


Judaism without Israel, without the Jewish people, without the memory of the Holocaust. What would be left? Now you can see what we [liberal Protestants] are dealing with.”¹

Shaul Magid’s perception of rising post-ethnic Judaism may be accurate, though not as prevalent as he claims. The post-ethnic Judaism

he envisions puts us at risk of abandoning a critical aspect of our “thick” Jewish culture, our obligation and familial ties to the Jewish people in Israel and around the world — in effect, trading our Jewish birthright for a thin gruel. That bargain, let us recall, was taken by Esau, not by his brother Jacob. 

Identity Making: Its Historical Roots

LILA CORWIN BERMAN

“I want my child to have a strong Jewish identity.” If you travel in circles similar to mine (synagogue-based preschool and the so-called “playground minyan”), this is a familiar line. The more I hear (and say) it, the more I find myself drawn to understanding the historical complexity beneath the seemingly basic desire to give our children strong Jewish identities. The assumption that one obtains an identity in childhood and then steadily maintains it has a history; so does the belief that parents are obligated to foster identity, through their own actions or by paying institutions to do so. The uncertainty and anxiety about how effective our identity-making efforts are strikes me, too, as a product of the historical evolution of identity discourse and distress.

One cannot understand the 20th- and early 21st-century evolution of Jewish identity without thinking about the creation of the ethnic idea in the United States. Born in a post-World War II moment that historian Gary Gerstle has characterized as teetering between civic and racial nationalism, the ethnic idea was capaciously confining. Jewish intellectuals such as Oscar Handlin and Nathan Glazer discerned an American “ethnic pattern” as just the kind of universal ideal that would allow Jews to remain distinct yet not apart from American society.

The social sciences, which seeped into almost every form of intellectual discourse at the time, drew attention to the structures of society in which individuals operated. Handlin, Glazer, and others posited the idea that, far from their predecessors’ belief in the inherently assimilative structure of American society, group distinctiveness would endure as a structural fact. This is what they saw in the world around them. Will Herberg, another Jewish intellectual steeped (though never formally trained) in the social sciences, called this the “triple melting pot,” cribbing from a sociologist who studied marital behavior in New Haven, and concluded

that Americans did not — and would not — transcend the lines of Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish in their marital decisions. While religion emerged as the marker of social division, post-war thinkers were quick to point out that they were not describing confessional or theological religion; rather, they were witnessing religion as a sociological phenomenon or an “ethnic pattern.” Through this new language, mid-century Jewish intellectuals re-explained American society as fostering, not obliterating, group difference. Here, a new semantics and politics of identity emerged.

Group distinctiveness — or identity — structured American society. Eventually, Glazer, along with Daniel Patrick Moynihan, would assert that it was the anomalous individual who did not have a group identity. In an interview I conducted with Handlin, he put it a different way: One could not be “just nothing.” So, having a Jewish identity was not a matter of volition as much as it was a historical fact tied now to a structural reality. Identity was an inevitability that demanded little in the way of nurture and, thus, was not particularly confining (in the way in which race, for example, remained confining).

At the very same time, psychologists were drawing new attention to social structure, less as a way of understanding society and more as a way to frame thinking about the self. As Andrew Heinze points out in his book *Jews and the American Soul: Human Nature in the Twentieth Century*, Jewish psychologists in the postwar era tended to focus on the relatedness of the self to the other, writ large as society. They imagined the normal self as a stable entity, anchored by the moorings of society and culture, as opposed to the abnormal self, which lacked proper ties and acted out through deviant behavior (such as self-loathing and bigotry).

The parallel to the ethnic idea is striking. Normal identity — on the individual or social level — was envisioned as a static form of


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interaction between the self and the group or society. One did not have to cultivate identity. It was simply the product of normalcy.

Mid-century Jews were among the most important thinkers responsible for creating a sense that all people must have an identity in order to be Americans. It is no accident that Jews were crucial theoreticians of identity. For a group of people who had come face-to-face with its mortality in the form of Nazi ideology and who, on the whole, had little connection to belief or religious obligation, the promise of group identity as enduring, inevitable, and thoroughly American was tantamount to an assurance of collective survival.

By and by, identity transmission became the *sine qua non* of identity. Less important than one's own identity was the question of whether that identity would persist in one's children. Just when the model of inevitable identity should have proven its worth, it crumbled. The circumstances that had guarded the line between Jews and non-Jews were shifting: in the decades after World War II, Jews started to learn alongside, live near, work with, and socialize with non-Jews. Even more to the point, a growing number of Jews and non-Jews came

to love one another. By the 1970s, the Jewish community entered into a crisis mode, fueled by rising rates of intermarriage and a deep ambivalence about the anti-authoritarian spirit of the counterculture movement. At the same time, Jewish intellectuals, among others, turned toward post-structural, postmodern renderings of identity, offering up terms like "fragmentation," and "compartmentalization" as correctives to master narratives of self and society. Jews were told that identity was both as complex as a pastiche of multiple selfhoods and as simple as marrying another Jew (and ensuring that one's children did the same).

So what does it mean, today, to want one's children to have a strong Jewish identity? On one hand, this desire implies a straightforward belief in our ability — as parents and as institutions — to mold identity into something that is stable and proper and usable. But it is also an expression of our helplessness. We do not know what it will mean to possess identity in the future, because we do not know what the social world around us will be or for what uses identity discourse will need to be deployed. Put simply, we do not have the faith that mid-century Jewish intellectuals had or, perhaps, feigned. 



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Post-Ethnic, But Not Post-Peoplehood

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Recently, I have been interested in the resurgent popularity of the term "Jewish peoplehood" as a new buzzword for evaluating Jewish identity. To get a better sense of the trend, I have had Google send me a daily alert with a link to every new Web reference to the term. The alerts I've received in the past year indicate a highly ambiguous term referenced in a broad range of contexts. However, most references can be linked to three broad assumptions: concerns about eroding Jewish boundaries, support for the state of Israel, and affirmation of a shared basis of Jewish identity across diverse practices, geographies, and worldviews.

Given these assumptions, it is absolutely no surprise to me that young Jews immersed in what Shaul Magid describes (using a term popularized by the American historian David Hollinger) as "post-ethnic," find the term highly irrelevant, and even morally suspect. The crux of post-ethnic thinking — the rejection of "the idea that descent is destiny" —

strikes a significant blow to the centrality of familial ties in defining Jewish boundaries.¹ Post-ethnic logic forces individuals to choose between two mutually exclusive approaches toward thinking about group identity: an inherently problematic interest in preserving ties grounded in blood, territory, and essentialist claims; or a more progressive desire to create communities that reject birth as the primary criterion for inclusion. Conceptions of Jewishness linked to inherited group boundaries, nationalism, and essential characteristics associate Jewish boundaries with those of the first option. This association leaves the connotations associated with Jewish peoplehood increasingly out of sync with the moral, cultural, and social ideals of American liberalism.

Any theory of Jewish identity today must recognize the post-ethnic trends that erode boundaries connected to descent. But does this rejoinder to ethnic associations grounded in racial categories mean that the concept of "the Jewish people" has no role to play in emerging

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¹ David Hollinger, "Obama, Blackness, and Postethnic America," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, V. 54 no. 25 (February 29, 2008, page B10).