conceived as the sum total of all that is best in Jewish tradition and learning, our people will not survive as a creative force in America.