

Cohen intro AJS Dec 19 2010

Steve Cohen has given me the honor of introducing him this afternoon. It seems appropriate that I do so, as a good friend who became a good friend in the course of writing a book together. Steven Cohen is the only person with whom I have ever done that – and he is also the only person I know who has written books with any number of people. The list is formidable. Since getting his PhD at Columbia in 1974, he has made a habit of convincing people to undertake joint research projects with him that resulted in jointly-authored books, and a much larger group to do collaborative studies that resulted in shared articles. He has also written books, articles and reports on applied research on his own, of course. The list of publications he has authored with others or alone numbers well over 150. For me, a humanist by training, two things about the process of shared research and writing seem worthy of special mention on the occasion of Steve's receiving the Marshall Sklare Award. Both bear directly on the quality of his work and ours.

The first is that it shared research, the way Steve Cohen does it, leaves an impact on both the research and the researchers, because it changes the nature of the learning that transpires. If one analyzes the results of reading or research in solitude, thinking consists of whatever connections are made in the brain as one sits in the office, or rides to work, or stands in the shower – and then responding to the comments made by colleagues to whom one has sent drafts. In joint authorship, digestion and analysis of what one has observed and read largely takes place in

conversation, which results in drafts that are not only commented upon but heavily edited by the co-author. Other readers are a bonus. Many readers of The Jew Within told us they could not tell who had written particular chapters, so similar had our voices and approaches become in the course of innumerable conversations and re-draftings. A method common to social scientists left its mark on this humanist. Four eyes are usually better than two, when observation is the key to understanding. Two minds think better together than either does alone – and the effect, if I am right, carries over to the writing one does undertake alone.

The second aspect of this process that I'd like to mention – or, better, to which I'd like to testify – is Steve's remarkable generosity of spirit. This is what makes it possible and pleasurable to write with him. It is also, I think, what makes him such a fine scholar – among the very finest sociologists now writing about Jewish communities, organizations, attitudes and behaviors. Steve is good at what he does because he listens so well to Jews. His questions are well suited to what he has learned from listening to them as much as from observing and analyzing them. He loves the Jewish people and, more remarkably, he loves individual Jews. He wants them, all of them (well, almost all of them) to succeed. He knows that covering up the problems that these Jews cause or face would be of no help to them. For Steven Cohen, critical scholarship is a mode of service. He takes the subjects he studies very seriously.

That is why, I think, Steve manages to teach us all so much – that, and the sheer amount of work that he seems to pour forth every year. Like many people,

whenever I hear claims made about the present condition or likely future of this or that community, movement, organization, activity or attitude I want to know what Steve thinks about it – and about the study that is the basis of the claim – before making up my mind about the matter. He has become indispensable to many individuals and organizations – the way Charles Liebman was, for so many years, and Marshall Sklare before him. His work, to borrow a recent title, helps transform synagogues and not only they from functional to visionary. His careful sociological attention to function helps communities and individuals to rise to the visionary. His data provides a solid foundation on which to think clearly and build futures.

It is my honor to present this year's winner of the Marshall Sklare award, my friend and co-author, Professor Steven M. Cohen.