

Is There Still a Jewish People?

Speech at "TAU, November, 2001

1. Following Ahad Ha'am and if not Ahad Ha'am then Rupert Emerson, it is feeling rather than objective criteria that determines a nation's people's existence. But feeling of how many? The answer is that a majority of Jews,, even a vast majority feel themselves part of the Jewish people.. From every survey in every country for which we have data (U.S., Israel, Eastern Europe, even western Europe), Jews feel themselves part of a larger Jewish entity and testify that this feeling is important to them or plays an important role in their lives. It may not seem that way to many of us but can we really judge how other people say they feel?
2. Furthermore, institutions representing the Jewish people and defending their interests do exist in an objective sense:
 - a. Gov't of Israel. True, it places its own interest before those of world Jewry but every political institution favors certain interests over others. The fact is that foreign governments take it for granted that the state of Israel does, in some way represent the interests of their Jewish residents.
 - b. JA weak but it breaths.
 - c. The Joint (joke about how name means one thing in Israel but something quite different in eastern Europe where it plays an important role not only in provision of welfare services but in providing a sense of community as a recent study of Moldava Jewry demonstrates).
 - d. World Jewish Congress. Like the JA it is very weak, almost inconsequential but not quite. It is a forum for a certain level of leadership in many countries.

e. a variety of voluntary private groups (some of them include some very wealthy and influential individuals) which meet to discuss condition of world Jewry and formulate plans for its welfare. Perhaps these groups are ineffective but their existence points to concern.

3. Institutions relatively unimportant since Jews, for the most part, do not define their interests in political terms as they did throughout the last century. The problems that Jews face in sustaining themselves as a people are not of a political nature.

4. Survival depends on sense of cultural affinity between Jews. It isn't only a question of whether we feel a bond with other Jews, at the present time we do, but do we share a culture with other Jews. Here lies the crux of the problem.

Borrowing Geertz's usage in his article "toward a Thick Description of culture" I want to distinguish between "thick" and "thin" culture

Define thick culture.. Examples of seder, kiddush, Yamim Noraiim. (*elaborate*). In the Golah, these symbols no longer evoke the associations -- familial, historical, religious -- which they once did. The most important new symbols or ethnic markers are the Holocaust and Israel but their importance seem to be fading. In Israel, Jewish culture amongst the non-religious seems quite thin. What do we mean by "thin culture" This is what Gans refers to as "symbolic ethnicity" According to Gans:

"...given the degree to which the third generation has acculturated and assimilated, more people look for easy and intermittent ways of expressing their identity, for ways that do not conflict with other ways of life. As a result, they refrain from ethnic behavior that requires an arduous or time-consuming commitment either to a culture that must be practiced constantly, or to organizations that demand active membership.

Second, because people's concern is with identity rather than with cultural practices or group relationships, they are free to look for ways of expressing that identity which suits them best, this opening up the possibility of voluntary, diverse, or individualistic ethnicity. Herbert Gas, "Symbolic Ethnicity: The future of Ethnic Groups and culture in American," On the making of Americans: Essays in Honor of David Reisman, Herbert Gans, et. al, (eds), Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1979, pp. 203-204.

5. Breeding ground for thick culture: Jewish neighborhoods (virtually absent except among Orthodox), social network (family and friends), Jewish schools and religion. But intermarriage on the one hand, and even among the unmarried, a majority of Jews in England and the U.S. when asked to report on their closest friends report that most of them are non-Jews. It remains to be seen if Jewish schools can carry the burden of Jewish survival and reacculturate Jews outside Israel since they are the single most significant source of hope in most of the world. In Israel, it is friendship circles on the one hand and Arab hostility on the other that remain the most important factors generating a common Jewish culture. Once again, only time will tell if this can generate a thick culture or whether the sense of Jewish peoplehood is will slowly disappear among the vast majority of Israeli Jews.