

The Reconstructionist

Volume 66, Number 1, Fall, 2001

Table of Contents

- 2 **Letters**
- 3 **From the Editor**
- Jewish Identity**
- 7 *Lawrence Rubin*, Signposts of American Jewish Identity
- 17 *Robert Goldenberg*, Jewish Identity in the Ancient World
- 22 *Leonard Gordon*, The Multiple Identities of Rabbis and Other Jews
- 28 *Lori Hope Lefkowitz*, You Are Who You Aren't: Closets, Cabinets and Jewish Identities
- 36 *Seth Goldstein*, Identity, Status and Rabbinic Leadership in Contemporary Judaism
- 44 *Deborah Dash Moore*, Inter-marriage and the Politics of Identity
- 52 *Michael Fessler*, Adoption and Jewish Families: A Proposal
- 60 *Barbara Hirsh*, Healing, Health and Holiness, a review of Chaim I. Waxman's *Jewish Baby Boomers: A Communal Perspective* and Steven M. Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen's *The Jew Within: Self, Family, and Community in America*
- 67 *Lawrence Bush*, Thinking About Male Jewish Identity, a review of Jeffrey K. Salkin's *Searching for My Brothers: Jewish Men in a Gentile World* and Kerry M. Olitzky's *From Your Father's House . . . Reflections for Modern Jewish Men*
- Viewpoint**
- 70 *Donald Menzi*, The Sabbath Bride — and Groom — in Shabbat Evening Liturgy
- Book Reviews**
- 80 *Dennis C. Sasso*, Touchstones for Jewish Living, a review of Harold M. Schulweis' *Finding Each Other in Judaism: Meditations on the Rites of Passage from Birth to Immortality*
- 83 *George Driesen*, The Art of the Sermon, a review of Harold I. Saperstein's *Witness From the Pulpit: Topical Sermons 1933-1980*
- 88 *Dayle A. Friedman*, Facing Death and Grieving, a review of Samuel A. Heilman's *When a Jew Dies*
- Vintage Perspectives**
- 95 Our Country At War, an editorial from December 26, 1941

Letters

Reconstructionist *Halakhah*

To the Editor:

I heartily endorse Daniel Cedarbaum's thesis in "The Role of *Halakhah* in Reconstructionist Decision Making" (Spring 2001 issue). Many in our movement tend to be too dismissive of *halakhah*, seeing it as a system that stands in the way of progressive principles or as an irrelevant intellectual exercise that remains the province of the Orthodox community.

I would reference your readership to my earlier piece, "Reconstructionist *Halakhah*" (*The Reconstructionist*, Spring 1993). In it I talk of how a halakhic process, implemented in congregations, can serve as a vehicle for community building. My experience in two different Reconstructionist congregations bears out the fact that wrestling with halakhic norms leads to serious engagement with both Jewish learning and traditional Jewish norms and prac-

tice. Not only have we used a modified, democratic halakhic process on the congregational level to develop our own guidelines around such core Jewish issues as Shabbat, *tzedakah*, *tikkun olam* and *gemilut hasadim*, but we found that the very process raised the level of knowledge and observance of the many who participated in the process.

I have long felt and argued in various forums that our movement should seek to guide such congregational halakhic processes on a national level. It would put our movement well ahead of other streams of Jewish life in bringing Jewish observance into the 21st century. It would also send a loud and clear message that we represent a good deal more than "do as you please" Judaism.

Rabbi Sid Schwarz

Founder/President

The Washington Institute for
Jewish Leadership and Values
Founding Rabbi, Adat Shalom
Reconstructionist Congregation

FROM THE EDITOR

A Season of Losses

This issue of *The Reconstructionist* appears in a season of losses, following the tragic terror of September 11. In earlier days, when this journal appeared biweekly (and later on, monthly), editorials gave us the ability to respond rapidly to major events. (See “Vintage Perspectives” on page 95 for the reprint of the editorial following the attack on Pearl Harbor.)

But if it was understandably difficult to respond to the events of September 11 while standing in close proximity to them, it is not clear that the vantage point of several months later yields clarity. Perhaps the best we have are fragments of response to help us frame some of the issues that now confront us.

Surely for Reconstructionists, we are not in search of easy theological answers that will somehow resolve the very real questions that we bring to this moment. We are, if anything, realists: we cannot invoke this as an act of God’s will, nor can we assuage our grief with easy assurances that heaven awaits those whose lives have ended. If Judaism is in fact the evolving religious civilization of the Jewish people, then all the alleged answers to ultimate questions are better understood as human responses instead of divine revelation. And as human responses, they are as good or as bad as the people who crafted them. And we find them more or less plausible depending on who we are.

It was inevitable that we would hear many people speak of their escape from death as a miracle. Equally inevitable was the number of reports of people thanking God for sparing them: they missed the planes that were hijacked, they stopped for an extra cup of coffee before going to work in the World Trade Center, their train or subway was late getting them to the office.

We should not begrudge anyone the gratitude that comes with realizing how close one came to losing one’s life or being exposed to serious danger. We should not deny anyone the right to feel as if they have been the personal recipient of God’s benevolence.

But many years ago, Rabbi Ira Eisenstein, z”l, taught that there is a profound difference between being “grateful for” and being “grateful to.” The human impulse in the wake of deliverance is to express gratitude. Having been raised, at least in the West, to believe that God’s hand lies behind history, it is natural to express that gratitude as gratitude “to” someone, specifically, presumably, to God.

A bit of reflection, however, makes it apparent that such gratitude carries

within it a theological problem of no small significance. Because while God was presumably busy saving some people, other people were not so lucky. We would never ask a survivor of a tragedy who is thanking God why she or he thinks that others were not so lucky. We don't believe people intend to be cruel or unkind when expressing gratitude.

But Reconstructionists must approach the issue differently. We are more self-consciously grateful "for" than "grateful to," yet we share with others appreciation for the gift of life. Life is no less precious for it being the luck of the draw than for it being the will of God.

Perhaps we Reconstructionists have an advantage. Seeing God as a power or force working in and through us, but not as a personality acting upon us, we are not backed into those awkward theological problems that go by the technical term "theodicy." In simple terms, "theodicy" means trying to explain how a good God can allow such bad things to happen. Asking how God as a power or force can "allow" things to happen is thus like asking how, for example, "gravity" allows things to happen. It is sort of a non-question.

But we Reconstructionists also pay a price for our theological comfort. We have to acknowledge that the world is more or less random; that what happens may have an explanation — for example, that bridge fell down because of faulty engineering — but often doesn't have a "Reason" — as in, "How could God let that bridge fall down?" There is no cosmic explanation why one person misses a plane that another person manages to get on. It is just what happens to happen.

Rabbi Harold Kushner, in his popular book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, says: There are really only two kinds of people: those for whom any answer is better than no answer, and those for whom a bad answer is worse than no answer.

Reconstructionists by and large fall into that second category. We take little comfort in the well-intentioned but often damaging traditional explanations of God's ways with God's world. We seek comfort not in explanation but in meaning: in the audacious human attempt to impose structure, narrative, poetry, art, esthetics, language and values on naked human experience. In short, we celebrate the human ability to create culture, to make, as Claude Levi-Strauss put it, the "cooked" out of the "raw." The awareness that we impose meaning on reality does not diminish the value of the meaning that we create. If anything, it may make it more precious.

The human drive to deny death and affirm meaning, about which the pages of this publication have spoken eloquently and elegantly for the past 65 years, manifests itself in many ways— not least in our determination to continue discussions of substance and consequence such as we address in this issue.

Remembering Ira Eisenstein

Rabbi Ira Eisenstein, Editor Emeritus of *The Reconstructionist*, died on June 28, 2001, at the age of 94. For many decades, Ira Eisenstein was the driving force behind this publication, writing many of the unsigned editorials and serving both as content and managing editor until 1982. *The Reconstructionist* was a primary place for Ira's essays, articles and reviews.

Of course, Ira Eisenstein's importance to the Reconstructionist movement extended far beyond this journal. It was his determination to establish Reconstructionism as an independent denomination that eventually led to the founding of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in 1968, where Ira served as founding president until his retirement in 1981.

It is often said that Mordecai Kaplan was a man of ideas, and Ira Eisenstein a man of institutions — that is, Kaplan was the ideologue, Eisenstein the pragmatist. It was at Ira's urging that in January of 1935 a magazine was launched devoted to developing what Kaplan had put forward a year earlier in *Judaism as a Civilization*. *The Reconstructionist* was indeed an “institution,” a publication; but more importantly, it was a vehicle for thinking creatively and critically and courageously about Judaism, the Jewish people and issues facing the Jewish world and the larger world.

The editorials and pages of *The Reconstructionist* are not merely a history of the eventual emergence of a religious movement. They are documents of a community in search of a new way of understanding itself in a new world, a new time and a new place. And the voice and vision of Ira Eisenstein shaped those discussions.

We will honor his memory as we continue to converse with openness, honesty and integrity, and with respect for a diversity of opinion, about the important issues that face us. *Y'hi Zikbro Barukh* — May his memory be a source of blessing.

Jewish Identity

The majority of articles in this issue examine aspects of Jewish identity, an increasingly complex and charged topic. Discussions of Jewish identity depart from different platforms: political, strategic, religious and sociological among them. The religious community thinks in terms of religious identity, focusing on such issues as patrilineal descent, conversion and adoption standards and boundaries of religious ritual. The Jewish agency community thinks in terms of group cohesion and continuity, Jewish political power and influence, coalition work and community relations and interfaith work.

Many discussions of Jewish identity take place amidst a confusion of topics, feelings and statistics. Analyses, attitudes and assumptions bang into

one another in forums and debates. That our Jewish community is passionate about issues of identity is apparent; we have yet to find a way to have such discussions in a productive way.

Reconstructionist Judaism begins with the centrality of Jewish peoplehood — with the acknowledgment and affirmation of ethnic identification with a culture. In the 1920s and 1930s, when Kaplan was writing for and speaking to second-generation Jews, the assumptions of ethnicity were self-evident. Now, in the fourth and fifth and even sixth generations of American Jewry, the presumptions of peoplehood are no longer so clear. Contemporary studies of younger American Jews increasingly point to religious rather than ethnic affirmation. Will the current interest in “spirituality” be transformative or ephemeral? Will “Judaism as a religion” replace “Judaism as a civilization”? And what will the phrase “the Jewish people” come to signify in the decades ahead? The articles in this issue attempt to bring some coherence to the conversation.

Future Issues

Our next issue (Spring 2002) will focus on “Texts in Context” and will be devoted to examinations of the ways in which contemporary Judaism uses, reads and understands traditional texts. Fall 2002 will feature “In Dialogue With World Religions.”

— Richard Hirsh

Signposts of American Jewish Identity

BY LAWRENCE RUBIN

On Friday, September 14, as the sun was setting on New York's Upper West Side, a long line of mostly young people stretched around the block from West 89th Street along Broadway. A passerby was told that the people gathered there were awaiting a third Shabbat service that had been added to the schedule at B'nai Jeshurun, a landmark synagogue known for its commitment to social action and also as a place where young, mostly single Jewish New Yorkers could meet other young, mostly single Jewish New Yorkers.

In the wake of the terrorist attack earlier that week resulting in the loss of thousands of lives at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, it seemed fitting and reassuring that so many Jews would seek solace and companionship at Shabbat services. Indeed, New Yorkers generally looked for consolation, if not comprehension, in the motifs and metaphors of religion.

At dusk that day, thousands of New Yorkers lit candles and stood

quietly with their neighbors outside apartment buildings. Fire stations were transformed into shrines as flowers, candles and messages of support and condolence were delivered to express both gratitude and immeasurable grief at the loss of hundreds of what everyone called "New York's Bravest." Public monuments and city buildings became basilicas and cathedrals of light reflecting the hundreds of devotional candles and prayerful notes left at them.

Seeking Connections

Intense moments yield instinctive responses. And many Jews, in this moment of national tragedy, felt the impulse to reconnect with their tradition and to connect with other Jews. Even as attendance at religious services has trended downward in recent years, the habit of looking to the synagogue in moments of spiritual need remains strong.

Yet what are Jews seeking there? Whether it is connection, safety, reassurance, memory or some combi-

Lawrence Rubin is a senior scholar at the Wilstein Institute of Jewish Policy Studies. He formerly served as executive vice chairman of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs.

nation of all of these, it is most likely that they are looking to encounter other Jews, men and women like themselves, members of their community (real or potential, temporary or permanent). What they are not likely to experience in synagogue is an encounter with the Lord.¹ Emotional bonding, it seems, is more important than divine revelation.

In this desire for connection, Jews are very much like other Americans. The root of the American ideal is found in the national insistence on the uniqueness of each individual. Moreover, individual freedom constitutes the precondition for examining our commonality, allowing us to nurture a constellation of relationships — with family, friends, colleagues, neighbors, co-religionists, etc. As Ralph Waldo Emerson and the other Transcendentalists reminded us, the sanctity of each individual frees him or her to explore the inner spark of divinity. Even as we define ourselves, we describe our relationship with others.

Immigrant Issues

Yet spiritual comfort and reflection are not always an option. For the first generation of immigrant Jews, finding transcendent meaning in one's life was decidedly less important than finding a job and making a living. While America promised everyone who came to these shores a unique opportunity for full and unfettered citizenship, the reality was often different and chastening. The nation's

promise was not fully kept.

Jews studied hard but were excluded from certain top universities. Jews worked hard but were barred from certain areas of employment. Jews made lots of money but were not invited to join certain clubs or participate in certain civic activities. Therefore, Jews developed a “two-ness” about their identity: acknowledged even if not accepted, involved even if not intimate. They became Americans even as they remained Jews.

Shared identity emerged from the struggle in a common cause. The earlier generations of Jewish immigrants found their identity sustained by the communities in which they lived. Their neighborhood reminded them that they were Jews. Frequently, the *shtetl* from which they emigrated to America was recreated in New York and other immigrant destinations.

The wooden shack, poorly heated, with occasional water and no plumbing, became the walk-up tenement with occasional water and a shared bathroom in the hall. Yiddish filled the streets and adorned shop windows. The family circle, comprised of relatives and near-relatives from the same town, provided material as well as moral support. Money was pooled to meet the necessities of life as well as to start new businesses. Abandoned children were taken in, clothed, sent to school and placed in appropriate jobs through an informal network. The *landsmanshaftn*, too, bought a burial site so that families

and towns could stay together even in (or especially after) death.

Support Systems

The importance of these support systems cannot be overestimated. The communal systems in places like Brownsville or Williamsburg in Brooklyn, the Lower East Side in Manhattan, Philadelphia's Strawberry Mansion and Chicago's South Side sustained the Jewish narrative. Living together in heavily populated neighborhoods allowed the story of the Jewish past to be told, and assured that the qualities and virtues required for success would be transmitted.

In *Habits of the Heart*, one of the landmark studies of American life, Robert Bellah observes that those who grow up in these sorts of communities "not only hear the stories that tell how the community came to be, what its hopes and fears are, and how its ideals are exemplified in outstanding men and women; they also participate in the practices — ritual, aesthetic, ethical — that define the community as a way of life."²

Jews in the Mainstream

For many first-generation Jewish leaders, the ideals to be exemplified and emulated were found in politics, not in the pulpit. Jews were disproportionately involved in the many great social and political movements of the 20th century. From the organizing efforts of unions in the early decades, through the civil rights

struggle beginning after World War II, to the anti-Vietnam war movement, the fight for women's rights, and other important causes, Jews were the spokespeople, the activists, the funders. They voted in overwhelming numbers for Democrats and played a major role in the New Deal. They also were prominent on Richard Nixon's enemies list in the post-Watergate break-in period. The American Jewish Committee's former director of research, Milton Himelfarb, did not overstate when he described political activity as the "messianism" of American Jews.

Jews as a community moved forcefully into the mainstream of American life. For the majority of Jews who arrived on these shores between 1880 and 1920, evidence of acculturation for them and their families was positive; despite persistent hurdles, barriers to Jewish educational, professional and social advancement eroded steadily. Jews increasingly came to be seen at the top of the learned professions and other prestige stations in society. Jewish philanthropy and social service agencies became the envy of all others.

Following the reestablishment of a Jewish state in 1948, Jewish self-esteem was enhanced through support for Israel. The slogan "We Are One" described not merely the obligation to give but the desire to embrace Israel as the modern-day embodiment of what it means to be Jewish. In sum, Jews by and large lived together, socialized together, thought

alike, voted the same way and (so it seemed) married one another.

Integration and Assimilation

Given the extent and success of Jewish involvement in the nation's public life, it is not surprising that Jews came to define themselves in activist terms. A landmark survey of American Jews conducted by the *Los Angeles Times* in 1988 discovered that nearly half of all respondents cited "a commitment to social justice" as the most important characteristic of their Jewishness. By contrast, only 17 percent identified support for Israel as the quality most important to their sense of Jewishness, and a similar small percentage said that religious observance was the most important characteristic.

But even as Jews were describing themselves as guardians of a just (American) society, a deeper irony was inescapable. The very openness of America jeopardized the sense of community that had launched Jewish acculturation and assimilation in the first place. Indeed, for many years, thoughtful observers cited worrying data about the fissures that were developing in the structure of the community. The *mameloshn* was left behind when Jews moved from their neighborhoods of first residence; so, too, were many of the elderly who had not succeeded materially. Synagogue attendance dwindled. Housing patterns became attenuated and, increasingly, Jews married non-Jews and either drifted away from or were

shunned by the rest of the community.

Israel as Identifier

As implied above, for many, passion for Israel had come to replace love of Judaism as a sustaining characteristic of Jewish identity. It was easier and more satisfying to read about Israel in the newspaper than to read about ancient Israelites in the Torah. However, the ardor and embrace of Israel that accompanied its founding and flourished in the wake of the terrifying Six-Day War of 1967 waned.

The first indication of American Jewish restiveness was the election in Israel of a right-wing government in 1977. Shadowing almost symbiotically the Likud's commitment to a "Greater Israel," there emerged a vigorous if minority politics whose vision of Jewish entitlement in the Holy Land seemed fundamentalist, and therefore alien to most American Jews. Finally, disenchantment with the slow progress toward peace, and despair at the Palestinian resort to violence following setbacks to the Oslo peace process, contributed to a malaise in American Jewry concerning Israel.

Israel and Alienation

In roughly the same time frame, a major conflict erupted between Israel and diaspora Jewry, further attenuating the bonds that nourished the communal identity and commit-

ments of American Jews. Largely for political reasons, the government of Israel tried to amend the Law of Return so that the state would only recognize conversions done according to strict Jewish law. The effect was twofold: First, it invalidated conversions by, and implicitly negated the authenticity of, Reform and Conservative rabbis. Second, it cast doubt on the Jewishness of the spouses, children and grandchildren of many American Jewish communal leaders.

For men and women with decades of dedicated service to the Jewish community and Israel, who had contributed generously to the building of the Jewish state, it was infuriating to face the reality that Israel would refuse to accept their relatives as Jews because their conversions had not been undertaken according to a singular standard of what comprised halakhic conversion. For American Jews, many of whom saw themselves Jewishly only when they held a mirror up to Israel, this rejection of their Jewish family, even if unintended, was devastating as well as distancing.³

Changing Identity Patterns

Soon after, Israel's apparent disparagement of the vitality and authenticity of American Jewry seemed to receive painful validation from the unlikely source, the Council of Jewish Federations itself. The CJF's 1990 National Jewish Population Survey discovered that, while 90 percent of all Jews who were married

before 1965 had Jewish spouses, "[i]n recent years [i.e., since 1985] just over half of Born Jews who married, at any age, whether for the first time or not, chose a spouse who was born a Gentile and has remained so. . . ."⁴ The response to these findings was flammable.

The lamentation was exceeded only by the finger-pointing. Among the culprits accused of eroding Jewish life were the Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist branches of Judaism, which had strayed from accepted standards of Jewish practice and tradition. Conversely, Orthodox Judaism did not escape unscathed, criticized for exclusionism, rigidity and intolerance.

The community relations field was lambasted for preventing Jewish day schools from receiving public dollars and for implicitly encouraging intermarriage by asserting that all people are equal. Federations were accused of being boring and too indebted to wealthy donors, thereby driving away younger and less-affluent Jews. And America itself was blamed for its very openness, which, it was charged, provided opportunities for social integration and upward mobility far more attractive than anything that the Jewish community could offer.

Beyond the high-charged accusations, the NJPS findings unleashed a firestorm of reports, studies and recommendations geared to assisting the community in stemming the intermarriage tide. Traditional as well as progressive rabbinic bodies passed resolutions restricting — or regard-

ing — rabbis officiating at intermarriages; efforts were devised to increase dramatically day school attendance; money was raised to encourage college students to visit Israel; campus Hillels received major infusions of dollars. “Continuity” became the watchword in the organized Jewish community.

Symptoms and Causes

Ironically, the vigorous response of the federations and other mainstream Jewish organizations to the steps proposed by Israel’s government served to create strains between the two major Jewish centers. At the same time, many adjudged the reaction to the other pressing issues (intermarriage, lack of affiliation, etc.) as anemic, sclerotic, elitist or simply wrongheaded. Rather than lament reality, some argued, the community should seek ways to be more inclusive, to make participation in Jewish life meaningful, to find many avenues for participation. The critics tended to see intermarriage as a symptom of larger issues at play in Jewish life, not as the cause of shrinkage in the community.

For other, less engaged Jews, these issues didn’t matter at all. They were experiencing the legacy of the ’80s “me” generation, enjoying a lifestyle that extolled self-discovery, self-expression and self-improvement. For many, voluntarism and charitable activity was important; it made them feel good. In relationships, younger men and women simply saw no con-

tradition between their own Jewishness and the religion of their spouses or partners. Intermarriage as an insurmountable problem rarely appeared on any radar screen. Furthermore, younger Jews, who experienced the miracle of Israel’s creation as history and not memory, were shown to lack the same depth of feeling for the Jewish state as their parents and grandparents.

Communal and Individual Needs

A major fault line seemed to have opened up between the requirements of Jewish institutions and the needs of individual Jews. Even as the community struggled to find new and creative ways to engage Jews in communal life, it became increasingly apparent that many Jews remain ambivalent with regard to organizational structures and time-tested systems.⁵ This does not mean, however, that they do not care. Jews continue to be proud of their Jewishness and seek opportunities to express those positive feelings.

A study by Amos: The National Jewish Partnership for Social Justice (a new organization whose purpose is to provide training for Jewish groups in the social justice area) found that 94 percent of Jews interviewed in a national sample agree that “social justice work by Jewish organizations makes me proud to be a Jew.”⁶ At the same time, federations continue to see the social justice principle of *tikkun olam*, “the repair of

the world,” as part of their mission.

Despite the general high regard in which Jews hold the principle of social justice, an understanding of the term is by no means universal. A number of Jewish leaders (often, but not exclusively, Republican) as well as large-city federations have recently questioned the breadth of the organized Jewish community’s social justice activism. In 1999, the federation of New York City urged the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, the community relations umbrella for 122 local and 13 national member agencies, “to narrow its focus to issues of direct concern to the Jewish community. . . .”⁷

Turning Inward

The blurring of the definition of social justice creates a tension between social activism and institutional priorities. Steven M. Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen found that Jews “generally acknowledged a conceptual link between being Jewish and the special responsibility to improve society.”⁸ Yet individuals tend to express that linkage differently than organizations. Individuals find value in social justice not only as a means of improving their community (or communities) but also as a component of personal satisfaction (i.e., “meaning” or “spirituality”) in their own lives. To them, a desire for meaningful Jewish involvement requires outlets that meet their needs, challenge their abilities and comport with their values. They are not looking to

serve institutional priorities, they are looking for institutions that support their values.

On the other hand, Jewish federations and other mainstream institutions are likely to feel mandated to focus on improving Jewish “society” in the first instance. *Tikkun olam* may certainly fill a role in the organized community’s values mix, but support for it is likely to be pursued internally, by seeking participation in community-based programs. Rightly or wrongly, this is often perceived as the institution asking that its insular priorities be supported. For many, the range of opportunities provided by the organized community is often considered limited and inadequate. It ignores real issues (e.g, the environment, women’s issues, gay and lesbian rights, intergroup relations) and fails to assure requisite personal satisfaction.

Part of the reason for the limiting of agendas within mainstream Jewish organizations is the breakdown of the communal consensus. Even as people are looking for creative outlets to pursue their search for meaning and to satisfy their spiritual longing, it is increasingly obvious that the terrain of Jewish life has become decidedly dialectical. What the communal model of earlier generations may have lacked in terms of opportunities for spiritual growth, it made up for in terms of commonality. Generally speaking, the agenda was clear, priorities were agreed to and approaches were evident.

Consensus Weakens

In today's highly individuated reality, the community is perhaps more easily defined by differences than by agreements. For example, as suggested above, the Israeli effort to modify the Law of Return unleashed sharp divisions in this country between the Orthodox and non-Orthodox streams of Judaism.⁹

Secondly, there is evidence that some traditionally held public policy principles in the area of church-state separation are under attack in certain quarters. The effort to support Jewish day schools, for instance, has emboldened some to question the organized community's traditional opposition to private school vouchers.

At the same time, President Bush's interest in providing funding to "faith-based" organizations (read: churches, synagogues and mosques) to expand the delivery of direct services stimulates interest among some federations that are looking for new channels of support for financially strapped service agencies. Finally, there are those who argue that the community's priorities today are so pressing that we cannot afford the luxury of expending significant energy or resources outwardly. Unquestionably, it is said, Jews must continue to be integrated in the broader community, yet we have an obligation to meet our own internal needs first.

New Realities

Of course, none of these arguments is new; only the context and the timing has changed. However, when we are seeking to define the nature of Jewish identity today it is crucial that we recognize a couple of realities.

First, as noted above, the quest for Jewish identity and authenticity has become an individual journey, rooted in a desire for some kind of spiritual connection to Judaism and Jewish community. There are as many paths on the journey as there are Jews engaged in spiritual sojourning. It is clear that no single approach will suffice.

Second, Jewish identity will be found and nourished in many places and in many ways: through observance, culture, social action, study, family, voluntarism, Israel experience — to name only a few. The variety of journeys, stories and needs has implications for the kinds of institutions, programs and services that are required to accommodate the rich diversity of Jewish life.

Perhaps we need to think small, not big. One interesting development has been the burgeoning of smaller and fiscally leaner "boutique" Jewish organizations that are able to provide greater participant satisfaction precisely because they are unencumbered by the competing forces inherent in today's megastructures. Some, like Barry Shrage, president of the Boston federation, argue that smaller structures, rooted in a commitment

to entrepreneurship and partnering, are better able to encourage creativity and innovation.¹⁰

Third, and perhaps most important, is to acknowledge the unique nature of American Jewish life. Whether we call ourselves (as I prefer) American Jews or Jewish Americans, the terms are inexorably linked. When we speak of Jewish identity in America, it is understood that we are discussing American Jewish identity.

Jewish Identity in America

There are those who look at American and Jewish identities and see dissonance, not harmony. For example, the American-born Israeli political scientist Charles Liebman asserts, “The American Jew is torn [unconsciously] between two sets of values — those of integration and acceptance into American society and those of Jewish group survival. These values appear to me to be incompatible.”¹¹

Liebman’s argument is self-defeating. It is a prescription for Jewish disaster to wring one’s hands and view Jewish and American values in opposition. Even on the most pragmatic level, it must be understood that without the political values of American society it would be impossible to sustain a secure Jewish community. No amount of day school education, in-marriage, synagogue attendance or Jewish literacy will assure Jewish survival where democracy is threatened.

Integration into America does not necessarily lead to the loss of Jewish distinctiveness. In America, we are no different than anyone else under law, yet we are also free to unfettered assertion, practice and celebration of our faith. Shortcomings in American Jewish life result not from the openness of American society but from failures within our community. And America is unique among the nations of the world in providing the political freedom that allows us to address these challenges.

The nature of the American-Jewish experience renders the Liebman argument unrecognizable to most American Jews. For an overwhelming majority, Jewish identity is wed to American destiny. Our Jewish roots are nourished in American soil. The tradition, history and values of our faith are expressed in the language of our nation. Even as the community comes to grips with the struggle to find meaningful Jewish identity, we must recognize that we are articulating our American selves as well.

1. In their important 1998 study, *The Jew Within* (The Wilstein Institute of Jewish Policy Studies, 29), Steven M. Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen observe that the moderately affiliated Jews they interviewed “go to synagogue . . . in order to experience community, connect with Jewish tradition and enjoy moments of personal reflection, but do not expect or experience any special connection to God there.”

2. Robert N. Bellah, et al. *Habits of the Heart* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 154.
3. This sense of rejection by Israel, the acknowledged “center” of world Jewry, was only magnified in the early '90s when Yossi Beilin, the outspoken leader of the Labor Party, asserted that Israel no longer needed philanthropic donations from the diaspora. Whatever his intentions, Beilin's comments were read among American Jewish leaders as casting aside the single most important act — charitable donations — by which American Jews signaled their “oneness” with the Jewish state — and, through it, the Jewish people and its destiny.
4. Highlights of the CJF 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (Council of Jewish Federations, 1991), 14.
5. Cohen and Eisen report in *The Jew Within* that “almost all our subjects, including the most committed among them, demonstrated enduring ambivalence towards the organizations, institutions, commitments and norms which constitute Jewish life. . .” [6].
6. Julie Wiener, Jewish Telegraphic Agency, May 2001.
7. *Idem*.
8. *The Jew Within, op.cit.*, 33.
9. A thorough discussion of these issues can be found in Samuel G. Freedman's *Jew vs. Jew: The Struggle for the Soul of American Jewry* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).
10. *Creating a New Vision for the American Jewish Community: The Challenge of Developing Leaders and Storytellers for Our Future*, Combined Jewish Philanthropies website.
11. Cited in David Arnov, "Toward a Psychology of Jewish Identity," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, (Fall 1994), 33.

Jewish Identity in the Ancient World

BY ROBERT GOLDENBERG

One of the peculiar features of Jewish identity is that it blends ethnic and religious elements. Identity as a Jew is widely viewed (in the modern world, at least) as compatible with having no religion at all, but people who claim to be Jews while practicing some other religion than Judaism often arouse resistance or rejection. Similarly, people who claim to be practicing Judaism but deny belonging to the Jewish people are often perceived as not quite understanding how Jewishness works. Jewish ethnic identity and Jewish religious identity are not completely identical, but they're not fully separate either.

This is not true of other groups. Thinking only of Europe, we all know that Irish people can be either Catholic or Protestant, and we all know that Catholics can be Irish or Italian or German. But when Jews try to mix and match in this way, things go wrong: How did this happen?

Similar and Different

The answer starts back in the days

of the Bible. It appears that the earliest Israelites were culturally rather like their neighbors: They ate similar foods, they wore similar garments, they earned their living in similar ways. They even had similar religious beliefs. The idea that every people has a national god who protects it and in return expects its loyalty was widespread in the ancient Near East. This idea, of course, lies behind the central biblical notion of covenant.

As the so-called biblical period drew to a close, however, the Israelites began to differ from other groups in important ways. The idea of covenant began to demand not merely loyalty toward the national god but exclusive loyalty. It was no longer enough to worship the God of Israel along with others: The ancestral God began to demand that those who worship Him must worship Him alone. Members of the covenant (whom we can now call "Judaeans," or Jews, after their ancestral territory) began refusing to add any other divine being to their religious lives. Their god became the sole God in heaven and on earth.

Robert Goldenberg is professor of Jewish studies at the State University of New York at Stonybrook.

This change did not take place overnight. It was strenuously opposed by those who thought it foolish to risk the anger of all the other gods in order to gratify the jealousy of one: Had not those other gods already showed their displeasure and their power by evicting the jealous God of Israel from His only sanctuary and sending His people into exile? Nevertheless, under the prophets' relentless urging, the notion of monotheism began to spread among the people. The Judaeans became known as a people who would worship no other god than their own.

Diaspora and Identity

The other important change that affected Jewish identity was the steady expansion of the Jewish diaspora: A growing number of people lived outside of Judaea who continued to identify with Judaeans and maintained the wish to live according to Judaeans' ancestral law. Immigrant communities could be found in many great cities of the Greco-Roman world, and many of them tried to preserve the ways of their ancestors. In the case of the Jews, however, this wish involved a refusal to worship the other gods of the cities and kingdoms where Jews came to settle: This religious peculiarity became one of the most familiar characteristics of Jewish life everywhere.

This "peculiarity" was seen (by Jews and others alike) as part of Judaeans' culture, not the fruit of theo-

logical reflection but a reflection of a certain nation's way of life. In Reconstructionist language, Judaism, monotheism and all, was the religious dimension of a full-blown civilization.

But that raised a question. Granted that Jews were obliged by their own national covenant to avoid the worship of foreign divinities, what about the foreign nations themselves? Was it all right for others to maintain their own respective religious traditions, just as Israel so insistently clung to the teachings of Moses? Jews naturally turned to their Scriptures, where the teachings of Moses could be found, to learn the answer to this question, but they discovered that no single lesson emerged from the sacred pages.

Israel and the Nations

The Bible is not a book but an anthology, and its component elements were written over a period spanning a thousand years. They reflect a variety of political regimes, some independent and some under foreign rule. They were written in widely separated countries and in more than one language. It would be astonishing if such a diverse literature would have the same thing to say about every imaginable question, and indeed that is not the case. On one question, however — whether Jews may worship deities other than the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob — the Bible speaks with fierce uniformity. On everything else the reader of

Scripture must choose among multiple possibilities. Here are some not-entirely-random quotations:

Do you not hold what Chemosh your god has given you? So too we hold what the Lord our God has given us. (Judges 11: 24)

The gods of the peoples are idols, but the Lord made the heavens. (1 Chronicles 16:26)

I will make the peoples pure of speech, so that they all invoke the Lord by name and serve him with one accord. (Zephaniah 3:9)

I am the first and I am the last, and there is no God but me. (Isaiah 44:6)

Each of the nations walks in the name of its own god, and we shall walk in the name of the Lord our God forever. (Micah 4:5)

Jews reading Scripture could be guided by any of these verses, or by any combination of them. They could read Judges and decide that every nation had its own protective deity, or they could read Chronicles and decide that other nations thought they had their own gods but were deluded. They could read Micah and decide that every nation was called to remain loyal to its own heritage, or they could read Zephaniah and decide it was their own Jewish

destiny to bring all nations to the worship of the one true God. And they were on their own in deciding how to proceed: The Bible itself could not help them, because it contained all these verses with no guidance as to sorting them out.

A Range of Responses

These circumstances produced a wide variety of Jewish responses to neighboring peoples and neighboring ways of life. Some Jews wanted nothing more than to be left alone, and were entirely willing to leave others alone in exchange: The rabbis of the Talmud fell pretty much into that category. Other Jews (most famously the noted Alexandrian author Philo) immersed themselves fully in the culture of the Greco-Roman world.

Some Jews were filled with contempt for a way of life they considered degraded beyond measure, while others seemed to accept the idea that a gentile could be as righteous as anyone else. It wasn't always easy to predict what individuals would think. Philo had received the best Greek education available and lived in a great Hellenistic city: He had great respect for Greek philosophy but only disdain for the religious traditions of his neighbors. In his opinion, the great advantage of Judaism was that it gave ordinary people the same level of divine insight through the "teachings of Moses" that only a handful of intellectual giants had achieved among the Greeks. The rest of the Greeks were little better than barbar-

ians, and the Egyptians among whom he lived were barbarians.

Attitudes toward gentile religions and gentile ways of life were matched by attitudes toward non-Jews as people. Surviving evidence suggests that many Jews moved very comfortably among their neighbors while others apparently shunned them. Many Jews engaged in commercial dealings with others: They bought and sold, they borrowed and lent, they entered into partnerships and other sorts of joint venture. Such Jews, of course, accepted that non-Jews were basically honest people with whom one could do business. (There were always law courts for dealing with the exceptions, though in many places judges were no more likely to be honest than anyone else.) In general, Jews managed to preserve ordinary relations with their neighbors, and that is precisely what one would expect: Most people, most of the time, get along with the people among whom they live.

Multiple Perspectives on Gentiles

On the other hand, rabbinic texts imply that Jewish men found non-Jewish women a constant temptation, so that rabbis struggled to limit opportunities for social contact between Jews and others: The evidence does not clearly indicate whether such temptation was a real factor in the everyday life of ordinary Jews or more of a rabbinic fantasy to start with.

A series of rules in the Mishnah

(*Avodah Zarah*, chapter 2) goes to the heart of this problem. These rules forbid a Jew to visit a non-Jewish barber unless a third party is present, apparently on the assumption that any non-Jew, given the opportunity, would readily slit a Jew's (maybe anyone's) throat. They forbid a Jew, male or female, to be alone with a non-Jew, or even to place livestock in gentile care overnight, apparently on the assumption that the sexual drive of non-Jews cannot be trusted.

What was the basis of these lurid fears? Moviegoers are familiar enough with Greek and Roman debauchery, but can you learn history from the movies? Did most ordinary people really indulge their worst inclinations so freely as to justify such legislation, and how do these rules fit with the other rabbinic laws that take commercial dealings between Jews and others as an ordinary, everyday reality? And who observed these rules in the first place? Just as the fears may have been imaginary, so too it may be no more than an illusion to think that anyone ever really lived this way.

Balancing Experiences

It seems the ancient rabbis were torn between a desire to keep away from others as much as possible out of fear and mistrust, and an opposing realization that most people were really quite decent — so that one could do business with them to mutual benefit most of the time. In certain ways, this was a conflict between the everyday experience that things

were all right and the equally compelling awareness that things could go catastrophically bad without warning. Both, after all, were true.

It was also a conflict born of the knowledge that some people are extremely dangerous while most people are not, and that strangers cannot always tell who is which: Rabbis were perhaps more inclined to have faith in their fellow Jews because they could more easily read the signals and know which individual Jews could not be trusted. Different situations and different questions drew different responses, and everything got recorded in the sacred texts we have today.

The teachers whom we often lump together as “the rabbis” lived in two different countries, under two different empires, with two different legal

and political and social systems, over a period of almost five hundred years. We modern Jews who try to learn from the sages who rescued and reshaped their (our) ancient heritage, find ourselves in exactly the same situation those ancient worthies encountered when they sought to derive lessons from Scripture. Like them, we find too many lessons in our past and are forced to choose among them on our own. We, no less than the sages, are influenced by diverse environments, by changes in the local situation, by our own differences of temperament and character. Recognizing the difficulty of the challenge can only increase our admiration for the magnitude of their accomplishment. It also gives hope that we, too, will ultimately find our way.

The Multiple Identities of Rabbis and Other Jews

BY LEONARD GORDON

Rabbis are particularly conscious of roles and role playing, of the ways in which we aren't who we are. The very lives of rabbis are built around such oppositions as that between our private and public selves. And the contraries multiply from there: As public figures, rabbis imagine themselves to be either leaders or facilitators, role models or fellow seekers. Congregational discussions focus on inreach vs. outreach, the role of Jews and non-Jews in congregational life, the sanctification of gay and straight marriages. In Israel, our communities try to locate themselves in the divide between religious and secular identities.

Maintaining Identity Amidst Diversity

Recently, the Conservative congregation that I serve agreed that a constituent minyan of the congregation could be affiliated with the Reconstructionist movement. The community has learned to accept that we can pray out of different prayer books, observe *Yizkor* at not fewer than four different services held at different

days and times during the holidays, and still function as one community, even as one congregational family.

Today, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association includes rabbis who serve in nondenominational, trans-denominational, renewal, Conservative, Reform and Reconstructionist-affiliated settings. Yet all the members are connected by virtue of a common commitment to the Reconstructionist vision and by a desire to support the dissemination of that vision throughout the world Jewish community.

I might conclude that boundaries are not what they used to be, but evidently boundaries never were what they used to be. From biblical times to the present, it seems that all of our neatly bounded identities are (and have been) continually in play, creating for rabbis and for our communities no small amount of discomfort and tension.

Unstable Nature of Identity

In fact, the Jewish people in particular have exemplified in our bodies and identities the ever-shifting

Leonard Gordon is the rabbi of the Germantown Jewish Centre in Philadelphia.

and unstable nature of identity. To outsiders, Jews have stood at the blurred boundary between racial and gender divides. We have failed to fit into neat characterizations of group identity as being either racial or ethnic, national or religious. Among ourselves, we have promoted marriage within the tribe, and then we have valorized the Moabite Ruth as the archetypal convert. We care deeply about *yichus* (ancestry) and then we assign the founding position in the history of rabbinic Judaism to two Jews by choice, Shemaiah and Abtalion. Over thousands of years, we set up our rules, and then we undercut them in our narratives, preserving both traditions side by side without noting the contradiction.

Think about some of the most pronounced identity questions of our own moment: Who is a Jew? What is sacred territory, and who has authority over it? What are the defining standards of Jewish observance? With whom can we do what? What does “Jewish” mean, anyway?

Common Focus, Multiple Viewpoints

If we are interested in identity crises, we should cast our eyes in the direction of late second Temple times, when Jews functioned in a complex set of interrelating communities, without clear boundaries, united only by their common relationship to the Temple in Jerusalem. To speak in appropriate generalities, for Sadducees, the Temple repre-

sented God’s protective presence on earth. For the Jewish followers of Jesus, it represented a symbol of the corruption of religious life into a series of business transactions and mechanical rituals. For the Qumran sectarians, the Temple was the site of their alienation. For Philo, writing in Alexandria, the Temple in Jerusalem was simply the visible model for the cosmic Temple that was God’s true home. For zealots, the Temple represented the nation’s political independence.

Jews coexisted, or divided, around a central symbol, permitting themselves for perhaps a century or more to live without shared dogma or ritual, without shared institutions, and even without a single shared calendar. The apparent end of this era came with the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, and with the end of the Jewish polity in Judea some 65 years later, when Rome crushed the Bar Kokhba rebellion and the center of gravity moved from Jerusalem to the Galilee.

Forming a Coalition

In the aftermath of these catastrophes, the task the early rabbis gave themselves can be summarized in simple terms: How can we preserve the broadest possible coalition of Jewish identities in the emerging community — without permitting our differences to permanently divide us? Without the Temple as an imposing symbol of our unity, we would now have to find in Judaism itself, in the rituals of prayer and study, the force

for supporting a unity that transcends our diverse identities.

When the Mishnah was published during the early 3rd century, the synagogue was a meeting place for Jews with a wide range of theological beliefs. Rabbis and priests, messianic Jews (including followers of Jesus of Nazareth) mingled with political zealots and *hekhalot* mystics. In Mishnah *Berakhot* 8:8, we are told that we answer “Amen” after an Israelite makes a blessing, but if the one saying the blessing was from a fringe community, we listen carefully and wait for the prayer to be over before saying “Amen.” (See Appendix for Mishnah texts cited in this article.)

I use the term “fringe community” purposefully here, in the meaning given the term by Arthur Waskow, who has called on us to see in *tzitzit* a model for creating an inclusive Judaism with many connections. The fringes can be included because we can say “Amen” to the prayers of others, even if their understanding of the ritual differs from our own.

Legitimizing Differences

Our communities include Jews who see themselves as traditionalists alongside Jews committed to revitalizing the language of prayer through spontaneous liturgical expression. Such prayers often include names for God some of us find compelling and others find idolatrously anthropomorphic. Mishnah *Berakhot* reminds us to listen with care and make judgments with an eye toward inclusion.

Mishnah *Ketubot* 4:12 acknowledges that the *ketubah* came in different versions, the people of Jerusalem and the people of Galilee writing different texts with distinctive clauses. Regional differences need to be negotiated. Judaism does not speak in one voice over space, any more than it remains unchanging over time. And even within the Land of Israel, difference could be acknowledged.

In our own time, Reconstructionist communities take on different characters in different areas, and even within one area. Some organize themselves around social action, other around study, yet others around the education of youth. Our policies on the liturgical role of non-Jews or the boundaries of ceremonies of *kid-dushin* vary widely. We need not evaluate each other’s choices from a place that seeks a common ethical imperative for our entire movement. Each community has its defining character and we should expect and value diversity.

Indeterminacy of Normalcy

Even casual readers of early rabbinic literature are immediately struck by the inclusion of discordant voices in the text. We read in passage after passage of statements by authorities that we know will be rejected. Mishnah *Eduyyot* (1:3-6) is concerned with justifying the inclusion of rejected opinions, and teaches that we keep minority voices alive to acknowledge two deep realities:

People should and do change their minds; and, over time and in different places, Jewish communities make different choices. As a result, today's minority position may become the accepted view in the future.

When we reject a prayer, a ritual, a text, a political or moral argument, we can do so from a place of modesty, unsure whether or not that perspective might find a new place in some future time. In my experience, the history of *mikveh* is the most compelling example of how rituals find new and unexpected life. In the 1970s it would have been hard to imagine the many uses we make of *mikveh* rituals today, let alone the current proliferation of *mikvaot* under the auspices of the liberal denominations.

Boundaries and Chaos

Finally, the Mishnah itself has been read as a sustained essay on the problem of ambiguity, of how to create boundaries in the face of a chaotic world. Much of early rabbinic law concerns the land of Syria (is it Israel or diaspora?), the eve of Sabbath (sacred time or ordinary time?), and the *tumtum* and androgynous (are they male or female?). Mishnah *Bikkurim* 1:5 wants to know whether someone of doubtful or double sex may bring the First Fruits to Jerusalem and, once it is decided that they can, what words they can recite during the offering.

Being Jewish is not, and never has been, a simple question of birth or conversion. The Mishnah abounds

with individuals who challenge simple characterization. The Jewish community the Mishnah knows includes a full and complex array of genders, *netinim* and Jews by choice, freed slaves and concubines, disqualified priests and scholars of no special lineage. Each has his or her own rules for bed and table. Each represents a different variety of an endlessly complex Israel.

Performance and Role Playing

In these texts and many others like them, I find a model for our communal work in this new world. We recognize not only our rabbinic work as performance, but our Jewish and gender identities as role-playing as well. We recognize that doing Judaism in the context of fluid boundaries is not a modern problem; it is central to the Jewish/human condition, and it has been with us in a profound sense throughout the history of Judaism.

Our Judaism today is an improvisation, as Judaism always has been. When the Temple was destroyed, a great debate ensued in which Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai wanted to sound the shofar at Yavneh on Rosh Hashanah when it fell on Shabbat. The rabbinic leadership rejected his proposal, holding fast to the idea that the shofar could only be sounded under such circumstances in the Temple courts. In a piece of unparalleled theater, he asked permission to sound it this one Rosh Hashanah in Yavneh, and they granted him his exemption. After the holiday, they

reopened the issue, and Rabbi Yohanan replied, “there is nothing left to debate, we already have the precedent.” So much for halakhic process.

The model of the early rabbis shows us a way of being flexible and inclusive without being boundary-less. We pray with others while not always saying “Amen,” listening to other voices while being aware that they may one day move from margin to mainstream; we recognize that our political and religious sensibilities may reflect our local communities and not an absolute value; we know that those who cross boundaries may teach us something important about who we are; and every once in a while, we put on a bit of theater to make our point.

Religion and Theater

Or better, perhaps, we recognize the extent to which it is all always theater. Our consciousness that all the world’s a stage is evident when we think about our costuming (Yes to a tie? No to a tie? Pants? Or should it be a skirt? Short or long?); when we coach the supporting players (“Children, please, please don’t lead the pack running in the halls”; “Lori, this week, could you show up — on time?”); when we modulate our tones, shift from judgmental preacher to balanced teacher to open-minded counselor; when we doubt our sincerity, when we re-record for the twelfth time the message on the office answering machine.

Oscar Wilde said, “Give a man a

mask and he will tell you the truth.” But evidently the secrets are the selves; beneath each mask lies another one. Identity — whether Jewish, sexual, racial, ethnic, national or rabbinic — is now and always has been a performance. The trick is how to make it good. So on with the show.

Appendix

I. “Inclusion does not always mean saying: Amen.” Mishnah *Berakhot* 8:8

A. If wine is brought after the food and there is but one cup, the House of Shammai say: The benediction is said over the wine, and then over the food. And the House of Hillel says: The benediction is said over the food and then over the wine.

B. They may answer, “Amen” after an Israelite who says a benediction, but not after a Samaritan until they have heard the whole benediction.

II. “Grounding decision-making in local reality, not in absolutes.” Mishnah *Ketu-bot* 4:12

A. (If her husband has not written for her) “You shall dwell in my house and receive maintenance from my goods as long as you remain a widow in my house,” he is still liable, since this is a condition enjoined by the court.

B. Thus used the people of Jerusalem to write;

C. And the people of the Galilee used to write after the same fashion as the people of Jerusalem.

D. But the people of Judea used to write, “. . . until such time as the heirs are minded to give you your *ketubah*.”

E. Therefore, if the heirs were so minded they could pay her her *ketubah* and let her go.

III. “Including marginal voices: Decisions are made to be changed.” Mishnah *Eduyyot* [1:3]

A. Hillel says, "One full *hin* . . ."

B. And Shammai says, "Nine *kabs* . . ."

C. And the Sages say, "(The law) does not follow either of these opinions. Rather (the law goes according to the following precedent): When two weavers came from the Dung Gate in Jerusalem and testified in the name of Shemai-ah and Abtalion that three *logs* . . . the sages accepted their words."

[1:4] A. And why do they (the editors of the Mishnah) record the opinions of Shammai and Hillel for no practical purpose? (They record it) to teach generations that come afterward that no one should persist in his or her own opinion, for "the founders of the world" (Hillel and Shammai) did not persist in their own opinions (since they accepted the opinion of the Sages).

[1:5] A. And why do they record the opinion of an individual against that of a majority, since the established law always follows the opinion of the majority?

B. So that if another/a later] court should favor the view presented by the individual, it may depend on it . . .

IV. "Boundary-crossing cases help us define our commonalties." Mishnah *Bik-kurim* 1:5

A. Rabbi Eliezer ben Jacob says a woman who is the child of converts may not marry into a priestly family unless her mother was an Israelite (by birth).

B. A guardian, an agent, a bond-
man, a woman, one of doubtful sex, or
an androgynous, may bring the First
Fruits, but they may not make the de-
claration, since they cannot say, "Which
you, God, have given me."

You Are Who You Aren't: Closets, Cabinets and Jewish Identities

BY LORI HOPE LEFKOVITZ

The prevailing myth: Once upon a time, and for thousands of years, at least we knew who we were. From our tribal identity through the ghettos that bound us together, being Jewish may have had its burdens, but you knew who you were. You knew, at least, how to behave, what the rules were, whom to marry, how to raise kids, how to be yourself.

Democracy, mobility, melting pots, blended families, denominationalisms, and the blessings of freedom and opportunity carried the sorry consequences of confusion, assimilation, and myriad other signs of identity trouble. It was onto this scene that Mordecai Kaplan entered, offering his brilliant articulation of the struggle to live effectively in two evolving civilizations, one Jewish, the other American. Strategies from the community center (with its *shul*, pool and school) to an adaptable liturgy

were devised to accommodate this new, breathtaking reality.

Era of Identity-Passing

Well and good for the 20th century, perhaps, but what of the 21st, when two civilizations hardly describe a single household, with multiples of everything from ethnicities to sexualities, masculinities, femininities, discourses and knowledges, everything from gender roles and sex roles to family roles and power dynamics? Moreover, we live in an era of identity-passing, when the boundaries between claims to identity and actual identities are not clear. A few years ago, the *Village Voice* reprinted a short article from *Lingua Franca* under the headline: "Gay in the Streets, Straight in the Sheets" about the "fad" of passing as gay. Racial and ethnic passing are slightly older stories. And when one passes perma-

Lori Hope Lefkowitz is the Sadie Gottesman and Arlene Gottesman Reff Kolot Professor of Gender and Judaism and academic director of Kolot: The Center for Jewish Women's and Gender Studies at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. Her most recent book, co-edited with Julia Epstein, is *Shaping Losses: Cultural Memory and the Holocaust*.

nently to another identity, is it still passing?

I had a philosophy professor once who told us a bad joke designed to illustrate a point about the limits of identity confusion: Two white guys and a black guy lived together. One of the white guys asked his roommates to wake him earlier than usual the next morning because he was starting a new job. As a gag, these roommates darkened his face while he slept and woke him at the last minute. Catching a glimpse of himself in the mirror as he rushed out the door, he grumbled in frustration: “Dumb *bleep* woke up the wrong guy!” The point of the story, of course, is that whatever your identity confusions, there is a sense in which there is no mistaking who you are. And most of us would go even further and claim that we would unfailingly recognize a lifelong beloved or a well-loved and constantly present child.

Is there no mistaking who you are? Did former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright know who she was, Christian grandchild of four Jewish grandparents? Did Isaac know on whom he bestowed the blessing when Jacob pretended to be Esau? What is the racial identity of the Jews or the sexual identity of Jewish (so-called) men? Karen Brodtkin, in her book *How Jews Became White Folks*, explains that only relatively recently in America were Jews assigned a white racial identity. Until the 1950s, Jews belonged to, in Brodtkin’s words, “an off white race” and developed a

“double vision that came from racial middleness,” an experience of marginality vis-à-vis whiteness and an experience of white belonging vis-à-vis blackness.¹

The Fall 1999 issue of *The Bulletin of the History of Medicine* includes an article by John L. Beusterien entitled, “Jewish Male Menstruation in Seventeenth-Century Spain.” The article documents that male Jews were commonly assumed to menstruate, a fact demonstrated by the most prominent physicians of the king. The feminized Jewish male beside his stronger, more athletic brothers, from the biblical Isaac and Jacob through Woody Allen, is a recognizable boundary-crosser between the sexes.

Performative Identity

Jewish sexual, ethnic and racial identities have no stable definition over time. Identity is, in the final analysis, performative, serious play, admittedly for high stakes, but masquerade at its very best and worst. You are who you aren’t. Moreover, we always were who we weren’t.

Identity performance is central to the myths of the Hebrew patriarchy and matriarchy, both in biblical narrative and in the narrative traditions that elaborate on Hebrew Scriptures. Adam and Eve lie to God about the mortals that they have become; Sarah and Rebecca both pull themselves off as their husbands’ sisters; Jacob, with apparent success, pretends to be Esau, and with fitting narrative ret-

tribution, Leah pretends to be Rachel on her wedding night. Joseph becomes an Egyptian courtier so transformed that his brothers do not know him; Moses is passed off as Pharaoh's grandson, and Esther, too, is a closeted queen. Ruth, no less than Tamar, begins the Messianic line with a political bed trick. If you pull the thread of identity deception in the Bible, the whole text is likely to unravel.

The biblical episode of Jacob masquerading as Esau is one origin story of Jewish gender ambiguity and performative masculinity.² This small episode can be read as an instance of Jacob acquiring the narrative future by successfully passing as a man. In Genesis 27, Jacob, who will become the last of the three patriarchs, receives his father Isaac's best blessing by successfully passing himself off as his older twin, Esau. It is a queer, campy sort of masquerade: Jacob covers his neck and arms in animal skins so that when touched by his old, blind father, he may feel like his hirsute brother. Their mother, Rebecca, who has been eavesdropping on her husband and elder son, knows that Isaac has sent Esau to hunt and prepare fresh game so that he may bless Esau sated from this meal, and it is Rebecca who then dresses Jacob in Esau's finest clothing so that Jacob will carry Esau's scent. Jacob himself expresses some reluctance to go through with this plan, afraid that his father will recognize him. But Rebecca, acting with a conviction that suggests divine sanction, urges Jacob on.

She seems ambitious on Jacob's behalf and her response would, in later generations, sound stereotypical of the Jewish Mother whose controlling behavior at once promotes her sons and compromises their masculinity: She says, in effect, "Don't worry, I'll take the blame."

Although Jacob identifies himself as his brother, Isaac registers some suspicion. When Jacob presents a maternal stew made from a domesticated beast as if it were the hunted game, Isaac says he is surprised by how quickly Esau has returned. Before giving Jacob the best blessing, Isaac again signals his own suspicion by remarking that his son feels and smells like Esau but has the voice of Jacob.

Identity Caricatures

This is a familiar caricature of the Jewish family: a manipulative mother, a blind (read castrated) father and the son whose confused identity emerges out of this family dynamic. Like other stories of the Hebrew patriarchy, we also see the victory of the more feminine domestic son over his more masculine rival brethren. The son who inherits the narrative future is younger, less hairy and less wild, and has features that would in later generations — the 19th century, in particular — be identified as feminine, contributing to the anti-Semitic characterization of the Jews as a feminized people.

If the brothers divide gendered traits between them, then Jacob's putting on of animal skins is a kind

of cross-dressing. Allied with the maternal and in the feminized position in the family romance, Jacob goes to his father in drag. But since he presumably is a man, Jacob — and in so performing, he acts like his father Isaac before him and like his son Joseph after him — is a man in drag enacting masculinity. The patriarchy itself is thus built on the foundation of radically destabilized identity categories.

In “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” Judith Butler writes that “[d]rag constitutes the mundane way in which genders are appropriated, theatricalized, worn, and done; it implies that all gendering is a kind of impersonation and approximation.”³ If we go further with Butler that “compulsory heterosexual identities, those ontologically consolidated phantasms of ‘man’ and ‘woman,’ are theatrically produced effects that posture as grounds, origins, the normative measure of the real,” then both Jacob’s passing as Esau and Hebrew heroines passing as harlots (whose masquerades result in masculine-style political and military victories) yield a legacy of gender confusions. We can never be sure: This man may be Jew or queer; this woman may be man. By passing, Jews remind us of the falseness and fragility of political power. In the presence of the Jew and the queer, we feel the anxiety of the Hegelian master.

Anxiety and Identity

The sons of the patriarchs, the

competing brothers, can represent a split self-projection of a father anxious about his masculine identity. And just as God apparently conspires with Rebecca on Jacob’s behalf, so, too, God had told Abraham to “listen to Sarah” when she wants to banish Ishmael. Because of the divine alliance with the matriarchs, the human father is twice the loser in adulterous and Oedipal triangles: first, to God and wife, and second, to wife and the younger son who is Oedipal victor. The fantasy of independent masculinity is then self-incorporated in this son who becomes a patriarch as his brother/double/twin fades out of the narrative future. Life has defeated the boy Isaac’s effort to grow to independent manhood (independence from women must remain a wish), as this child succeeds only through what may be experienced as the shameful, and even shaming, ruses of his mother.

In Isaac’s childhood, his mother Sarah had insisted on banishing her bondswoman and son because she sees Ishmael “playing with Isaac.” Because Isaac’s name in Hebrew (Yitzchak — literally, “he will laugh”) derives from the verb that means “laugh, play or mock,” if we preserve the Hebrew word play, Ishmael can be said to “isaac Isaac.” Among the alternative rabbinic-midrashic interpretations of this activity is that Ishmael’s play is homoerotic, and Sarah is therefore justified in protecting her young son; another reading is that in “isaacing” Isaac, Ishmael is pretending to be Isaac, dramatically enacting Isaac’s

role as future patriarch. Reading retrospectively from Jacob's successful identity masquerade vis-à-vis his brother, Sarah may have good reason for concern that the rehearsal she catches might ultimately lead to a performance that could threaten her son's position as inheritor.

Do Clothes Make the Man?

In the case of the twins of the next generation, the mother's choosing one over the other has historically commanded more explicit interpretation (both being equally hers). Philo reads these twins as complete opposites (except in their arms); Rashi reads them as closely similar. (The distinctiveness of Jacob's voice is so subtle that it is not surprising that Isaac doubts his hearing.) Some medieval readings of Jacob's masquerade as Esau suggest that Jacob does become Esau when he tries on the role. This interpretation is consistent with the medieval belief that clothes literally make the man. A woman who dares dress as a knight and strap a sword around her middle might awaken to find herself literally transformed. Avivah Zornberg imagines Jacob acquiring and assimilating the Esau persona of wild complexity and sexuality into his own smooth identity as a necessary step in earning the blessing and making himself fit for the patriarchy.⁴

Once blind and old himself, Isaac has his own fantasy of authority expressed in his thwarted wish to confer the preferred blessing on Esau. It

is in Jacob's effort to fulfill his father's fantasy that the patriarchy's femininity takes on the political character of gender-masquerade or drag.

All dressed up in animal skins and carrying his brother's wild scent, Jacob's success works like queerness in the sense that Moe Meyer offers when he writes that: "What 'queer' signals is an ontological challenge that displaces bourgeois notions of the Self as unique, abiding, and continuous while substituting instead a concept of the Self as performative, improvisational, discontinuous, and processually constituted by repetitive and stylized acts."⁵

Biblical women also masquerade, enacting a false and heightened femininity or harlotry; "passing as a woman," she too acquires subversive political power analogous to the patriarchal power that Isaac, Jacob, Joseph (and later Moses) acquire when they "pass as men." Like Jacob's donning of animality, exaggerated femininity is also drag as Tamar, Yael, Delilah, Judith, Esther and even Ruth all acquire political power — in some cases, deadly political power — by enacting a heightened and false femininity that conforms to Joan Riviere's turn-of-the-century description of femininity as masquerade or drag.⁶

The Political and the Sexual

Many biblical passing narratives are explicitly political, and in these, the political and sexual often overlap. Joseph, also a younger favored son, is a boastful dreamer who flaunts

the garment of favoritism. Once sold into slavery, he declines to be seduced by his master's wife, and these details lead some medieval commentators to characterize Joseph as queer: a drag queen, a cross-dresser. He also becomes an Egyptian and rises to a position something like Secretary of State. When his brothers come to plead for food, he is so changed as to be unrecognizable to them. It is a threshold moment: They appear and request food. Had they never appeared, Joseph could presumably have lived out his years without ever recovering the identity of his youth. He could have chosen not to out himself as a Hebrew. But the comfort of the text lies in the implication that he has no choice.

Similarly, Queen Esther is queen of the realm when her people of origin come under a death sentence. She is told that she can reveal her Jewish identity to the king as part of the plan to save her people or someone else will have to save the Jews. Performing as sex object, she chooses in this guise to out herself as a Jew. There, too, is a threshold moment when Esther can (and yet clearly cannot) choose to keep her identity closeted.

Moses raised in Pharaoh's court is the most reluctant spokesman for the Hebrews, but he is also compelled to "be himself," that is, to "be" true to some birth identity that demands that he lead the people out of Egypt. Joseph and Moses, who both spend part of their lives passing as Egyptians, bracket the Egypt story. If this

secretary has a secret, is passing, then any secretary could be passing, could be Jewish or queer. As in the film *Europa, Europa*, the Holocaust story is full of episodes of passing, leaving open the question of how many born Jews passed permanently into non-Jewishness. Those who spoke German could mimic the language of dominance and stood a better chance of successful passing.

That never coming back out of non-Jewishness threatens the classification system in ways that leave us anxious is suggested by the strength of public reaction to the revelation that Madeleine Albright is the daughter of born Jews who lost their own parents because of the deadly Jewish identity. The Albright narrative rewrites the biblical stories of sexual and power politics and passing as exemplified by Joseph and Queen Esther, both of whom are compelled by the plots in which they figure to pass back and thereby reassure us of the clarity of identity. Finally, her story suggests that some family secrets (perhaps even your own) are never exposed and may pass on out of the world. I suppose that her family's having not passed back and Albright herself having not bothered to carefully read and interpret her family history as yet another identity story of lifesaving Jewish passing was felt to be so transgressive because this secretary's secrets, like Isaac standing before his son, invite a terrifying question: How can one know the identity of even one's most intimate relations?

In these stories, the principle location of self-defining difference is ultimately within the self. Although Jacob's trickery is oft-discussed, it is rarely commented on that the ruse is so odd as to be parodic. This returns me to an earlier question: how could even an old, blind patriarch mistake animal hair for the human arms of his child? We can read this episode as a gender performance in which no one is really fooled. There is, of course, ample evidence that Isaac is not entirely fooled. He twice questions the identity of his son and, before giving Jacob Esau's blessing, Isaac observes that his son feels and smells like Esau but has the voice of Jacob. Our attention is directed to the sensual basis of all efforts to know someone else. If the favorite son can be smelled, touched and listened to and still be misrecognized, indeed, how can we know even our most intimate relations?

This moment, like the Albright family story, raises the fundamental epistemological question: What does it mean to know? Alternatively, how does the self split for purposes of self-deception? Jacob's pretending to be Esau conforms as well to aspects of Homi K. Bhabha's description of colonial "mimicry" of dominant culture. Mimicry is "almost but not quite" (the scent and feel, perhaps, but not the voice); mimicry is a "double articulation":

a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline which "appropriates" the Other as it vi-

sualizes power. Mimicry is also the sign of the inappropriate, however, a difference or recalcitrance which . . . poses an immanent threat to both "normalized" knowledges and disciplinary powers.⁷

Passing as Success

Jacob mimics masculinity as other Hebrews (his son Joseph, later, Moses) will mimic political power. In these Jewish stories, drag and passing are overlapping strategies of miming power that leave a gap within the self, the very space that enables self-deception. Passing is about thresholds, and thresholds are places marked by anxiety. In the Exodus narrative, the threshold is marked by blood so that the angel of death will know the unknowable, that here is a Jew and he should therefore escape death. In Judges 19, the dead body of a rape victim lies draped over the threshold. Passing is the opposite of failing; a rite of passage is a success, the crossing of a boundary. "To pass" is to get away with pretending to be who you are not.

But we are who we are not. Was Esther not herself when she was seducing the king? Were Moses and Joseph not themselves as court Jews? Harry Brod makes this important point in his analysis of Superman as a Jewish story.⁸ Invented by two Jewish boys during the Depression, Superman and Clark Kent (Esau and Jacob?) are one man. Actually, Superman, the resident alien, is the real

person; Clark Kent the disguise. Lois Lane loves Superman. Clark Kent loves Lois Lane. But there is a gap in the narrative logic: If Superman is Clark Kent, then Lois Lane and Clark Kent love each other. But they don't. And why does Superman (presumably, the real self) require Lois to love the Clark Kent (the Jacob or the Jewish) persona?

To pull the thematic thread of deception and lifesaving lies from biblical narrative through contemporary stereotypes of Jews in popular culture is to discover stories of sexual and political passing or masquerade running continuously throughout the fabric of the myth of Jewishness in both the textual tradition and the representation of Jewish history. Bringing contemporary theories of drag and camp to the subject of Jewish ethnicity suggests that Jewishness is always already sexualized and without positive content, a projective anxiety of heterosexual gentility about psychic reality and the positive content of subjectivity. We may be reassured: We always were who we were not.

-
1. Brodtkin, Karen, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 2.
 2. A selection of what follows is included in "Passing as a Man: Narratives of Jewish Gender Performance," in *Narrative* (January 2002) and is reproduced here with permission of the Ohio State University Press.
 3. Butler in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* edited by Abelove, Henry, Michele Aina Barale and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 313.
 4. Zornberg, Avivah Gottlieb, *Genesis: The Beginning of Desire* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1995), 171-79.
 5. Meyer, Moe, ed. *The Politics and Poetics of Camp* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 2-3.
 6. Riviere, Joan, "Womanliness as a Masquerade," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 10, (1929): 303-13.
 7. Bhabha, Homi K, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994) 86.
 8. Brod, Harry, "Of Mice and Supermen: Images of Jewish Masculinity," in T. M. Rudavsky, ed., *Gender and Judaism: The Transformation of Tradition* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 279-293.

Identity, Status and Rabbinic Leadership in Contemporary Judaism

BY SETH GOLDSTEIN

For any group to survive, boundaries are needed. These boundaries need to be firm enough for the group to maintain identity, yet porous enough to allow flow in and out. If the boundaries are too rigid, the group cannot grow. If the boundaries are too loose, the group will lack cohesion. The Jewish people is a group that requires boundaries, and the boundary maintenance of the Jewish community is centered around the questions of “What is a Jew?” and “Who is a Jew?”

At the same time, in order for the group to survive, it needs people who identify positively with that group, who want to be counted as members. They need to have a strong identity as group members or else they will find another group of which to be a part. This aspect is especially important for Jews, since we are living in a post-Emancipation age in which Jews have freedom of social mobility within the societies in which they live.

To be a member of the Jewish community requires the desire to be a part of that community.

Who and What Is a Jew?

As communal leaders invested with the inheritance and transmission of the Jewish tradition, rabbis are often the ones who maintain the group boundaries, answering the “what” and “who” questions. In dealing with these issues, the rabbi may play a key role on two different levels, the distinction between which is of key importance. Very often, the term “Jewish identity” can be and is used in two different senses: as self-identifying as Jewish but also as others identifying people as Jews. It is necessary, therefore, to clarify terms. Rather than speaking of Jewish identity as a whole, we should speak about “Jewish identity” and “Jewish status.” At the risk of sounding reductionistic, we might say that identity is from the bottom-up, while status is from the top-

Seth Goldstein is a fourth-year student at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College.

down.

On the one hand, rabbis help people in their (potentially ongoing) quest for Jewish identity. A wide range of factors may contribute to a person's identity formation, and ultimately a person will define how s/he identifies him/herself (what Stephen Cohen and Arnold Eisen, in their recent book, *The Jew Within* [Indiana University Press, 2000], call "the sovereign self"). The content of this question is more fluid (what elements help this person define her/himself as a Jew?). A rabbi who is involved in a person's identity formation does so with the understanding that the person is an individual.

On the other hand, rabbis also play a role in determining Jewish status. Questions of status are more direct: Is this person Jewish? Can s/he be counted in a minyan? Can s/he be married under Jewish auspices? Ultimately someone with recognized authority will make a decision. A rabbi who is involved in making status decisions does so with the understanding that the person is a member of a community.

Numerous factors, both passive and active, are at work in the development of status and identity, including one's lineage and one's personal choices. Identity and status are related, since the conferring or withholding of status may affect a person's identity. However, these two concepts should be seen as separate. How they differ and how they interact are made clear in the contemporary discussions around patrilineality.

Jewish by Birth ?

The normative *halakhah* in determining Jewishness by birth is that the child follows the mother — if a person is born of a Jewish mother, the child is Jewish, and if a child is born of a non-Jewish mother, the child is not Jewish. The matrilineal principle in cases of mixed marriage is established in Mishnah *Kiddushin* 3:12:

And any woman who does not have the potential for a valid marriage either with this man or with other men, the offspring is like her. And what is this: This is the offspring of a slave woman or gentile woman.

The other side (i.e., a Jewish woman and a non-Jewish man) is spelled out in Mishnah *Yevamot* 7:5 and the Babylonian Talmud (*Kiddushin* 68b), in which the child is declared Jewish, but is considered a *mamzer* (illegitimate). This is subsequently codified in later Jewish literature.

This, however, is a break with biblical tradition (which appears to be patrilineal), which raises an important question for the contemporary interpreter of Jewish tradition: How much of a role does historic information and reasoning (or lack thereof) inform our decision-making process? Within a strictly halakhic framework, none, since the law is the law and the *halakhah* creates its own reality and mechanisms for change.

Adapting *Halakhah*

On the other hand, the liberal movements understand *halakhah* to be contextually bound. For Reconstructionists especially, Judaism is viewed as the continuously evolving religious civilization of the Jews. Historical and cultural context is of great importance in understanding the development of Judaism. It is understood that *halakhah* is not an independent organic body but rather the creative output of the Jewish people (as interpreted by halakhic authorities). Thus, new social realities may force a change in the *halakhah*.

However, with the importance given to the sources, the process by which we change that which has been handed down must be taken with great care and deliberation. The weight of history and the 4000-year development of the Jewish people are too great to be pushed aside lightly. The question then becomes: Do social realities outweigh tradition in the discussion of lineality?

The Reform and Reconstructionist movements say yes and have accepted patrilineality — a person is considered Jewish if he or she has one Jewish parent. However, since it is a break with normative *halakhah*, do we accept patrilineal Jews with qualifications? Do we affirm patrilineal Jews as Jews only after they have fulfilled certain requirements?

Both the Reform and Reconstructionist movements' positions address this issue. The Reform movement's 1983 rabbinic resolution holds that

children born of one Jewish parent also need to be raised and educated as Jews, as well as undergo public acts of identification in *ishut*-moments (personal life-cycle events) under Jewish auspices.

The Reconstructionist movement is, unfortunately, not as clear on the issue. The Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association's 1979 "Guidelines on Conversion" does not require education and affirmation in addition to having one Jewish parent. But the 1968 and 1984 resolutions on intermarriage of the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation require both.

Leniency and Stringency

It is important to note that all of these resolutions deal with the situation in which one parent is Jewish, and do not distinguish whether it is the mother or the father. Thus, even the traditional understanding that being born of a Jewish mother transmits Jewish status is called into question.

These positions are, ironically, both a *kula* (leniency) and a *humrah* (stringency). On the one hand, they open the possibility of granting Jewish status to a large number of people who, while they may claim a Jewish identity, have been previously denied Jewish status. On the other hand, they open the possibility for the denial of Jewish status to a large number of people who have previously been assumed to be Jewish by virtue of the halakhic criterion of matrilineality! So while the Reform and

Reconstructionist movements may accept as a Jew a person rejected as such by the Conservative and Orthodox, the Reform and Reconstructionist movements may (in theory, if not in practice) deny as a Jew a person accepted as such by the Conservative and Orthodox.

The question of qualifications highlights the distinction between status and identity. Status is something that can be externally conferred, while identity is something that one must internally create. Adding qualifications to the determination of status of a person born of a Jewish father and non-Jewish mother makes status contingent on identity. That is, Jewish status is conferred upon a person if the person has a Jewish identity.

With the recognition of matrilineality without qualification (the normative halakhic position), status and identity are separate. That is, Jewish status is conferred in the presence or absence of Jewish identity. For the conservative movements, status comes before identity. For the liberal movements, identity comes before status.

Imposing Qualifications on Identity

Yet the qualifications serve both the identity and status questions. The Reform and Reconstructionist positions require a person to “establish” his or her Jewish status by marking certain Jewish *ishut*-moments. By participating in such rituals, a per-

son publicly declares (or has declared on her/his behalf) his or her Jewish status before the community, and the community recognizes the person’s Jewish status.

Each such moment marks a different development of that status. With *brit milah* and girls’ *brit* ceremonies, a Jewish child is recognized as a member of the *brit*, of the community. At bar/bat mitzvah, the child is recognized as an adult and culminates a Jewish education. At a wedding, the individual enters a covenant with another and begins to create a new Jewish home and family.

At the same time, each of these moments marks an opportunity for a person’s individual Jewish identity to be strengthened and affirmed. Each serves to instill in a person a connection that can aid in his or her positive identification with Judaism and the Jewish people. By marking each *ishut*-moment Jewishly, the individual is making a public declaration of attachment to Judaism and the Jewish people. S/he declares identity as a Jew as well as status as a Jew. It is in *ishut*-moments that questions of status and identity come to the fore, when a person’s previously unclear status may need to be clarified and a person’s previously ambiguous or ambivalent identity can be strengthened or weakened.

Impact of the Individual on the Community

This dichotomy is reflected in a ruling recorded in the code literature

that states that if people are observing Jewish ritual and performing *mitzvot* (i.e., identifying as Jews) they are assumed to be converts even if there are no witnesses to testify to that fact. However, if they want to join the community and marry, the marriage cannot take place unless witnesses to the conversion are brought forward or the person undergoes ritual immersion (i.e., verification of status).

In other words, one's identity is not questioned so long as it is an individual expression. Once it begins to intersect with and potentially affect the nature of the community, questions need to be asked and determinations need to be made. To apply a metaphor from the American experience: One can live in the United States and identify oneself as an American. One can attend Fourth of July parades, pledge allegiance to the flag or eat turkey on Thanksgiving. But if one tries to vote, one will be turned away unless one holds the proper status as "citizen." While one's identity can be understood as a personal affair, a question of status can have wider implications.

Conflict may thus arise when one's personal identity and public status are different. This question ultimately points to a larger tension in contemporary Jewish life — the individual versus the community. We live our lives as individuals, but we also necessarily form bonds with others to form partnerships, families and communities. To these communities we have obligations and responsibili-

ties, yet we still wish to maintain the liberty to chart our own life's path. The balance between the two impulses is constantly being tested and the correct way to maintain this balance is a subject of political theory.

Rights and Obligations

After the Enlightenment, when Jews were given the same rights as other Western citizens, this question entered Jewish thought as well. It is possibly most apparent in American Judaism. American Jews live within two communities, one of which puts emphasis on individual rights (America) and the other on identification with the collective (Judaism).

In keeping with this paradigm, in contemporary Jewish society, a ruling of status that conflicts with one's identity could be seen as an infringement of one's personal rights. That is, people have the right to identify themselves as they wish, and it is an infringement of rights to challenge such identification. However, a person also has a responsibility to the group, and just as the individual has the right to identify, the group also has the right to make determinations as to who can be considered a member.

Groups can decide who can and cannot be a member in consideration of a person's personal identity, but not necessarily because of it. If status and identity conflict, the community has the right to exclude the individual — the community is under no obligation to bend its definition

of status to include a person's identity. If through some legitimate process the group's leadership, or a majority of its members, wish to change the definition, that may be a possibility.

It is also possible for one whose status is questioned to either leave the group and find another, or work to alter his or her status so it is fitting with the group definition. Ultimately, though, for an individual within a community, both status and identity are important. One can have identity without status, and status without identity. A full participant in a community, however, would have both.

Exploring Affirmation

With the increased influence of the American paradigm (rights and autonomy) as well as the continued breakdown of ethnic, religious and social boundaries between groups, the issues of status and identity have become extremely important to the American Jewish community. How do we bridge the gap between status and identity? The traditional means of changing one's status in Judaism is through conversion. However, there is a vast arena whose Jewish language and ritual needs to be developed — that of affirmation.

As mentioned above, each Jewish *ishut*-moment is both a confirmation of status and a shaper of identity, and rabbis have an important role to play in both.

Rabbis have a dual responsibility:

they are responsible to the greater community, and they are responsible to the individuals within that community. Rabbis need to be the maintainers of group boundaries, making decisions about who is in and who is out, as well as who can get in and how. And rabbis need to be the nurturers of individual journeys, both to Judaism and within Judaism; they have the power to affect deeply a person's attachment to Judaism and her or his Jewish identity. The role the rabbi plays in *ishut*-moments can produce profound meaning for a person and a community.

The language of affirmation is most welcome when status and identity are in conflict — when there are discrepancies between how individuals identify themselves and how groups identify individuals. Affirmation works toward affirming a person's identity through ritual rather than changing his or her status. While the rituals involved may affect both, affirmation focuses on identity rather than status. In some situations, telling people who think they are members of a group that they are perhaps not may push them even further away. Affirmation is helpful because it comes from a positive place (“you are this, let's confirm it”) rather than a negative place (“you are not this, let's make you this”).

Dual Meanings

The rituals of conversion have the same dual meaning as *brit* ceremonies, *b'nai mitzvah* and weddings. On

the one hand, they affect a change in status on the part of the individual. On the other, they have the power to affirm a person's identity. Which meaning is stressed is a matter of perspective. In reexamining conversion, rituals can have the trappings of the traditional conversion ritual, but can be put in terms of affirmation. The ritual thus acts on many levels at once. If done well, most questions of the person's status should be laid to rest (s/he will have undergone conversion) and the person's identity would be stronger (s/he will have affirmed identity through ritual). Similar rituals of affirmation can be used in a variety of other situations, including born Jews who convert out to another religion and then want to rejoin the Jewish people or those who have "self-converted."

In the contemporary period, the Jewish community is faced with a situation in which belonging to the community is voluntary, boundaries are in flux and the best way to draw those boundaries and draw people into the community is the subject of dispute. However, the basic assumptions upon which these discussions are premised have changed. Previously, discussion has focused solely around issues of status. Status is a purely "legal" question that may be divorced from social context. Now, however, we are increasingly concerned with questions of identity. Identity is not a "legal" question and is dependent on social context.

Granted, the ancient rabbis who made the initial halakhic decisions

did not deal with the issue of identity — it was not a social category in the same way status was. However, we are in an age in which identity takes on utmost importance, and we cannot ignore the implications for identity in the decisions we make on these issues. We are not dealing solely with legality, or solely with questions of status. How do people identify themselves vis-à-vis the group, what parts of the tradition do they affirm and deny, how does living in multiple civilizations affect the values people hold, and how do they view themselves — these are all questions that are part of contemporary discourse.

The Roles of Leaders

This is of extreme importance for the modern liberal rabbinate and leadership. Contemporary Jewish leaders have a multiplicity of roles, responsible to both the individual and the community. Rabbis can rule on questions of Jewish status, but they also need to be responsive to issues of Jewish identity, the final decision on which is out of their hands. And because of the direct relationship between status and identity, rabbis need to be cognizant of the consequences of these decisions.

Since every *ishut*-moment raises questions of both status and identity, when rabbis rule on status questions they will have an impact on that person's identity. A wedding, for example, could be a Jewish identity-building experience. Even if a person has not had much contact with the

Jewish community previously, the fact that he or she is coming to a rabbi for a wedding is a potentially positive step in identity formation. And, indeed, a positive experience with a rabbi could plant the seed in people's minds about Judaism and the possibility of keeping a Jewish home and raising a Jewish family. If they are not treated well by their rabbi or if they are turned away, they may be disinclined to pursue future involvement in Judaism as a couple or as a family.

To meet the status-identity challenge, we need to think creatively. We need to explore new language in relation to old ritual. We need to consider seriously creating and using rituals of affirmation — rituals to affirm and solidify people's Jewish identity. And while these rituals may relate to changes in status, this is not their primary focus. Contemporary Jewish leaders need to be more concerned with questions of identity than with questions of status.

Intermarriage and the Politics of Identity

BY DEBORAH DASH MOORE

Feminist scholarship teaches us the importance of social location. Where you stand, or in contemporary lingo, where you're coming from, illuminates what you stand for or where you're going. Social location does not predict point of view, but contemplating one's position invites a measure of self-reflection.

Given the currently controversial topic of intermarriage, I think that it is crucial to indicate my own subjective position. I speak about intermarriage as a long-term insider — having made a decision to intermarry more than thirty years ago. As an historian, I am inclined to seek out the unique, to craft narratives that balance change with continuity and to avoid temptations to predict the future based on past patterns. I will argue that intermarriage today occupies center stage as a surrogate for more difficult questions that American Jews are reluctant to face. But first, my own social location.

A Subjective Position

Having said that I chose to intermarry some thirty-odd years ago, I

should add that I have also elected to live only a few miles from where I grew up. My decision to remain in New York City reflects a subjective commitment to the viability of American Jewish life and undoubtedly influences how I interpret the American ethos. New York offers a peculiar perspective on both the United States and the Jewish world. As a city that has lacked a majority population and included large numbers of immigrants and their children, New York reinforces my historical proclivities to examine qualitative issues.

I should point out as well that the few miles between Manhattan's northern tip and its downtown Chelsea neighborhood that separate my current home from my childhood one do not represent some great psychological or cultural distance. Where I live now differs only slightly from where I was raised. For example, the local Spanish speakers today are more likely to come from the Dominican Republic than from Puerto Rico.

Not only did my husband and I choose to raise our sons in the city,

Deborah Dash Moore is professor of religion at Vassar College and co-author of *Cityscapes, A History of New York in Images* (Columbia University Press, 2001).

we also opted for other markers of continuity with my childhood: public school educations, supplementary Jewish education through high school, public transit for traveling around the city, affiliation with a Reconstructionist congregation, regular Sabbath eve dinners as well as holiday observances and, of course, bar mitzvah.

As an historian who is interested in the past and attuned to the quality of a Jewish life freely chosen, I understandably frame my account of these activities as continuities. Blood is not what counts. There were, of course, discontinuities. An academic gets to live abroad if she wishes, and I did. So my family enjoyed a year of living in Israel, unlike the brief summer visit I knew as a child.

Intermarriage in Context

I mention these to contextualize the intermarriage: Mine was not a rebellion, a rejection of parental values and mores, an act of conscious assimilation away from Judaism to American society. My husband, on the other hand, experienced radical disjunctions between the life he knew as a boy and the one he lives as a Jewish adult.

Although I am an insider to intermarriage, my biography places me on the outside of most debates on the politics of identity. In fact, some of the leading figures in these debates would bar me from any position of influence as a bad role model for other American Jews. As in all politics, current conflicts over Jewish

identity concern power. At stake, it appears, are sizable sums. Who should allocate these resources and who should receive them has fueled a struggle over how to define the boundaries of the Jewish community.

Communal Rhetoric

Many of those inside Jewish organizations desire to enhance their power by identifying an enemy. Since American society no longer produces enough influential anti-Semites and anti-Semitic movements (Pat Buchanan and Louis Farrakhan just don't frighten Jews enough, and with good reason), Jewish leaders have trained their rhetorical guns on intermarriage and what they claim are its attendant ills. These include a threat of demographic decline with the corresponding loss of political clout, the destruction of a unified Jewish people who can no longer marry within the group due to divisions over patrilineal descent, and the weakening of Jewish religious traditions and resulting assimilation.

Other substantial changes in American Jewish life don't bother Jewish leaders as much. No one, for example, seems to bemoan the loss of a left-wing, radical, secular, diasporist Jewish community, or the disappearance of a large urban Jewish working class and union movement. The rubric of "continuity" covers much of what leaders worry about, though the real issues of continuity, which involve what we teach our children, get discussed far less often.

Folk and Elite Norms

More than twenty-five years ago, Charles Liebman wrote about “the ambivalent American Jew”¹ who wanted to assimilate into American society and yet remain distinctively Jewish at the same time. Liebman pointed out that American Jews held onto a Jewish ethnic exclusivism even as they discarded Jewish religious traditionalism. “Why is intermarriage any more horrendous than violation of the Sabbath?” he asked. “In the catalog of ritual Jewish sins, there is hardly anything worse than desecration of the Sabbath. But obviously in the catalog of Jewish communal sins,” he pointed out, “there is nothing worse than intermarriage.”

American Jews thus cheerfully sent their sons and daughters off to college, not with warnings to observe the Sabbath, which Judaism values most highly, but with admonitions not to date and fall in love with gentiles, something much lower down on Judaism’s scale of proper ritual behaviors. The former, Liebman noted, reflected the norms of an elite religious tradition; the latter expressed the concerns of a folk religion.

So here we are, several decades later, focused on American Jewish folk religion’s requirements that Jews not intermarry, now championed less by the folk than by the elite. How did we get to this point?

Common wisdom would propose that rising intermarriage rates brought us to pay so much attention to the widespread violation of this

folk-religious dictum. However, we know that these rates started to increase in the mid-1960s and American Jews did not begin to get visibly exercised about intermarriage until the 1990s. This would suggest that a confluence of other changes encouraged American Jews to pay attention to what was happening before their noses.

Changing Contexts

Ten years ago, dramatic political events radically altered how we thought about our world. The collapse of the Soviet Union shifted the balance of power in the Middle East even as it sent hundreds of thousands of Soviet Jews to Israel. One of the mainstays of Jewish political mobilization on behalf of Jews overseas rapidly disappeared. As Israel benefited from the new world order, its strength and prosperity weakened a second focus of Jewish political activism.

Peace negotiations with the Palestinians, a peace treaty with Jordan, and even the rescinding of the notorious “Zionism is Racism” resolution at the United Nations, all signaled a less-besieged Jewish world. Although the Holocaust remained as a viable forum for Jewish politics, it could not sustain single-handedly American Jews’ commitment to Jewish life.

In this context, intermarriage statistics generated a crisis of conscience, introduced a beleaguered mood with some leaders talking of another “si-

lent holocaust,” and sparked a vigorous politics of identity among American Jews.

Social Change

In addition, a number of domestic changes contributed to the rise of intermarriage as a cause célèbre. A new generation of leaders ascended to positions of prominence in American Jewish organizations. Schooled in Jewish denominationalism, they rejected consensus politics as part of an outmoded Cold War heritage. Born after the establishment of the State of Israel, they learned its political lessons of partisanship. Too young to have struggled for civil rights and civil liberties in the United States, they came of age during the early movements of identity politics, protest against the Vietnam war and the backlash against liberalism promoted by radicals on the left and right.

Finally, attitudes toward intermarriage in the United States gradually underwent revision following the Supreme Court's 1967 decision in *Loving v. Virginia*. The court held that anti-miscegenation laws were a form of invidious racial discrimination prohibited by the Constitution and that marriage was a fundamental right. Anti-miscegenation statutes in the United States usually prohibited whites from marrying blacks, though occasionally Asian-white marriages were barred.

To this day, the Alabama state constitution contains a clause forbidding the legislature to “pass any law to

authorize or legalize any marriage between any White person and a Negro or a descendant of a Negro.” The Supreme Court noted in *Loving* that because the Virginia statute “prohibits only interracial marriages involving white persons” it was “designed to maintain White Supremacy.”

As American attitudes rejected white supremacy as racist, a new moral consensus emerged. By the 1990s Americans accepted the notion that individuals should be free to marry as a constitutional right and that laws preventing “different” people from marrying were racist and unconstitutional.

Evolving Attitudes

Jewish attitudes similarly evolved. Although American Jews refused to define Jews as a race, many undoubtedly felt increasingly uncomfortable arguing against the intermarriage of Jews and gentiles in the face of an American consensus that freedom to marry was a constitutional right. By emphasizing that Judaism was a religion to which conversion was possible, opponents of intermarriage could justify their endogamous commitments as democratic. By downplaying the ethnic component of conversion that involves acquiring a new lineage in Abraham and Sarah, literally a new mother and father, Jewish leaders could stress Judaism's western attributes. How different was Judaism, in this comparison, from the Catholic church, which also opposed

interreligious marriage?

The possibility of conversion to Judaism thus provided a convenient loophole around the issue of racial exclusivity. However, the vigorous debate over “outreach” exposes the flimsy construction of this loophole, in actuality a noose. Those most opposed to intermarriage turn out to be those most opposed to “outreach,” to making conversion easy for gentiles (especially those involved in serious relationships with Jews). These same opponents of intermarriage also worry out loud about how converts will dilute Jewish life, weakening its ethnic dimensions. Racial exclusivity thus reappears in religious guise.

As my son Mik Moore has argued in an unpublished paper, “By doubting the sincerity of converts, the Jewish/convert marriage becomes nearly as suspect as the Jewish/Gentile marriage.” Furthermore, “the dearth of conversions to Judaism and current opposition to loosening traditional anti-conversion rules belies the ease with which opponents of intermarriage can point to the option of conversion as a way to differentiate anti-miscegenation” laws from the Jewish ban on intermarriage.

Socially Constructed Identity

The issues can be clarified if we leave for a moment the politics of identity and recognize how Jews are constructed by the societies in which they live. Israel constructs Jews according to several conflicting criteria. The Law of Return contradicts

halakhab as interpreted by rabbis who possess political power bestowed by the state. And these social constructions of Jews differ from actual Israeli practice, especially vis-à-vis Jewish immigrants. In the United States today, Jews are considered “white” and “EuroAmerican.”

A century ago, the category of European was split between east and west, with the latter superior to the former. In the years prior to World War II when anti-Semitism thrived and Jews lived largely in semi-segregated urban neighborhoods, endogamy flourished and most Americans thought of Jews as less than white. Neither were Jews EuroAmerican; rather, they were East European, a considerably lower immigrant classification. Some racists considered them “Oriental” and not European at all. On various scales of attractiveness as neighbors, Jews ranked just above blacks and Asians in desirability.

After World War II when Judaism entered the American pantheon of the religions of democracy and Jews joined the middle class and moved out to the suburbs, Jews lost much of the stigma attached to them. They gradually whitened up, their differences becoming less and less visible to their gentile neighbors, especially their children.

Debatable Questions

If what it means to be a Jew has undergone such radical shifts even within the memory of some of us (not to mention what history can tell

us about those developments), then it behooves us to look more closely at what is animating today's intermarriage debate. Why are the Jewishly illiterate offspring of two Jewish atheists logged in as genuine Jews while the semi-practicing offspring of an intermarriage, especially if the father is a Jew and the mother a gentile, are not counted as Jews?

Why do we pay more attention to blood than to behavior? Why do we zealously guard the privileges of ascending the *bimah* or the honor of leadership from Jews who have intermarried or from their gentile partners? Why is such extreme language invoked around intermarriage — I am thinking of the “silent holocaust” terminology — when no one screams about Sabbath observance? In short, why have both Israeli and American Jewish leaders become like those ambivalent American Jews Charles Liebman skewered several decades ago?

Part of the answer lies in the essentialism inherent in identity politics. Plural metaphors of identity politics cannot compete with the demand for a single primary identity. Another part of the answer can be found in a loss of nerve among certain American Jewish leaders vis-à-vis American social and cultural life. My husband, MacDonald Moore, calls them “Neodox,” a coinage I like, and holds that “they act as if they want to consolidate their gains and displace some guilt in the process” (unpublished paper). For the Neodox, genuine Judaism is not elective, and

anything that smacks of choice is suspect. Neodox speak of Jews as a tribe, rather than a nation, race, ethnic group or religion.

Politics and Polemics

Jewish solidarity in this view derives from kinship and a special relationship to God codified in the God of Israel's covenant with His (always “His” for these leaders) chosen people. An intermarriage crisis can be used to recruit unwary American Jews to facilitate a shift of resources away from a confident liberal agenda that claimed for Jews an equal place at the American civic table all along.

MacDonald Moore argues that the Neodox present intermarriage as an unmitigated evil that results from lack of affiliation with Jewish organizations, inadequate Jewish education and minimal observance of Jewish ritual. The alternative to intermarriage can be seen in the Orthodox, who also appear as paragons of affiliation, commitment, knowledge, responsibility — all of the virtues required for Jewish survival. The answer then for the Neodox is to rebuild American Jewish life around the model of Orthodox community.

The Fruit of an Open Society

Are there other alternatives? Well, one possibility is to suggest that intermarriage is not an evil, but rather the complex fruit of a relatively free society. Such an interpretation would applaud, not denigrate, the semi-

practicing behavior of self-identifying Jewish children of a Jewish father and gentile mother.

A number of years ago, a Reform rabbi published a modest piece reporting on sixteen years of intermarriages that he had performed in a small Pennsylvania city. He had developed his own criteria of seriousness and commitment to Judaism required from the couple before he participated in their wedding ceremony. What Rabbi Henry Cohen found was, to my mind, impressive: a majority of stable marriages and Jewishly identifying children. This vision of Judaism is the opposite of tribal. It is based not on commandment, but commitment; not on obligation, but choice; not on blood, but values.

Why Be Jewish?

We can see a version of this type of Judaism in a flyer handed out at the Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim (otherwise known as KKBE) Sisterhood Gift Shop, a shop that attracts large numbers of Christian visitors to historic Charleston in South Carolina. “WHY BE JEWISH?” it asks in capital letters — and then queries in smaller type: “Why make the effort to raise children Jewish?”

The sisterhood flyer offers six answers: “First, Jewish life is a wonderful way to transmit strong values . . . Second, Jewish life builds strong families . . . Third, Judaism encourages education and intelligent debate and can help you to bring up thinking children. Fourth, Judaism gives

children roots. . . . Fifth, Judaism can give a wholeness and rhythm to your life.” And the clincher: “Sixth, your help is needed. The Jews are a small people who have given much to the world. You and your partner can help ensure that this rich heritage survives.” The first two answers also cite sacred days, Passover and Hanukkah for the value of freedom, and the Sabbath for its family-enhancing power.

In the face of the American consensus regarding marriage as a fundamental right, Jewish arguments against intermarriage began to shift to concern over “continuity” or what Jews can do to ensure that their grandchildren would be Jewish. Obviously, there is nothing that Jews can do to assure that their grandchildren will be Jewish. Only the truly *hutzpadik* or the *meshuggenah* imagine they can secure that future. Certainly, anyone with even a whiff of knowledge of 20th-century Jewish history should recognize the futility of such a charge.

But if American Jews cannot guarantee that they will have Jewish grandchildren, they can commit to raising Jewish children. This would mark a significant departure for many American Jews, who may need to be convinced that it is worth the effort. The women in the KKBE Sisterhood suggest a pretty good set of reasons for such a commitment. These reasons focus not on Jewish difference or superiority but rather on Jewish otherness. Jewish religious culture offers a coherent value system, favors vibrant family life, encourages education and critical thinking, gives

children a rich heritage that connects them to previous generations. And, yes, Judaism is a minority religious tradition, so that all Jews are precious to the Jewish people. No mention here of prejudice and persecution, of chosenness and commandment.

The Desire to Live as Jews

Of course, such an approach will not produce Jewish grandchildren, nor will it prevent intermarriage. The question I would want to ask is whether it will build a strong desire in a child to live as a Jew, which involves creating a Jewish home as an adult. Such homes can emerge even out of intermarriage, as my experience testifies, if the Jewish partner to the intermarriage cares deeply about living a Jewish life.

There are gentile Americans who are drawn to Jews and Judaism for some of the reasons cited by the KKBE Sisterhood. They espouse Jewish ethical values, intellectuality, concern for family and community; and they are bold enough to risk minority status. However, among the items missing from the KKBE list that I think is crucial is Israel. The Jewish state, its people and the land, form an integral part of Jewish culture, albeit an aspect not as easily understood and appreciated by gentiles as those elements relating to religion. Israel speaks to the ethnic dimension of Jewish identity as well as its religious aspects.

If we are concerned about continuity not as a slogan or as an adject-

ive modifying the word “crisis,” then we need to pay attention not to identity politics that involves circling the wagons against an external enemy, but to our children, our neighbors, our schools and community centers. For several generations, American Jews have rallied to save threatened communities of Jews overseas. Such efforts gave enormous satisfaction to those who participated in them. I think we can reap similar rewards of self-fulfillment that simultaneously energize our Jewish collective if we seek to live Jewish lives at home and in the street: to work and play as Jews, not just to pray as Jews.

More than fifty years ago, the radical rabbi and founder of Reconstructionism, Mordecai M. Kaplan, argued in the closing pages of *Judaism as a Civilization* that “The Jew will have to save Judaism before Judaism will be in a position to save the Jew.”² Kaplan’s call to arms is no less relevant today. It means that Jews will have to abandon the thrill of identity politics for the greater challenge of living a program of maximum Jewishness. It means, too, that Jews as Jews should champion, in Kaplan’s words, “all movements to further social justice and universal peace.” Finally, it means that we should not be afraid of the future but try to create new forms of Jewish life and culture.

1. Liebman, Charles: *The Ambivalent American Jew* (Philadelphia, The Jewish Publication Society, 1973).

2. Kaplan, Mordecai M.: *Judaism as a Civilization* (Philadelphia, The Jewish Publication Society, 1981), 521-522.

Adoption and Jewish Families: A Proposal

BY MICHAEL FESSLER

David and Ellie are a Jewish couple in their mid-thirties who have tried unsuccessfully to conceive a child for the past several years. After several rounds of infertility treatment, they decided to adopt an infant from South America. The bureaucracy surrounding the adoption was arduous to navigate, but last week they flew to Guatemala and returned with their new daughter Elana. They are at once relieved, overjoyed and exhausted by the experience of adoption, and are looking forward to settling in together as a family.

Almost as an afterthought, they ask their rabbi to do a naming ceremony for Elana in the synagogue. Their rabbi informs them that since Elana was not born Jewish, she will need to undergo conversion, and offers to facilitate this process. Ellie and David become angry and confused at this requirement: In their minds their daughter is now a member of a Jewish household and will be raised Jew-

ish. They have accepted Elana into their family as their daughter — why can't the Jewish community do the same? Are they being told that she isn't really their daughter? Why should she have to undergo a seemingly arbitrary ceremony of conversion?

Adoption and Identity

Any time a new child joins a family is occasion for celebration. This is true for adopted no less than for biological children. But adoption has its own unique qualities that deserve attention, particularly in a Jewish context.

An adoption is a time of transition, when a family brings in a new member by transfer of parental status rather than through birth. In most Western societies, an adopted child becomes legally part of the adopting family. His or her certificate of adoption stands in stead of a birth certificate, and s/he is considered to be part

Michael Fessler, ordained at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in 2001, is spending this year in Israel.

of the adopting family — “grafted in,” holding equal standing with any biological children.

This legal incorporation into the adopting family is critical to most adoptive parents’ understanding of their parental role and their family: They see their new child as their “real child,” beyond question, and are sensitive to messages that seem to delegitimize their parental bond to their adopted child.

Jewish and General Models

Traditional Jewish thought is clearly supportive of adoption. Such rabbinic sources as “He who brings up a child is to be called its father, not he who gave birth [sic]” (*Exodus Rabbah* 46:5) and “Whoever raises a child in his home, it is as if he had begotten him” (TB *Sanhedrin* 19b) clearly laud the act of adoption and extol the strength of an adopted parent’s bond with his or her child.

But unlike the Western legal tradition, traditional *halakhah* contains no provision for the legal incorporation of an adopted child into her new family. While adoption is viewed as deeply admirable and to be encouraged, it is not transformative of lineage as it is in the Western legal system. An adopted child’s status follows that of his or her biological parents, not that of the adoptive parent(s). This has profound implications for the status of a non-Jewish child adopted into a Jewish household.

Jewish tradition sees Jewish status

as transmissible in two ways: descent (lineage) and assent (conversion). We will first discuss each of these entry points as traditionally formulated, as well as modified by the liberal Jewish movements (Reconstructionism and Reform); then, we can examine the place of adoption within this model.

Traditional Norms

According to traditional Jewish practice, a child born to a Jewish mother is considered to be Jewish. This is the case regardless of the mother’s level of Jewish observance or if there are other factors that might cast doubt on the Jewish identity of the offspring. Even if the mother converts to another religion, many authorities would hold that the offspring retain a claim on Jewish identity if they so identify. In the traditional model, what is critical is Jewish status, which inheres in the individual and cannot be abandoned or nullified.

(It is worth noting that this system of matrilineal descent itself seems to be a rabbinic innovation dating back approximately 2,000 years. In the biblical period, Jewish [or, more properly, Israelite] status seems to have been patrilineal in nature — i.e. the father’s status, not the mother’s, was determinative).¹

Contemporary Alternatives

In the past few decades, in response to the growing rate of inter-

marriage as well as to changing social realities in the sphere of child-rearing, the Reconstructionist and Reform movements have formally adopted policies of ambilineal descent,² where Jewishness of either biological parent can, under certain circumstances, suffice to convey Jewish status to their offspring.

The caveat “under certain circumstances” reflects a two-fold innovation in the liberal movements’ position: In addition to including paternal lineage as a source of Jewish status, they have also added a requirement not present in traditional *halakhah* — some evidence of actual and active transmittal of Jewish identity.³ Both the Reform and Reconstructionist criteria for Jewish status can lead to situations where a child’s Jewish status is ambiguous. This may be either because she or he has not (yet?) undergone the identity-forming experiences deemed essential, or because the definition of “timely public and formal acts of identification” (the language used by the Reform movement to define necessary conditions for identity) is essentially a judgment call that may vary from rabbi to rabbi and community to community.

Whatever the ambiguities introduced by the liberal movements’ redefinition of Jewish status, however, it is clear that in both traditional *halakhah* and in the liberal movements’ practice, being raised as a Jew is not sufficient to confer Jewish identity in the absence of any Jewish lineage.

Norms of Conversion

For those who are not Jews via lineage, entry into Jewish status is traditionally conferred through conversion. To be halakhically valid, conversion requires three elements: appearance before a *bet din*, which evaluates the candidate for conversion; immersion (*tevilah*) in a *mikveh* or natural body of water; and, if the candidate is male and uncircumcised, *milah* (ritual circumcision).⁴ The RRA’s 1979 *Guidelines on Conversion* endorse each of these traditional elements.

The Reform movement, in contrast, has as a matter of long-standing precedent dispensed with the traditional elements of conversion. For many years, predominant Reform conversion practice for adults consisted simply of rabbinic approval and a public statement of faith before the congregation. *Tevilah* and *milah*, and certainly *hatafat dam brit* (the taking of a drop of blood when circumcision has already taken place), were considered optional at best. In recent years, the pendulum seems to be swinging back in the Reform movement, and increasing numbers of Reform rabbis urge or require the traditional elements of conversion for the Jews by Choice with whom they work.

Conversion of adopted minor children does not require extensive study or formal affirmation of Jewish commitment on the part of the child (for obvious reasons) — the presumption is that Jewish identity will be incul-

cated in the Jewish home in which the child will be raised. However, someone converted as a minor traditionally has the opportunity to renounce his or her Jewish status upon reaching the age of bar or bat mitzvah. This is a one-time option — once past bar/bat mitzvah age, Jewish status is permanent.

There is a *minhag* (custom) that the patronymic/matronymic portion of a convert's Hebrew name be “*ben/bat Avraham Avinu v'Sarah Imenu*” — “son/daughter of Abraham our father and Sarah our mother,” referring to the archetypal ancestors of the entire Jewish people.⁵ In effect, this *minhag* gives voice to the tension between the lineage-based model of Jewish status and the alternative option of conversion: Jews by Choice are essentially grafted into the Jewish people's lineage at its most primal ancestral source, as if to remove all doubt as to their claim to Jewish status.

Resistance to Conversion

While many adoptive Jewish parents find it unremarkable that their adopted non-Jewish child should need to undergo conversion, some parents meet the notion of converting their newly-adopted child with substantial resistance. This resistance can stem from many sources. Some parents find it stressful that they have to jump through a “Jewish hoop” after all the hoops of the adoption process. To them, civil adoption seems sufficient.

Others, conscious of the *minhag* of

attributing converts' Jewish lineage to Abraham and Sarah, are sensitive to any implication that their adopted child isn't considered to be their “real child” in the Jewish community's eyes.

This factor can be particularly upsetting to parents who have had to overcome their own discomfort at parenting a biologically unrelated child, and can bring up such issues as inter-spouse conflict over adoption, or grief over the lost possibility of a biological child.

To still others, conversion seems to be the wrong paradigm to apply to a child of Jewish parents. They view their Jewish home as sufficient to inculcate Jewish identity, and bridle at the notion that a ceremony will somehow magically do what years of parenting will not.

Identity and Status

Many of these sources of parental resistance to converting adopted children can be traced to the conflation of two separate but related issues: Jewish status and Jewish identity. Despite popular usage, these are not identical, and it is important to distinguish between the two.

Jewish status is communally determined — it exists only in reference to a particular Jewish community that decides who has it and who doesn't. It is binary: Either someone is Jewish or is not. Different Jewish communities have different criteria for determining Jewish status. Orthodox and Conservative Judaism follow

the matrilineal principle, while Reform and Reconstructionism follow a modified ambilineal principle. But within any given community's decision-making system, a person either possesses Jewish status — "is a Jew" — or does not.

Jewish identity, on the other hand, is individually determined — it is fundamentally an internal dynamic that depends heavily on a person's family background, life experience, choices and commitments. Unlike Jewish status, Jewish identity is not a matter of yes/no, nor even a quantity — it is qualitative, and can vary widely during a person's life.

While Jewish status and Jewish identity generally coincide, the cases where they do not can be painful to the individual and the community. Many people of uncontested Jewish status are raised in other religious traditions and have no Jewish identity, for example. Conversely, someone can have substantial Jewish identity and lack Jewish status according to some Jewish communities — e.g. patrilineal Jews in Conservative and Orthodox settings — or even in all Jewish communities — e.g. self-declared Jews who have undergone no conversion of any sort.

Rabbinic Roles

Rabbis are uniquely situated to mediate these issues of status and identity. Even in Reconstructionist communities, which practice democratic values-based decision-making, particular questions of Jewish status

arise in the course of rabbinic work and need to be dealt with immediately by the rabbi — not after months or years of communal discussion.

In the course of his or her work, a rabbi is often called upon to function in multiple roles of guardianship and advocacy: on behalf of the interests of his or her community, on behalf of the Jewish people as a whole and on behalf of the adopted child's interest. One goal is for the adopted child to have clear, rather than doubtful, access to and membership in the Jewish people in her/his adult life.

In an American Jewish polity increasingly imbued with values of individual autonomy, adoptive parents often privilege Jewish identity over Jewish status. "If we raise our child so that she feels Jewish," they might ask, "who are you to tell us that she isn't?" As a rabbi dedicated to building Jewish community — an essential part of the Reconstructionist project — I might choose to answer: "It sounds as if you're really committed to giving your child a strong Jewish identity. But being Jewish is more than just a feeling — it's also about being part of a Jewish community and of the Jewish people. If you want her to belong, you're doing her a real disservice if she's not Jewish by any actual Jewish community's standards."

Factoring in *Klal Yisrael*

Another factor is *Klal Yisrael*. While some segments of the liberal Jewish movements are willing to ig-

nore lack of formal conversion if discovered years after the fact, it runs counter to the child's best interests in cases like these to ignore the rest of the Jewish world. While there is no realistic prospect of Orthodox communities accepting liberal converts anytime soon, Orthodoxy remains a small percentage of the American Jewish polity.

The Conservative movement, on the other hand, is both more relevant and easier to work with. Conservative Judaism remains the second-largest movement in the United States, and contains the largest number of affiliated Jews who identify with a movement.⁶ An adopted child will generally be recognized as Jewish in a Conservative context without controversy, as long as the mechanics of traditional conversion are carried out (*bet din, mikveh, milah/hatafat dam*).

Finally, many Reconstructionist and Reform rabbis require or strongly urge the traditional elements of conversion for adopted children. Clearly, in order to give adopted children the widest possible latitude in their future Jewish involvement (which may well venture outside Reconstructionist settings), it seems only prudent to urge strongly the conversion of adopted children.

While both of the issues just articulated are compelling to many rabbis, they may be less compelling — or even alienating — to some parents of adoptees. From a lay perspective, rabbis often seem over-concerned with status and under-concerned with identity and meaning. It may be

this disjunction between rabbinic and lay (status vs. identity) priorities that underlies many parents' reluctance to formally convert their adopted children. Conversion emphasizes formal issues of Jewish status, but can short-change real engagement with vital issues of Jewish identity — rather than grappling with issues of integrating the adopted child into the family system, rabbis can often appear overly anxious about “correcting a flaw” in the child's Jewish status.

An Alternative Model

I'd like to suggest a new model for approaching adoption into Jewish households: the creation of a Jewish adoption ceremony. Having a Jewish adoption ritual to offer families would give Jewish ritual affirmation to an important life transition. As Reconstructionists, we understand that a Jewish wedding involves much more than signing a marriage license; that there is deep meaning in a *brit milah* or naming ceremony that is unmatched by signing a birth certificate; that for many couples, participating in a Reconstructionist egalitarian *get* ritual provides closure between ex-spouses in a way that signing a civil divorce decree cannot. It is just as critical that adoption become a fully ritualized and sanctified moment in the Jewish life cycle.

In good Reconstructionist fashion, this ritual would revalue traditional practices, reading them in new ways. The elements of halakhic conversion

would be present — immersion, *bet din*, and circumcision/*hatafat dam* if necessary. However, the ritual would not primarily address the child's change of status from non-Jew to Jew. Rather, the ceremony would focus on welcoming the child into his or her new family and effecting a change of status of a different kind: Jewish adoption as the transfer of lineage, such that the adoptive parents are considered the “real” parents in Jewish as well as civil terms.

Immersion is a powerful symbol with many potential meanings. Here, it could be removed from the context of purity/impurity (as many understand its application in conversion), and instead function as a symbol of the child's metaphoric birth into the loving arms of his or her new parents. As part of this ceremony, the child would receive her or his new Hebrew name — a name that includes the new parents' Hebrew names, rather than the traditional “son of Abraham and Sarah” used for adult converts. A Jewish adoption ceremony of this type operates to address simultaneously the emotional and pastoral needs of the adopting family, concern for communal integrity and faithfulness to Jewish tradition.

Conservative and Radical

To perform such a ceremony is at once conservative and radical. It is conservative in that it takes the traditional halakhic elements of conversion seriously in order to accom-

plish the goal of integrating the adopted child into the larger Jewish community. At the same time, such a ceremony is radical in that it constitutes a critique and reconstruction of the tradition's failure to give adoption halakhic weight. It rejects the paradigm that adopted children are not lineally connected to their adoptive families, and affirms that Western culture's model of adoption has something to teach the Jewish community.

As Jews who are Americans, we want our Judaism to treat our family relationships with at least the same seriousness that American law and culture do. This new model of Jewish adoption ceremony offers a way to satisfy this desire, by reframing the traditional elements of conversion so that they signify not only the child's entry into the Jewish people, but also (and primarily) his or her entry into the adopting family.

Adoption ceremonies such as I've outlined could help ensure that adoptive children's Jewish status and Jewish identity, rather than coming into conflict with one another, instead undergo transition in concert with one another. In such a ritual, the transition into the Jewish people happens at the same instant as (and, arguably, because of) the transition into membership in a Jewish family. Moreover, rituals of this nature can imbue a stressful and logistically complicated life transition with connection to community and transcendent meaning.

Appendix

I acknowledge that this new model of Jewish adoption has complications to be worked out. While I hope that this model would be useful to same-sex couples who are adopting, I'm acutely aware that there may be heterosexist assumptions regarding family configuration or other issues that I've failed to adequately address here. Similarly, Jewish families come in many different configurations, and when referring to "parents," I do so only as shorthand — I in no way mean to exclude single-parent adoptions or other configurations I haven't explicitly addressed.

Finally, I have consciously set aside cases of children adopted past the age of infancy. While it is relatively unproblematic to perform a ceremony involving the elements of conversion for an adopted infant, it's clear that there are psychological and developmental issues at stake in converting a ten year old that require substantial sensitivity and care.

1. See Shaye J.D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 263-307, for historical analysis of this transition.

2. Often mislabeled "patrilineal," which would imply that only Jewish fathers and not mothers convey Jewish status to offspring. This may have been the case in the biblical period, but does not accurately describe the liberal movements' current position.

3. This evidence consists of "timely public and formal acts of identification with

the Jewish faith and people" in the case of the Reform movement, as formulated in the Central Conference of American Rabbis' 1983 Resolution on the Status of Children in Mixed Marriages. The Reconstructionist movement's 1968 statement considers children with one Jewish parent to be Jews "if the parents have committed themselves to rear their children as Jews by providing circumcision for boys, Jewish education for boys and girls, and if the children fulfill the requirements of bar/bat mitzvah or confirmation." *The Reconstructionist* 34:8, 30. This is one of several recorded positions of the Reconstructionist movement. See Richard Hirsh, "Jewish Identity and Patrilineal Descent: Some Second Thoughts," *The Reconstructionist*, March 1984.

4. If a male prospective convert is already circumcised, *hatafat dam brit* — the drawing of a symbolic drop of blood — is traditionally required in place of *milah*. The exception is when the original circumcision was performed *leshem giyyur* (for the sake of a later conversion), as is often done with adopted or non-matrilineally Jewish infants. The Reform and Reconstructionist movements leave the requirement of *hatafat dam brit* to the discretion of the presiding rabbi.

5. The earliest source I've found for this *minhag* is in *Teshuvot ha-Rosh* 15:4: *Shulhan Arukh Even ha-Ezer* 129:20 Beit Shmuel on the *Shulhan Arukh Even ha-Ezer* 129:20 The Gra points to *Orah Hayyim* 53; Be'er Golah points to Beit Yosef, citing *Teshuvat ha-Rosh Klal* 16 *siman* 4. Beis Shmuel, *Even HaEzer*, 129:39. See also the Rosh in a responsum (15:4) in *Shut Minchas Yitzchok*, Vol. 1, 136.

6. According to the CJF's 1990 Jewish population study, Reform ranks highest overall. However, a large percentage of Jews who identify as Reform are not necessarily affiliated with a synagogue.

New Studies of Jewish Identity

Jewish Baby Boomers: A Communal Perspective

Chaim I. Waxman

(New York: State University Press, 2001), 163 pages

*The Jew Within: Self, Family, and
Community in America*

Steven M. Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen

(Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2000), 207 pages

REVIEWED BY BARBARA HIRSH

To even a casual observer of Jewish life in America, there have been noticeable changes in recent years: increased attraction to spirituality, declining interest in and attachment to Israel and widespread mixed marriage without the condemnation of earlier generations, to name a few.

Documenting and explaining changes such as these, and assessing their implications, are the tasks of social scientists. For decades, studies have been conducted on the life of American Jewry, our patterns of identification, affiliation, mobility and religious practices.

Recently, two important and enlightening books have appeared that

significantly advance our understanding of the current generation of American Jews and the challenges that face us: Chaim Waxman's *Jewish Baby Boomers: A Communal Perspective*, and Steven Cohen and Arnold Eisen's *The Jew Within: Self, Family, and Community in America*. These familiar and respected scholars of American Jewry use different methods to examine Jewish identification and practices, yet draw complementary conclusions and voice similar concerns about our community's future.

Approaches to Research

Waxman's demographic study re-

Barbara Hirsh is the Dean of Academic Administration at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College.

lied primarily on subsets of the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS), most notably the 46 percent who at the time of the survey were between the ages of 26 and 44 (approximately 800 respondents). Waxman used responses from that survey drawn from the pre-World War II cohort for comparison purposes, in addition to drawing upon the work of earlier researchers.

By contrast, Cohen and Eisen collected their data from a combination of personal interviews, focus groups and survey data. They chose to interview Jews between the ages of 30 and 50 who had some Jewish affiliation but were not “activists.” Few of the interviewees were single and far fewer of the married respondents were in mixed marriages than is true of the American Jewish population as a whole. This had an important impact on their findings, as will be discussed below.

General Conclusions

The picture that emerges from both works is a documentation of decline in communal attachment among Jewish baby boomers, along with an intensification of privatization and personalization in expressions of their Jewishness. By and large, respondents were uninterested in authority, theology or consistency. They were especially concerned with personal meaning, with Jewish observance that connected them to family members and, above all, with autonomy in matters of Jewish practice

and decision-making.

The books under discussion report that today’s Jews still resemble their parents and grandparents in many respects in terms of Jewish patterns of living. Yet they are also quite similar to their non-Jewish neighbors in terms of their generation’s approach to religion. Defining exactly what distinguishes this generation of Jews is a complicated task. To understand this population and the implications for American Jewry, it is helpful to examine three interrelated phenomena: increased personalization, declining communal attachment and intermarriage.

Increased Privatization

As Cohen and Eisen’s interviewees so clearly illustrate, Jewish meaning for today’s generation of Jews is constructed privately, with the “self” the final authority in determining Jewish practice. “Almost all our subjects . . . betrayed enduring ambivalence toward the organizations, institutions, commitments, and norms which constitute Jewish life. . . .” (9) “What matters to the Jews we interviewed . . . are powerful individual memories and experiences.” (16) Like those dubbed the “generation of seekers” by Wade Clark Roof,¹ Cohen and Eisen’s subjects described themselves as perpetual explorers.

Among the Jews studied, ritual observance is conducted largely with and within the family, often motivated by the presence of children.

Observance is generally connected to holidays, not daily practice, and each holiday is evaluated independently for potential meaning. Practices are determined according to individual inclination, and function primarily as a means of family connection.

Identity: A Given and a Choice

A paradoxical set of beliefs was in evidence among many of Cohen and Eisen's interviewees. They understood Jewishness to be a given — a birthright, an undeniable inheritance and, at the same time, a freely chosen identity. The inherited nature of Jewish identity implies that no one can deny anyone else's claim to Jewishness — no matter what they do or do not do. At the same time, the insistence that one has elected this identity preserves the view that one is acting on the basis of individual autonomy.

For all the insistence among respondents that they were acting autonomously in choosing a Jewish identity, their adult Jewish involvement nonetheless largely correlated with their Jewish upbringing and education. Furthermore, the association among various indicators of Jewish involvement observed in earlier generations continues to hold — those who claimed that Jewishness is more important also reported a corresponding constellation of conventional and concrete activities. Typically, these include ritual practices, prayer, synagogue affiliation,

marriage to a Jew and Jewish social ties.

Affirming God

The respondents exhibited an attraction to those aspects of Jewish life that are most universalistic and a disdain for practices or beliefs that emphasize the boundaries between Jews and non-Jews. This was evident in responses about God. Cohen and Eisen admitted surprise at the degree to which their respondents professed belief in God. Subjects generally conceive of God as “a force or spirit that is present in the world rather than as a personal being endowed with consciousness and purpose.” (157) For these Jews, such a God is found in private, not collective, Jewish experiences, not in the synagogue or prayer book, where the images of God are seen as too commanding and, curiously, too “Jewish.” Cohen and Eisen note that few respondents referred to Jewish studies, sources or texts as informing their theological beliefs.

The portrait that emerges in *The Jew Within* is one in which people identify as Jews to the extent that it is a source of personal meaning. Jewish practices are used selectively insofar as they assist in attaining that meaning and are vehicles for family cohesion. Personal decision-making is assumed and highly valued in determining the nature of one's Jewish identity, the selection of Jewish practices, beliefs about God and choice of values.

Declining Communal Attachment

Jewish group identity in the second half of the 20th century was largely influenced by historical circumstances. The experiences of the 1940s propelled the development in the 1960s and 1970s of a passionate concern with Israel, Soviet Jewry and Holocaust commemoration. For many Jews, engagement with these concerns constituted a profound and primary vehicle of Jewish identification.

The receding of such issues and the inward turn of consciousness now shape the new Jewish landscape. Israel is significantly less likely to be a source of Jewish identification. For many younger Jews, Israel may as easily be a source of confusion and even alienation. Freedom for the Jews of the former Soviet Union is a largely resolved issue and, over time, the immediacy of the Holocaust became lost and interest has waned.

There are a number of implications that flow from these changes. A loss of interest in the public and political dimensions of Jewish community threatens the viability of the communal structure that is in place to address matters of Jewish corporate concern. We are witnessing the decline of what had been a potent set of options for involving Jews in Jewish life.

Jewish communal structures that provide an array of social services and organized activity in response to social and political concerns have long been the envy of many other ethnic

and minority populations. The decline of this network, through lack of personal involvement and reduced communal support, poses a significant challenge to Jewish communal leaders who seek to advocate for Jewish group interests in the larger society. It also may signal a declining involvement of Jews, as Jews, with general societal issues.

Whither Peoplehood?

This retreat from the public sphere is more than a withdrawal from the Jewish federations, fraternal organizations and defense agencies. It is the counterpart to the inward turn of large numbers of Jews who are less moved by the interests of the Jewish people as a whole than by a highly personal search for meaning. Such Jews have a weaker sense of “peoplehood” than their predecessors. A higher value placed on universalism often correlates with lower regard for traditional identity boundaries between Jews and non-Jews. The Jews observed in these studies exhibit a strong sense of universalism, as expressed in borrowing freely from other religious traditions to enhance personal spiritual practices. A logical consequence of this shift in consciousness is a reduced interest in the concerns of world Jewry and Israel, American Jewish public affairs and the particularistic effort to provide Jewish social services.

The decline in ethnic group consciousness poses a particular dilemma for the Reconstructionist movement,

which emphasizes peoplehood. Ironically, Cohen and Eisen note that this generation may be especially receptive to Reconstructionism (or Reform) because of the emphasis placed on “outreach,” which is heard as “non-judgmental and accepting.” We need to consider how to preserve Reconstructionism’s emphasis on Jewish peoplehood, with the corollary concerns for Israel and the Jewish community, when current and future constituents find such notions to be simply foreign to their experience as Jews.

Intermarriage

Compared with earlier generations of Jews, the rate of intermarriage is now significantly higher than among Protestant and Catholic generational counterparts. The earlier higher occurrences of intermarriage among Jewish men has given way to statistics that suggest Jewish women are as likely as Jewish men to intermarry. All three authors observe that intermarriage (i.e., where no conversion of the non-Jewish partner occurs) is no longer subject to the social disapproval of earlier generations. The current generation sees little inconsistency in a professed adherence to Jewish identity alongside the choice of a non-Jewish life partner.

Because of the composition of the respondents in Cohen and Eisen’s study, Jews with non-Jewish partners were greatly underrepresented. Perhaps for this reason, intermarriage receives surprisingly less emphasis in

their book than one might expect. This is particularly disappointing because the research led Cohen and Eisen to conclude that one’s partner is perhaps the most significant influence on Jewish identity and practice.

As an example: Cohen and Eisen observe a decline from previous generations in the observance by Jews of Christmas. Waxman observes the same decline — but only within exclusively Jewish households. When intermarried households are also considered, the observance of Christmas sharply increases, lending further credence to Cohen and Eisen’s observation of the influence of partners on such decisions. Thus, Waxman notes that “93.4 percent of the respondents in endogamous Jewish marriages say that they never or sometimes have a Christmas tree . . . [and] 73.4 percent of those in mixed marriages report that they usually or always have a Christmas tree.” (69)

Qualitative Differences

Regarding the implications of intermarriage, Waxman in particular makes it plain, based on his own research and the consistent findings of others, that “Jewish identity is qualitatively different . . . in families where there is no intermarriage.” (114) The majority of children from intermarried families are not identifying themselves as Jewish, nor are they marrying Jewish partners. Cohen and Eisen observe that the depth of one’s Jewish life “varies dramatically with the commitment of one’s partner.”

(133) They note that “the presence of a non-Jewish spouse . . . would seem to undermine the chances for a supportive Jewish family context; all the social scientific data tend to support this.” (132) Unfortunately, Cohen and Eisen did not use their in-depth interview technique with these families to better understand their internal dynamics.

Waxman summarizes the conclusions of several studies on intermarriage in these strong terms:

. . . it is glaringly apparent that those Jewish baby boomers who are married to non-Jews manifest much lower indices of Jewish involvement in both the religious and ethnic terms than Jewish baby boomers who are married to Jews. The intermarried have much higher percentages of never having visited Israel . . . not belonging to any Jewish organizations, not having had any formal Jewish education, and not participating in a variety of religious rituals. In addition, 38.3 percent of the intermarried attend church services at least once a year. If the Jewish baby boomers, as a group, manifest low levels of Jewish identification and identity, the intermarried ones do so much more. And the evidence suggests that the intermarriage rate is increasing. (117-118)

Needed: A Comprehensive Response

The rabbis and congregations of the Reconstructionist movement, along with other liberal Jews, have worked deliberately to create congregational and educational environments welcoming to intermarried Jews, their partners and their children. These efforts have yielded many positive results. However, as Waxman notes, the Jewish community has yet to develop a comprehensive response to the challenges that widespread intermarriage presents. The same is true for the Reconstructionist movement.

The research under discussion indicates widespread and growing rates of intermarriage, which carries significant implications for the character of Jewish communities — both on the smaller congregational level and in the larger corporate sphere. While recognizing the delicacy of bringing serious discussion about the impact of intermarriage into public Jewish discourse, these studies suggest the imperative of doing so.

This one issue alone has significant implications for the content of rabbinic training and the nature and content of other professional Jewish training. It is an exceedingly delicate task to enable congregational communities to affirm the value of strong Jewish identity while not alienating non-Jews who are members of the extended congregational family, and in many cases strong sup-

porters and participants in the congregation. We need a thoughtful and comprehensive strategy to address this question in all of its complexity.

Maintaining Connections

Both books under discussion include references to the fact that patterns and changes within American Jewry are consistent with those in other American groups. Waxman especially brings to the discussion approaches that locate these developments in larger political, economic and historical contexts. This is helpful in considering why, for example, personal autonomy has emerged as such a key notion in understanding contemporary Jewry, and the degree to which this autonomy truly exists. It is also helpful in reminding the reader that patterns within American Jewry are themselves subject to change.

Particularly because of the inclusion of in-depth interviewing, Cohen and Eisen's study has been long-awaited. It was hoped that this method would yield an understanding of subjects not possible from large scale survey data. While the dimension of testimony does help to put a personal face on what might otherwise pass

dryly as statistics, as noted above, the absence of in-depth discussion with intermarried families results in a somewhat skewed portrait.

Jewish leadership at all levels would do well to consider carefully the agenda that should be crafted out of the conclusions of this research. Clearly, the Jewish community, through our institutions and leaders, will have to continue to make many adaptations to remain connected to Jews. It is also clear that there are many Jews searching for the meaning that connection can bring.

Both books document the current predominant patterns of Jewish identification and bring into sharp focus the challenges that our community faces at this moment in preserving and perpetuating Jewish life. It is interesting to read these books in tandem, precisely because while their approaches differ, their conclusions are largely similar, thus underscoring a set of concerns about the future of the Jewish community that merits the attention of anyone concerned with the future of that community.

1. Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1993).

Thinking About Male Jewish Identity

Searching for My Brothers: Jewish Men in a Gentile World

Jeffrey K. Salkin

(New York, G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1999), xiii + 235 pages

From Your Father's House . . . Reflections for Modern Jewish Men

Kerry M. Olitzky

(Philadelphia, The Jewish Publication Society, 1998), xxv + 108 pages

REVIEWED BY LAWRENCE BUSH

Judaism is not only a civilization, as Mordecai Kaplan taught — it is a civilizing civilization. Its economic laws aim to civilize the *yetzer hara*, the “evil” or lustful urge. Its laws of *kashrut* aim to tame the survival-oriented instinct to gorge on whatever edibles are available. Its sexual laws are intended to curb promiscuous impulses. “Modesty, mercy and benevolence” — these are the ideal characteristics for Jews put forth in the Midrash (*Deuteronomy Rabbah* 3:4) — characteristics that defy baser human instincts and the “might makes right” logic of history.

Channeling Macho

For Jewish men through the centuries, the pursuit of these virtues

has demanded both spiritual transformation and the channeling of “macho” into Jewishly acceptable pathways. Intellectual innovation, economic overachievement and heroic social activism have been among the fruits of this transformation/sublimation process. In our own time, however, the “alternative” masculinity proposed by Judaism has been eroded by at least four powerful cross-currents: assimilation and the loosened hold of Jewish traditions and community; the devastating, emasculating impact of the Holocaust; the compensatory Zionist pioneer/warrior mystique; and the challenge to patriarchal culture, including Jewish culture, led by our own wives, sisters, mothers and friends. Many Jewish men of the baby-boom generation have been stranded on the shore,

Lawrence Bush edits *Reconstructionism Today* and is co-editor of JEWS., an arts and literary magazine (www.jewsdot.com).

alienated from the mainstream of “hard” masculinity but without a Jewish alternative to call their own. The books under review empathize with this complex identity crisis and offer resources from Judaism and Jewish history for the reconstruction of Jewish masculine identity.

Feeling of Fraternity

Kerry Olitzky’s *From Your Father’s House . . . Reflections for Modern Jewish Men* is a pocket-fitting volume of forty-five essays, most only a few paragraphs long. Olitzky begins them with quotations from a wide range of scriptural sources, and seems to take for granted a level of unambivalent Jewish commitment and religiosity among his readers. This stance limits his reach but also establishes a nice feeling of fraternity.

The brevity of the essays precludes much in the way of analysis or even anecdote; the book is more a packet of “seeds of thought” than a harvested crop. It might best be used by men’s groups or synagogue brotherhoods “to open up discussion, to stake out the territory,” as the author writes in his own preface. A friendly, 12-page introduction by Rabbi Shawn Zevit provides an overview of the contemporary Jewish “men’s movement” (called the “brotherkeeping” movement by one of its leaders, Yosaif August) and adds some necessary grounding and context.

Jeffrey Salkin’s *Searching for My Brothers* is a considerably more substantial and personally revealing book

about “Jewish men in a Gentile world.” Salkin covers a lot of ground in a short space. He writes about heterosexuality (“The question, ‘Was it good for you?’ is a religious question”); about anti-Semitism (a “symbol of Jewish vulnerability . . . is the frequent inability of Jewish men to defend their women”); about fathers, sons and father-in-laws (“The Moses-Jethro relationship is probably the most important [human] relationship in the entire Torah.”); about bar mitzvah (“In Europe, bar mitzvah was a *comma* — a comma in the long, run-on sentence of Jewish life and responsibility. In America, it has become a *period*.”); about contemporary Israel (“It was as if a bodybuilding manual had arrived at our doorsteps.”); about Jewish history, biblical lore, circumcision, work and ambition, the Yiddish language, modern theology and more.

Despite this wide range and Salkin’s talent for sound bytes, *Searching for My Brothers* never wears thin or feels superficial. Salkin keeps it moving with high narrative energy and unpretentious erudition that extends from arcane Judaica to popular American culture:

Only in a post-Israel world could we encounter someone like the current reigning World Championship Wrestling heavyweight champion. He is a six-foot-four-inch, 285-pound man known as Goldberg. His real name is Bill Goldberg, a thirty-one-year-old son of a Harvard-educated doc-

tor and classical musician. He was once a defensive lineman for the Atlanta Falcons. He wrestled his title away from Hulk Hogan. . . . His signature finishing move is a body slam called the Jackhammer. . . . Wrestling is no longer a 'goys' phenomenon."

Missing Voices

Salkin also gives voice to several women, Laura Geller, Mary Daly, Rachel Adler and Alice Miller among them. Entirely missing, however, from both his and Olitzky's books are the voices of post-baby-boom men — the MTV, AOL, *Tattooed Jew* crowd, who likewise seem largely absent from synagogue life and most other Jewish communal settings. What are they making of the regression to macho masculinity and hyper-violence in American culture? How have their own identities been shaped by AIDS, by "girl power," by campus sex codes, by extraordinarily raunchy movies, by *The Man Show* on Comedy Central, by queer politics, by Ecstasy and raves, by the intense corporatization of American culture? How far has the "Cool Judaism" (Jonathan Schorsch's phrase)¹ of heavy metal Hasidic rock and Jewish characters on *South Park* gone

toward healing post-boomers of Jewish shame? How much do they identify with the "warrior mystique" of Israel, and to what extent has it neutralized what Salkin calls the "anti-Semitic iconography" of "the Pathetic Jewish Male"?

Baby-boom men could be likened to the generation of Moses: We were "freed from Egypt" by the feminist movement, which directly transformed our marriages, our sexuality, our experiences of fatherhood, our cooking skills and our sense of privilege and possibility as we grew into manhood. Both Kerry Olitzky and Jeffrey Salkin (and, before them, Harry Brod, editor of *A Mentsh Among Men*, and Rami Shapiro, author of *Embracing Esau*) have worked well to distill the turmoil of this generation and give new dignity to the Jewish paradigm of masculinity. The lessons with which we are grappling will not have staying power, however, unless we educate — and learn from, and give voice to — the next generation of men, the generation of Joshua. Mentoring, even more than brotherkeeping, should be the next step for the Jewish men's movement.

1. Jonathan Schorsch, "Making Judaism Cool," *Tikkun*, March/April 2000, 33.

The Sabbath Bride — and Groom — in Shabbat Evening Liturgy

BY DONALD MENZI

“The sun in the treetops no longer
is seen;
Come, gather to welcome the
Sabbath, our Queen. . . .

Draw near, O Queen, and here
abide;
Draw near, draw near, O Sabbath
Bride.”¹

The imagery of Shabbat as a bride has always puzzled me. Various rabbis’ attempts to explain it as expressing God’s love for the institution of the Sabbath have always sounded somewhat lame and incomplete. I was sure that there must be more to it — that there was something the rabbis weren’t telling us, something that they themselves may not have been aware of.

It was not until my friend Zwe Padeh and I were halfway through our translation into English of the first volume of *Etz Hayyim* — Hayyim Vital’s monumental introduction to the kabbalah of his master, Isaac Luria — that I began to realize that my suspicions were correct.²

The image of the Sabbath Bride is truly meaningful only in the context of the kabbalistic understanding of the nature of reality and the function of Jewish ritual as the primary means of *tikkun olam* — repairing the world.

Kaplan and Kabbalah

I found that some basic elements of the kabbalistic world-view were in many ways surprisingly similar to Mordecai Kaplan’s, as expressed in his writings.³ For both Kaplan and the kabbalists, “God as ultimate reality is unknowable.” Both rejected what Kaplan called a pure naturalism “that reduces all manifestations of life, including thought, to mere operations of matter and physico-chemical causes.”

Instead, both Kaplan and the kabbalists viewed the world dualistically, with “outer” and “inner” (or lower and higher) aspects. For both, the “outer” or “lower” aspect is the physical universe, the world of things that we can touch, taste, see, smell,

Donald Menzi is a past president and member of West End Synagogue in Manhattan.

weigh and measure. And both viewed the “inner” (or higher) realm as consisting of a “complex of forces . . . operating in their own right,” which Kaplan described as “a cosmic urge, by obeying which man makes himself at home in the universe.”

Unlike Kaplan, however, the kabbalists sought to probe deeply into the nature of the inner (or higher) realm, and developed their own methods to analyze and describe its structure and dynamics. They conceived of a complex system based on ten distinct but interrelated forces that they called *sefirot*, which they classified as either “male” or “female” based on their essential characteristics.⁴

The Family of *Sefirot*

In order to describe more fully their interpretation of the interactions among these abstract forces, the kabbalists did not hesitate to give them human faces (*partzufim*), identifying them metaphorically as members of an extended family. This supernal family included the biblical figure “Ancient of Days,” whom the kabbalists called *Arieh Anpin*, literally “long face” (*sefirah* 1); a father (*Abba*, *sefirah* 2); a mother (*Immah*, *sefirah* 3); a son, *Ze’ir Anpin*, literally “short face” (six *sefirot*, 4-9); and a daughter, *Malkhut* (“Kingdom,” *sefirah* 10).⁵

In this configuration, the kabbalists identified the biblical God of Israel, *YHVH*, who is also the rabbinic period’s “King of the Universe”

(*melekh ha’olam*), with *Ze’ir Anpin*, the “son.” The *Shekhinah*, the personification of the divine Presence dwelling among us, they identified with the tenth *sefirah* — *Malkhut*, the “daughter.”

Both Kaplan and the kabbalists saw the “inner” and “outer” (or higher and lower) realms as two distinct but interrelated aspects of reality. To the kabbalists, the path connecting them is a two-way street, and it is the spiritual activities of humans — especially the Jewish people — that bridges the two aspects. It is our prayers and performance of the *mitzvot* (with the proper inner intention) that arouses ardent love between the divine Male and Female, helping to bring about their marital unification.⁶

Kabbalah in *Kol Haneshamah*

The Reconstructionist siddur, *Kol Haneshamah: Shabbat Vehagim*, includes just one example of the many Lurianic *kavvanot* that express this idea:

For the sake of the union of the blessed Holy One with the *Shekhinah*, I stand here, ready in body and mind, to take upon myself the mitzvah, “You shall love your fellow human being as yourself,” and by this merit may I open up my mouth.⁷

Despite their imaginative imagery, the kabbalists were ardent monotheists, but for them, divinity was a complex

Kaplan's multifaceted "God-idea" expressed as a kabbalistic "Tree of Life"

unity, with many different aspects. For Isaac Luria and his disciples, whose concepts influenced all later kabbalists, God's oneness is a broken unity that needs our help to be made whole. All of the imperfections and lack of harmony in the world — its warfare, hatreds, poverty, ignorance, crime, disease and general failure to live up to its full potential — they saw as evidence of a cosmic brokenness that encompasses all aspects of the universe, both outer (physical) and inner (spiritual).

The kabbalists' ultimate goal was to

heal and repair this brokenness, and the metaphor that they used most often to describe their goal — the achievement of universal harmony, balance, peace, love and joy — was that of a sacred marriage, the union of *Ze'ir Anpin* and *Malkhut*, the divine Male and Female, the supernal Bride and Groom.

Metaphor of Marriage

While the kabbalists used the metaphor of marriage in a number of different ways, they applied it especially

to Friday evening services, beginning with Kabbalat Shabbat, which they created. According to the kabbalists, when we gather for services on Friday night, we are not just congregants, but wedding guests — bridesmaids and groom's men — witnessing and taking part in a ritual that they interpreted as a Jewish wedding, complete with the uniting of bride and groom under the *huppah*, the seven nuptial blessings, a wedding banquet, consummation and the begetting of new life.

The Reconstructionist prayerbook, *Kol Haneshamah*, contains many allusions to kabbalistic concepts, both explicit in its “below the line” commentaries and implicit in its editors' choices of passages to include or exclude and in the wording of some of its English renderings. Among “modern” prayer books, it is certainly the best with which to illustrate the way that the kabbalists applied their marital metaphor to Shabbat services, though its scrupulous use of gender-neutral language has somewhat obscured the inherent male-female dynamic implicit in this imagery.⁸

The Dialogue of Divine Lovers

“ . . . The King has brought me to his chambers:
“We are gleeful, we rejoice in you,”
he says. . . .
You have enlivened me, my sister-
bride
Awake, north wind, yes come, south
wind”⁹

The entire Song of Songs is tradi-

tionally recited between the end of Friday afternoon services and the beginning of the Kabbalat Shabbat service proper. *Kol Haneshamah* has retained part of this practice by including excerpts from the Song of Songs at the beginning of Kabbalat Shabbat.

The Song of Songs is a love song, in the form of a poetic dialogue between two ardent lovers. It owes its inclusion in the Bible to the tradition that it was written by King Solomon, and to Rabbi Akiva, who interpreted it as a dialogue between God and his people, Israel.

For the kabbalists, the Song of Songs had a somewhat different meaning. The Song of Songs is a love song between the two “offspring,” *Ze'ir Anpin* — the Holy One, Blessed be He, the divine King, the personification of the six central *sefirot* — and his “sister,” *Malkhut*, the *Shekhinah*, our Sabbath Bride-to-be.¹⁰ As such, it makes a fitting beginning for a service that they interpreted as a celebration of the marital union of the divine Male and Female.

The Royal Bridegroom

Immediately following the Song of Songs in Kabbalat Shabbat, we find six psalms — Psalms 95-99 and 29. When we examine closely the language of these psalms, we find that they all refer to God in the role of king (*melekh*) and judge.¹¹

Psalm 95: For THE CREATOR is a generous divinity, a sovereign (*melekh*) greater than all the image-gods. . . .

Psalm 96: Declare among the nations that THE ETERNAL reigns (*malakh*).

Psalm 97: . . . THE UNCREATED reigns (*malakh*)! O world, rejoice!

Psalm 98: . . . THE ONE who comes to *rule* (*lishpot*) the earth, to rule the settled world with justice.

Psalm 99: . . . THE ONE OF SINAI reigns (*malakh*) . . . with royal strength, but loving justice.

Psalm 29: . . . THE REDEEMER prevailing at the Sea . . . *presiding* (*melekh*) for the cosmos.

Whatever the kabbalists' original reason for including these six psalms in Kabbalat Shabbat, they were certainly aware that six is the number of *sefirot* personified by the figure of *Ze'ir Anpin*, King of the Universe, the male aspect of divinity who is presented to us here as the heavenly Bridegroom-to-be.¹²

Here Comes The Bride!

Now that the Groom has been introduced, we are ready to welcome the Bride, whom we can imagine as entering the sanctuary to the accompaniment of our singing of *Lekhab Dodi*¹³ — by the 16th-century kabbalist Shelomo Halevi Alkabetz.

The repeated refrain of *Lekhab Dodi* is an invitation: "*Lekhab dodi likrat kalah, peney shabbat nekabelah.*" "O, come, my

friend, let's greet the bride, the Sabbath Presence bring inside."

I had always assumed that the Hebrew *dodi* ("my friend") was simply a way of saluting each other in a comradely way. Not so! say the kabbalists. *Anaf Yosef*, a kabbalistic commentary, explains that here we are addressing God himself, our divine Friend, envisioned as the Bridegroom awaiting with us the entrance of the *Shekhinah*, the supernal Bride.¹⁴

The first stanza of *Lekhab Dodi* also has a secret meaning for the kabbalists:

"'Keep' and 'Remember' in a sole command,
the solitary God did us command
I AM is one, the Name is one,
in name, in splendor, and in
praise."

The reference here is to slightly different versions of the commands to observe the Sabbath that are found in the books of Exodus (*shamor*, "keep") and Deuteronomy (*zakhor*, "remember"). The Talmud reconciled the two versions by stating that God uttered both words simultaneously. The kabbalists found in them a hidden reference to unification of the supernal Male and Female, Bride and Groom, where *zakhor* ("remember") refers to the Male (*zakhar*) and *shamor* points to the Female. Their "oneness" consists of their marital union, which we have gathered to celebrate.¹⁵

So, just as in a modern wedding the groom turns to face the bride as she

comes down the aisle, we turn toward the doorway to welcome the Sabbath Bride as she enters the sanctuary, while we sing the final verse of *Lekhab Dodi*:

O, come in peace, O divine crown,
with joy, rejoicing, and with mirth,
amid the faithful, loved by God,
come in, O Bride, come in, O Bride!

United Under the *Huppah*

Now that the divine Bride and Bridegroom are both present, we celebrate their coming together by reciting the *Shema* — the quintessential assertion of God’s oneness:

*Shema Yisra’el, Adonay elohaynu,
Adonay echad.* “Listen Israel:
THE ETERNAL, our God,
THE ETERNAL ONE alone!”

The *Zohar* explains the *Shema* as follows:¹⁶

All the supernal limbs (i.e., the *sefirot*) are united together in a single desire and with a single will to be one, without any separation. Then her husband conceives the intention of bringing her to the canopy to be one with her, to unite with his consort. Therefore we arouse her and say “*Shema Yisra’el!* Prepare yourself! Your husband comes to you in all his finery, and is ready to meet you.”

Then the consort (i.e., *Malkhut*) prepares herself and adorns herself, and her ministers bring her to her husband, whispering in a soft

voice,
*Barukh shem kevod malkhuto
le’olam va’ed.*

“Blessed is the name and glory of God’s realm (*malkhut*) forever.”

Note that traditionally we do not say the second line of the *Shema* (“*Barukh shem kavod . . .*”) out loud except on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. The *Zohar* explains that during the rest of the year we bring the Bride forward with a whisper so that the “other side” — the forces of evil — cannot interfere with their unification.

Every attempt to bring the Bride to the side of the King for the joy of intercourse must be made with a whisper, in secret, to prevent any trace of the evil side from following her steps or cleaving to her, or to stop any blemish whatsoever from affecting her children.¹⁷

On the Day of Atonement, however, when evil has temporarily lost its power, we can say this openly, with no fear that the heavenly union will be disrupted.

The Seven Nuptial Blessings

The kabbalists interpreted the seven blessings of the Shabbat *Amidah* as paralleling the seven blessings of the Jewish marriage ceremony. They focused especially on the fourth blessing, which begins,

Atah kiddashta et yom hashevi'i . . .
“You sanctified the seventh
day . . .”

The basic meaning of the Hebrew root *K-D-SH* is “set apart,” which has a dual meaning of either “sanctified” or “betrothed,” depending on the context. The second meaning is found in the formula repeated at Jewish weddings, “*Harey at mekudeshet li . . .*” “Behold, you are betrothed to me. . . .” Here the kabbalists interpreted “*Atah kiddashta . . .*” as referring to the Holy One’s betrothal to the Sabbath Bride.¹⁸

New, Holy Souls

What happens in a Jewish wedding after the ceremony under the *huppah*? The Bride and Groom go to a room where they can be alone together at last, where, in ancient times, the marriage was consummated. (These days, they usually just share a bit of food together before returning to the wedding party to dance and greet their guests.) The kabbalists were able to find a hint of the supernal Bride and Groom’s marital consummation in the concluding verse of *Veshamru*:

*. . . uwayom hashevi'i shavat va-
yinafash.*
“. . . and on the seventh day, God
ceased and drew a breath of rest.”

The Hebrew *vayinafash* is usually translated simply as “rested.” Notice, however, that *vayinafash* sounds like *nefesh*, one of the Hebrew words for “soul.”¹⁹ One of the earliest kabbalistic works, *Sefer HaBahir*, explains *vayina-*

fash as referring to new souls generated by the marital union of the supernal Bride and Groom.²⁰ From this is derived the kabbalistic explanation for the tradition that married couples should make love especially on Friday nights.²¹ As stated in the *Zohar*,

Those initiated in the higher wisdom perform their marital duties on each Sabbath night, for it is on the night of the Sabbath that the Holy One, blessed be He, unites with His Consort in order to produce holy souls for the world. Therefore on this night the companions sanctify themselves with the sanctity of their Creator, and direct their minds, and fine children are produced, holy children, who do not veer to the right or to the left, children of the King and the Consort.²²

L'ḥayim to the Newlyweds!

The kabbalists had their own understanding of Kiddush — the blessing we say over wine at the start of the Sabbath meal. Here, too, they found a reference to the sacred marriage of the Sabbath Bride and Groom.

We noted above that the Hebrew root *K-D-SH* means “set apart,” which can be translated as “consecrated,” “sanctified,” or — in the marital context — “betrothed.” *Kol Haneshamah*’s translation of the last line of the Kiddush blessing allows for all these interpretations:

Barukh atah adonay, mekaddesh

hashabbat — “. . . who sets apart Shabbat.”²³

Indeed, when kabbalists followed the recital of the Kiddush blessing with a hearty “L’hayim!” it was to salute the divine newlyweds, whose union brings new life into the world.²⁴

Two Angels

Legend has it that following Friday night prayers, the Jewish husband returns home, accompanied by two “angels,” one good and one bad. If, when he opens the door, he finds the candles lit, the table set, and the bed made, then the “good” angel is permitted to say, “May it be this way next Shabbat also!” and the bad angel is compelled to respond, “Amen.” But if the candles are not lit, the table not set, and the bed not made, the “bad” angel is permitted to say, “May it be this way next Shabbat also!” and the good angel is forced to reply, “Amen.”

These three items — candles, table and bed — were not chosen at random. The lit candles reflect the piety and religious observance of the woman of the house. The set table symbolizes an orderly household. And the bed? Clearly, this is in anticipation of what is to come, after the meal is finished and the children are sent to their rooms, when the husband and wife are free to follow the kabbalists’ injunctions about what to do on Friday night.

Separating

Most kabbalistic sources apply mari-

tal imagery only to Friday evening services. Some, however, extended the metaphor to the whole day of Shabbat, detailing the various elements of Shabbat services that parallel a traditional Jewish wedding, ending with *Havdalah*, when the divine Bride and Groom must separate, and when the “additional soul” that we receive on Shabbat must reluctantly return to its creator. “What does the (human) groom do after he and his bride are united?” asks David ben Judah, an early 14th-century kabbalist.

He comes into her in the *mitzvah* of coupling, and then separates from her. . . . This is the essence of *Havdalah*, the ritual of separation. For as Sabbath departs, the supernatural King withdraws from the Queen. For this reason, the soul that remains in us here below is bereft, for she remains alone, without her mate, the Sabbath-soul. So we strengthen her with fragrant scents at *Havdalah*.²⁵

And so, at the close of Shabbat, the Sabbath Bride and Groom are separated once again. Shabbat, which has provided us with a foretaste of a world in which all separations are overcome, is over and we, too, are bereft. For kabbalists, returning to an often inhospitable world that was generally unfriendly to Jews and Judaism, there was comfort in the sure knowledge that within a few days — next Friday night, in fact — they would again be able to see themselves as honored guests at the celebration of a sacred marriage and

wedding banquet, enjoying once more a foretaste of the eternal peace and boundless pleasures that will accompany the ultimate harmonization of all the forces of the universe — those we can see, feel, touch, and measure, and those that remain invisible to our merely human powers of perception.

Contemporary Meanings

What does all this mean to us? What can we make of this kabbalistic imagery, so full of metaphors that are foreign to our current way of thinking?

First, we must acknowledge that our religious services presently retain many vestiges of ideas that once made perfect sense in the broader context of an ancient, comprehensive world-view. Removed from their original context, they have often either become meaningless to us or have been given “modern” interpretations that don’t really fit them very well. It is certainly difficult, and perhaps impossible, for most of us to think like the kabbalists, imagining distinct male and female aspects of divinity, for example, ritually united during our Shabbat services.

We can, however, out of respect for our own tradition, trace the path of its development back to its sources, in order to understand the thinking of those who influenced the present shape of our services and created some of their most popular parts. Certainly, if we are going to follow the kabbalists’ practice of reciting verses from the Song of Songs every Friday night, call upon their imagery of the Sabbath Bride and sing songs like *Lekhabh Dodi* and *Yedid*

Nefesh, which they composed, we can at least do so with an awareness of what their words meant to them, even if we can no longer believe in them the same way they did.

And when, instead of simply repeating their words by rote or pretending that they mean what we moderns would like them to mean, we look into them more deeply, we will often discover unexpected nuances, new depths of meaning and some unforeseen surprises that can only enhance our pleasure in what we have been doing all these years.

-
1. *Kol Haneshamah*, 10
 2. The teachings of Isaac Luria (1525-1572), as transmitted by his chief disciple Chayyim Vital, are the foundation for all later kabbalah. For an introduction to Luria’s teachings, see *The Tree of Life, Chayyim Vital’s Introduction to the Kabbalah of Isaac Luria*, translated by Donald Menzi and Zve Padeh, Jason Aronson Inc., 1999.
 3. Citations from Mordecai Kaplan are taken from the following sources: *Questions Jews Ask* (95, 103), *Judaism Without Supernaturalism* (26), *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion* (26, 244), and “Between Two Worlds” in Ira Eisenstein, ed., *Varieties of Jewish Belief*, 141.
 4. The Hebrew term *sefirah* (plural, *sefirot*) is derived from the root *sfr* (count, tell) and is related to *safar* (to count), *sefer* (book), and *sippur* (communication). It first appears in this sense in *Sefer Yetzirah*, an anonymous Jewish text, roughly contemporary with the Talmud, that had great influence on the development of kabbalistic thought.
 5. The visual images *Arikkh Anpin* as a white-haired patriarch and *Ze’ir Anpin* as a youthful black-bearded warrior king, are derived from the *Idra Rabba* and *Idra Zuta* portions of the *Zohar*. They appear in *Kol Haneshamah* in *Shir Hakavod* (“Song of

Glory”), a poetic defense of the use of such anthropomorphic images. (453-457)

6. The metaphor used by the kabbalists to describe this “arousing” was that our prayers and *mitzvot* adorn the bride with beautiful garments and jewels, enhancing her attractiveness to her prospective mate.

7. *Kol Haneshamah*, 150.

8. For a more detailed discussion of the marital motif in the Shabbat liturgy, see Elliot Ginsburg, *The Sabbath in Classical Kabbalah* (State University of New York Press, 1989).

9. *Kol Haneshamah*, 14, 18.

10. The kabbalists’ interpretation does not really contradict Rabbi Akiva’s. To them, the *Shekhinah* was so closely identified with the Jewish people that one of her epithets was *Knesset Israel*, “the Congregation of Israel.”

11. *Kol Haneshamah*, 20-39. Capitalized expressions in *Kol Haneshamah* (e.g., THE CREATOR, THE ETERNAL, etc.) are all substitutions for the unpronounced four-letter Name, YHVH.

12. The kabbalists also saw the six weekdays as paralleling the six *sefirot* that they personified by *Ze’ir Anpin*, while Shabbat, the last day of the week, was to them analogous to the last *sefirah*, personified by *Malkhut*, the Sabbath Bride.

13. *Kol Haneshamah*, 40-47.

14. This is the same reading of the Hebrew “*dodi*” that we find in the traditional interpretation of the Song of Songs, where “*dodi li*” — “my Beloved is mine” — is interpreted as spoken by Israel to God. Such

expressions of intimacy are typical of kabbalistic spirituality, as found, for example, in *Yedid Nefesh* (*Kol Haneshamah*, 4), written by the 16th-century kabbalist Eleazar Aikri.

15. See Elliot Ginsburg, *The Sabbath in the Classical Kabbalah*, 109.

16. *Zohar* II, 133b, cited in Isaiah Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, vol. III, 1023.

17. *Zohar* II, 114b, cited in Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 1027. The “children” of the divine King and his consort are the souls born in this world to the pious, whose marital union takes place on Friday nights (see below).

18. See Elliot Ginsburg, *The Sabbath in the Classical Kabbalah*, 118, 171n, 211, 175n, 231.

19. *Kol Haneshamah*’s translator hints subtly at this meaning by using the phrase “breath of rest.” In ancient times, the breath was associated with the soul.

20. *Sefer HaBahir*, 158, cited in Elliot Ginsburg, *The Sabbath in the Classical Kabbalah*, 123.

21. For a thorough discussion of the kabbalistic understanding of marital relations, see David Biale, *Eros and the Jews*, Basic Books, 1992, 101-120.

22. *Zohar*, I, 257a.

23. *Kol Haneshamah*, 119.

24. *Tiqunei ha-Zohar*, 24 (69a), cited in Elliot Ginsburg, *The Sabbath in the Classical Kabbalah*, 118.

25. David ben Judah he-Hasid, ‘*Or Zaru’a*’, cited in Elliot Ginsburg, *The Sabbath in Classical Kabbalah*, 123.

Touchstones for Jewish Living

*Finding Each Other in Judaism:
Meditations on the Rites of Passage from Birth to Immortality*

Harold M. Schulweis

(New York, UAHC Press, 2001), 120 pages

REVIEWED BY DENNIS C. SASSO

The founder of modern Jewish Orthodoxy, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888), asserted that “the catechism of the Jew consists of his calendar.” Hirsch was referring to the cycle of Sabbaths, festivals and holy days that punctuate the rhythm of traditional Jewish life. For the majority of postmodern Jews living in the 21st century, this assessment is no longer relevant. Perhaps Passover, Hanukkah and Yom Kippur still claim the allegiance of the majority of today’s Jews, but the Jewish calendar as a whole has ceased to define the contours, the context and the contents of Jewish expression. We live by other schedules. A secular rhythm accentuates the flow of our days.

Most of today’s Jews find sanctity in the flow of time in the occasions that mark the cycle of life from birth through death. It is at these times that we are reminded of our Jewishness, and it is during these transi-

tions that we are open to experience the spirit of holiness and of sacred fellowship. Regrettably, the majority of American Jews come to the synagogue “by invitation only” — for a bar or bat mitzvah, a wedding and, on sadder occasions, to pay their respects at a funeral.

Powerful Rites of Passage

In his new book, *Finding Each Other in Judaism*, Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis, whose writings have instructed and inspired a generation of rabbis and lay readers, invites us to a deeper appreciation of the spiritual and social powers inherent in the celebration and observance of the Jewish rites of passage. These are the moments when the “I” draws closer to the “we,” to the members of the family and to the community present and past.

In the introduction, Schulweis delineates two obstacles “that dissipate

Dennis C. Sasso is co-rabbi of Congregation Beth-El Zedek in Indianapolis.

the potentiality of bringing the family closer through Judaism: riteless passages and passageless rites.” By the first he means the “secular marking of life’s stages without ritual anchorings to religious meaning or spiritual reflection,” events that are “purely private occasions free of the constraints of communal traditions . . . a birth without benediction, a wedding without sanctifying rituals, a funeral without Kaddish.”

The second obstacle, “passageless rites,” refers to ceremonies where ritual is trivialized and holiness debased. Passageless rites convert “the bar or bat mitzvah into a birthday party; the wedding into a . . . catered meal, the florist’s display and the photographer’s angle.” Quoting the dictionary, he reminds us that the term “ceremony” indeed functions so often as “an action performed with formality but lacking deep significance, form or effect.”

Schulweis’ book is intent on “overcoming the disconnection” between rite and passage. He seeks to “bridge the chasm, to properly hyphenate rite and passage, to connect believing with behaving, doing with understanding.”

Marking the Life Cycle

Schulweis devotes six chapters to stages in the Jewish life cycle: “Birth and Brit,” “Bar and Bat Mitzvah,” “The Wedding,” “Rites of Conversion,” “In Sickness and in Health” and “Death, Dying and Immortality.” The chapters are neither “how-

to manuals” nor comparative anthropological surveys. Rather, drawing from the vast store of our religious, legal, spiritual and folkloristic heritage, each chapter blends ancient custom and wisdom with poetic imagery to paint a portrait of a stage in life that touches the soul and feeds the mind of contemporary Jews. Prose essays are followed by the author’s own poetic and reflective meditations, a bountiful treasure to be mined by lay folk and clergy alike in composing and enriching meaningful life-cycle ceremonies.

Some of the poetic selections found in this volume are familiar from other Schulweis publications (e.g. “Touch My Heart,” “Holding On and Letting Go”). Sometimes, the poetry is a bit didactic and philosophical, better used for explanation than inspiration. But, as a whole, the meditations are erudite and compelling. They teach as they touch. Schulweis exhibits a Kaplanian passion for rationality and coherence, a Heschelian sense of pathos and a Buberian urgency for encounter. The prose narrative that introduces each section eschews scholarly lingo and is intent upon rendering tradition accessible and inviting for the questioning and questioning Jew.

A New Chemistry of Faith

Topics of the life cycle, family relations and holiday observance are woven in a seamless continuum. Thus, the section on marriage addresses the theme of divorce by sub-

tly introducing us to other experiences and expressions of family estrangement. Schulweis proposes a ritual of reconciliation that addresses the nuanced distinction between forgiveness and forgetfulness, anger and vengeance. The meditation that ends the section on the wedding, entitled “The Mitzvah of Reconciliation,” is a fitting modern *piyyut* (liturgical poem) for the Days of Awe. In Schulweis’ anthropology, psychology, sociology and theology merge in a new chemistry of faith.

In the section on conversion, Schulweis speaks of outreach in a simple and poignant manner: “We are a family, a growing family, which an increasing number of Americans not born or raised as Jews seek to join.” He reminds us that “Judaism’s birth was through conversion” and invites us to “open the gates.” The narrative portion of this chapter is disappointingly short and lacks a meaningful evaluation of the values inherent in the rituals and practices of conversion (e.g. study, *mikveh*, *bet din*). However, the meditations at the end of the chapter are sensitive and perceptive. They reflect faithfully what so many thoughtful converts have to say about the fruits of their own search and discovery of Judaism.

I found the section on “In Sickness and in Health” to be especially insightful and evocative. Schulweis

shows that a religious humanism grounded in a naturalistic theology can be spiritually fulfilling and pastorally uplifting. Meditations such as “May I Not Forget” (a modern *Birkat Hagomel* [thanksgiving blessing for safety] upon recovery) should enter into every manual for rabbis and be available for home, hospital and synagogue use.

The Names of God

In the last chapter, “Death, Dying and Immortality,” Schulweis returns to a theme about which he has written before: the distinction between Elohim and Adonai as divine names. Elohim reflects the “reality principle,” the author of all that “is”; Adonai represents the “ideality principle,” the source of what “ought to be.” Schulweis develops these concepts and treats us to a theology that is modest and patient in the need to accept what is, yet at the same time is infused with the *hutzpah* and urgency that moves us to aspire to be partners of the divine in transforming the world for good.

In *Finding Each Other in Judaism*, Harold Schulweis provides for searching Jews and other religious seekers beautiful and meaningful touchstones for spiritual enrichment and interpersonal encounter at every stage in the life cycle.

The Art of the Sermon

Witness From the Pulpit: Topical Sermons 1933-1980

Harold I. Saperstein

Edited with introductions and notes by Marc Saperstein

(Lexington Books, 2000) 365 pages

REVIEWED BY GEORGE DRIESEN

The sermon is not a popular, perhaps not even a familiar, genre these days. So it is pleasing as well as surprising to come across *Witness From the Pulpit*, a collection of more than fifty sermons Rabbi Harold I. Saperstein delivered at Temple Emanu-El in Lynbrook, Long Island, from 1933 through 1980. Saperstein, who recently died, served the temple as its rabbi during that entire period, except briefly during World War II, when he voluntarily served as a chaplain in the U.S. Army.

Texts in Context

In these sermons (only a fraction of Saperstein's output), he responded to important social and political events of the day. Unlike traditional *divrei Torah*, these sermons were rarely tied to the weekly Torah portion. But then the sermons in this volume were selected for their historical and social rather than their theological importance. The editor's introductions, footnotes and occasional

editorial interpolations help the reader understand both the rabbi and the frequently momentous events upon which he commented.

Witness From the Pulpit is something of a family affair. Edited by Professor Marc Saperstein, with a foreword by his brother Rabbi David Saperstein, the book can be seen as the tribute of sons to their father's career. This adds a human tone to the objective, scholarly voice of the explanatory materials, footnotes and careful references to sources that are provided.

Harold Saperstein meticulously prepared his sermons, typing them out and then cutting up the pages so they could be turned more easily. Before delivering a sermon, he read it aloud several times. By the time he had finished, he was able virtually to give the sermon from memory. As a result, the sermons were delivered in a flowing manner, so much so, the editor recounts, that congregants frequently asked whether his father wrote them out. To make sure he never unknowingly repeated himself,

Rabbi George Driesen teaches in the greater Washington, D.C. metropolitan area.

Saperstein developed a filing system by subject.

The Imperatives of Social Action

Harold Saperstein was a rabbi in the great social action tradition of the Reform movement, a disciple of Rabbi Stephen S. Wise. Like his mentor, Saperstein was actively engaged by the events of his time: the rise of Hitler, the agony of the Holocaust, World War II, the creation of the State of Israel and its repeated wars for survival, the unfolding liberation of African-Americans from segregation and physical intimidation, the successes of the civil rights movement in the South and its effects elsewhere.

Saperstein not only preached about contemporary events, he was often in the thick of them. For example, he and his wife went to Alabama in 1965 to participate in the black voter-registration drive. Frequently, they were the only whites to address gatherings of black people, often in churches, to encourage them in the dangerous business of asserting their rights. When Saperstein closed his first account of his trip with a ringing declaration that “Together we go forward. With God’s help. . . deep in my heart, I do believe, we shall overcome some day,” his hearers and, forty years later, his readers, recognize that he was privileged to say “we” as ordinary well-wishers were not.

Similarly, the Sapersteins were in

Jerusalem on sabbatical when the surrounding Arab states invaded in 1967. Aware of the likelihood of war, they had remained while many others fled. One could only imagine how proud and deeply moved his congregation must have been when, after recounting what he had seen, he invoked the familiar aphorism of Hanukkah, “*nes gadol haya sham*,” “a great miracle happened there,” to describe the Israeli triumph.

Tensions of the Topical

Topical sermons can be problematic, however. American rabbis learned this during the Civil War, when some got into trouble for speaking for abolition, about which many congregants felt rabbis ought to remain silent lest they divide their congregations and violate the principle of separation between church and state.

Topical sermons are equally, if not more, problematical today. The Jewish community is more divided politically than it once was. Congregants today are saturated with news, commentary and opinion. The rabbi is just one more competing voice, and not necessarily better informed and educated than congregants — even if he or she quotes a verse or rabbinic aphorism in support.

Furthermore, people’s attention spans seem to be shortening. In the 19th century, a good orator could hold a crowd’s attention for an hour and a half or more. Today, rabbis are repeatedly admonished not to talk

too long, and “too long” often means anything more than ten or fifteen minutes. The sermons collected here are considerably longer than that, as they needed to be to accomplish the rabbi’s goal of informing and motivating his congregation.

Affirming the Sermon

Moreover, Jews today come to synagogue as much to feel themselves part of a community as to learn. They often prefer dialogue with one another to sitting passively while the rabbi speaks. As a result, in many congregations a rabbi-led discussion suggested by the Torah portion substitutes for the Shabbat “sermon slot.” Ideas aside, the discussion gives congregants a chance to get to know one another and to be heard, opportunities they often crave and that help build a sense of community. A rabbi’s closing comment, if any, hardly functions as a sermon. Given these developments, the regular Shabbat sermon may be on the road to extinction.

Witness From the Pulpit demonstrates how great a loss that would be. Sermons may perform important functions, many of them illustrated here. First, rabbis are trained in a tradition that spans millennia, and have a sense of history that many congregants lack. Hence, rabbis often see a contemporary issue “under the eye of eternity.” This can be a valuable perspective that ought not be lost.

Second, at moments when history drives Jews collectively to the brink of despair or to heights of exultation,

many often want to hear a rabbi’s words. The High Holidays of 2001, following the events of September 11, proved yet again how central the synagogue and the sermon can be in time of crisis.

In his lifetime, Saperstein spoke to equally troubling topics. Thus, on Rosh Hashanah Eve in 1942, when he and other discerning Jews had come to recognize the horror swallowing up the Jews of Europe, he linked the agony of the Jewish people to the image of Isaac lashed to the sacrificial pyre atop Mount Moriah.

Promoting Hope

But despair was not enough. Quoting an American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee worker back from Europe, Saperstein asked, “Is the whole story of what is happening to our people so sad? Isn’t there anything comforting or inspiring?” Yes, Saperstein said. The “spiritual brotherhood” that united the Jewish people in its hour of peril has expanded “until it embraces all the forces of civilization and decency and humanity.” For once, he said, the Jews were not alone. If that observation was overly sanguine, it was nonetheless peculiarly appropriate for a rabbi whose task, after all, was not only to assess danger but to embolden people to confront it.

Similarly, *Witness From the Pulpit* records Saperstein’s sermons upon the assassination of President Kennedy and at the height of the Yom Kippur War. Both are tied to a vision of Jew-

ish history and to our textual tradition. Both are ennobling and stirring examples of sermons delivered at moments of despair and crisis.

The topical sermon can inform Jews about political and social developments that particularly affect us but of which we are unaware, either because they are not generally reported or because their significance for us is not apparent. The topical sermon enlightens us. Finally, topical sermons help achieve one of the loftiest of rabbinic goals, to inspire Jews to live moral lives.

From Eyewitness to Preacher

Many of Saperstein's best sermons seek that target. Nine days after Martin Luther King delivered his famous "I Have A Dream" speech on the Mall in Washington, D.C., Saperstein, who was there, described the occasion. He traced its roots back to the Torah, through the Exodus and the Emancipation Proclamation, and quoted King's words. Saperstein did so for a purpose. At the time, a local school board was embroiled in a controversy over its decision to bus students to certain schools to promote racial "balance." Though not taking a position on the precise controversy, Saperstein embedded it squarely in the aspirations and the text of King's famous oration. Whatever those who heard him may have done in response (many of their children would be affected), the rabbi had clearly set the bell of freedom ringing in their hearts.

Despite the high quality of Saperstein's sermons, the book suffers from the limitations of the genre. A sermon must be brief, be understood on first hearing and, usually, be addressed to ordinary people. These limitations restrict the questions a preacher may pose and the depth with which they can be pursued. Rarely, as in Saperstein's 1957 sermon to the Central Conference of American Rabbis, "How Leadership Fails," are these sermons-turned-essays profound, even though the comments are uniformly astute. The sermon's primary objective, after all, is to motivate and arouse. It is hard to inspire readers many decades removed from and deprived of the rabbi's voice.

On the other hand, whatever the future may hold, most rabbis still regularly give sermons. The sermons collected here may lift a contemporary rabbi's eyes, for they are literate, organized and passionate, qualities rabbis strive to achieve. And, to the extent contemporary rabbis need encouragement to tackle social justice issues, *Witness From the Pulpit* provides it.

The Sermon and History

This collection is also intriguing as history. Today's historians are as interested in the experience of ordinary people as earlier historians were in heroes and battles. Saperstein, of course, was far from ordinary. But, by noting the topics he chose and the ideas he mobilized, the reader may

gain an intuitive understanding of the concerns and the ideology of middle- and upper-middle-class suburban Jews during the tempestuous period covered here. For older readers, the book will revive poignant memories of the hopes and fears that accompanied the shattering and ennobling moments of their earlier years.

For other readers, precisely because of its accessibility, the book may serve as an antidote to the dubious, glib judgments of the past that have become current since the generation that lived through them has moved offstage. Thus, the widespread notion that the American Jewish community stood mute in the face of the Holocaust is belied by the history captured

here. The sermons make clear that the Jewish community mobilized to persuade elected and appointed government officials to respond to the ongoing extinction of the Jews of Europe, but was repeatedly blocked by, among other things, anti-Semitism and official indifference.

Harold Saperstein, the rabbi whose life and thought are documented in these sermons, was an admirable exemplar of the successful spiritual leader of his day, a man highly literate in Jewish and secular sources, passionately committed to the Jewish people and dedicated to the congregation he served during virtually his entire working life. We are indebted to his sons for preserving and presenting a portion of his legacy.

Facing Death and Grieving

When a Jew Dies

Samuel A. Heilman

(University of California Press, 2001) 271 pages

REVIEWED BY DAYLE A. FRIEDMAN

As I was writing this review, I received a call from an acquaintance who had recently suffered the sudden loss of her mother. She spoke of her disorientation and distress, and added, “The daily minyan is my life-saver. I don’t know what I would do without it.” This woman, who was already quite involved in Jewish life, was still surprised and relieved to discover that Jewish mourning rituals provided her with an anchor amidst the sadness and anomie of bereavement.

Samuel Heilman, a City University of New York professor and social anthropologist who has previously published studies of ultra-Orthodox Jews and of the sociology of the contemporary American Jewish community, made a similar discovery. When he experienced the loss of his beloved, Holocaust-survivor father, this Orthodox only child found that his

scrupulous observance of the traditions for death and bereavement gradually, and gently, brought him back from despair to affirmation, from isolation to connection.

Two Perspectives

Heilman resolved to use his academic tools and Jewish knowledge to mine these traditions, in order to unpack their “underlying meaning.”¹ *When a Jew Dies* is the result of this endeavor. The volume’s structure is two-fold. The main text is what Heilman describes as an ethnographic study of Jewish mourning. The voice here is that of “the social anthropological interpreter of customs and traditions.” Heilman’s is not an ethnographic study of a particular community at a specific point in time, but rather, an examination of Jews as what Max Weber

Rabbi Dayle A. Friedman is director of the Geriatric Chaplaincy Track and a spiritual director at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. She is the editor of *Jewish Pastoral Care: A Practical Handbook from Traditional and Contemporary Sources* (Jewish Lights Publishing, 2001).

called “ideal types,” “personifications distilled and emerging from the customs and traditions that they shaped and that shaped them.” While Heilman acknowledges that Jews range in observance and approach to the tradition, he states that

this book seeks to . . . provide an informed portrait of what happens when certain Jews attached to Jewish practices die, while trying to understand and reveal the cultural and social meaning of their customs and received traditions.

The other component of the study is an often moving narrative of Heilman’s personal experience in observing Jewish mourning rites in grieving his father’s death. Here, his voice is that of a bereaved son who acts “according to the imperatives of religious obligation.”

It is an ambitious undertaking simultaneously to hold two such divergent perspectives, and it is not always successful. Heilman’s failure to focus on a particular community leaves the reader wondering who these “certain Jews” are who observe in the manner he describes. Are they the *haredim* of the Jerusalem *hevrah kadishah*? Modern Orthodox Jews in America? Observant liberal Jews? Theoretical constructs derived from the texts he perceptively analyzes? Given the diversity of the contemporary Jewish community, we need to know which Jews are being described, in order both to

evaluate how accurate the depiction is and to apply productively its findings.

In Search of Meaning

Furthermore, in an ethnographic study, one might expect to hear about the meaning that particular individuals derive from the practices described. Heilman offers a compelling, first-person narrative about the meaning and impact of Jewish mourning practices on him, but does not share with us any other individual Jew’s perspectives. We learn about neither his family members’ reactions to these rites nor those of other Jews in communities in which he was a participant/observer. At the end of the day, it seems that what Heilman has done is actually something different than he set out to do. Rather than providing a study of what traditional Jewish mourning customs mean to those who observe them, he has given us one person’s perspective, along with an penetrating analysis of the idealized ritual based on traditional sources and anthropological theory.

Notwithstanding these weaknesses, Heilman offers a passionate and incisive account of Jewish practices for mourning the dead. His comprehensive approach to the whole structure of Jewish mourning, from deathbed through the first year and on to *yizkor* and *yahrzeit*, is a helpful framework, and he makes important observations about the function and impact of these rituals.

In treating the entire ritual cycle as a system, he is able to point out the ways that symbols, themes and messages contribute to a coherent whole that effects healing and transformation.

Binding the Mourner to Community

Heilman notes that the entire structure of Jewish mourning practices summon the mourner out of his or her² desolation and into connection with community. While public commemoration of a death is common to many cultures, the pervasiveness of communal rites throughout the “long haul” of mourning is a distinctive feature of Jewish tradition’s approach. He notes that “congregation is the Jewish antidote to death’s abandonment.” He finds that saying Kaddish in a minyan over the eleven months of mourning joins him to “a fraternity of the bereaved.” Saying Kaddish is “a kind of double-sided clamp linking the reciter with the abiding sense of loss, as well as with the Jewish congregation and its consoling embrace.”

Interestingly, Heilman notes that this link between mourner and community is mutually beneficial. Not only does the public nature of Jewish mourning offer sustaining, loving connection to the mourner, but it serves to strengthen communal life. In this way, ironically, the dead help the living:

. . . at least in my day, it was

the dead — or perhaps the sense of obligation to the dead on the part of the living — that helped promote communal prayer. If the community was servicing those who recite Kaddish by providing us with a minyan, it was the dead who were somehow the prime movers in all this, exerting their power upon the living to come together in their name.

Ongoing Relationships

A lifelong rationalist, Heilman is somewhat startled to discover after his father’s death the degree to which he continues to feel himself in relationship with his father. He notes that the practices he observes nurture and deepen that relationship over time. In sitting *shivah* in his parents’ home, Heilman is struck by his father’s simultaneous presence and absence:

. . . he was everywhere, and everywhere missed . . . At first I felt as if I might find him in the armchair where for the last five years, since his debilitating strokes, he had always sat. But he was not there and never would be again. The chair’s emptiness was overwhelming. When I turned away from the sight to gaze out the windows, I could almost feel him standing nearby, meticulously closing the blinds as he did each evening before going to bed or

quietly opening them in the morning when he got up — always the first one — ready to begin the day. If I turned toward the table in the dining room or the kitchen, my eyes were drawn first to his empty chair at the head of each. Even when I was surrounded by visitors, and we looked for chairs on which to seat them, those chairs remained untouched and in their place, silent witnesses to my father's lingering presence and absence.

Over time, Heilman is comforted to find that the rituals he has observed in his year of mourning have brought him ever closer to his father:

As long as I continue to do all this and come to the synagogue, study the Mishnah, as he would have had me do, I dissolve the distance between us. We pray together; we study; we go on together as one. When he was alive, I could detach myself from him, go away from where he was. Now he is always with me. We have conquered the breach of death.

Heilman has found that “underneath my tallit I am not a rational man. Here I keenly feel my father's presence beside — inside — me.” The rituals he has observed have not only drawn him into new, deeper connection with his father, they have transformed his experience of himself.

From Despair Toward Affirmation

Heilman observes the inexorable pull of Jewish mourning rituals toward meaning, affirmation and life. He notes throughout the mourning process the ways in which mourners' ritual obligations induce in them a positive attitude toward life at precisely the moment when all feels ashen to them. From the obligation to lead worshippers in the minyan, calling them with *Barekhu* to praise God, to the very act of saying Kaddish, the mourner is drawn back from the abyss of alienation and doubt to a stance of affirmation:

What both the repetition of Kaddish and the invitation by the mourner to the congregation to recite *borchu* (sic) do as well, of course, is to echo the sentiments first expressed when the living encountered or were informed about the death [the recitation of *Dayan ha-Emet*: Blessed is the Eternal our God, the True Judge]: to bless and exalt God, and hence tacitly acknowledge not only his superior judgment but also their acceptance of God's will. It was a sign of their having made their peace with the Almighty and with the reality of death. As such, then, the summons to “bless God” is a dramatic public statement that some order and spiritual healing have begun to fill the breach opened by death.

While we might argue that this process often takes far longer than Heilman's description would suggest, this core function of the rituals is what makes them so beloved, and so powerful. At the first *yahrzeit* marking the end of his year of mourning, Heilman felt this pull quite dramatically as he noted his reluctance to share the customary drink of *shnapps* and to make a *l'hayim* with the minyan:

But my fellow worshipers were pleased to join me, and they held off their normal rush out the door. One by one, as congregant after congregant lifted the little glass of golden liquid and toasted my father's soul, wishing him a gentle ascent from the oblivion of death to the supernal heights, offering me their hopes that "his neshoma should have an easy aliyah," as they put it, I felt the awkwardness slip away. The cumulative effects of a collective spirit of joy and grace meant to lift my father's spirit was lifting my spirits as well — and away the vapor of sadness flew. We were free, all of us, my father from his body and the fresh weight of death, I from my grief and the long wait of mourning, and the community from its need to support and sustain me each day of the year. We had survived even death, and as long as I used this day to recall that, all of us would

persevere against the pain of its sadness.

Insights for Our Communities

Heilman, an accomplished sociologist, knows that his portrait of "when a Jew dies" is at best a description of how the small Orthodox minority (5.5 percent, according to the 1990 NJPS) of the American Jewish community mark a death.³ He acknowledges that "some may argue — not altogether beyond reason — that the picture I have drawn here of what happens when a Jew dies is already yellow with age, disintegrating at the margins. Its value is therefore at best academic and historical. This may be what once happened when a Jew died, but soon it will not be the case." However, he justifies his approach because there are still some Jews who mourn in the way he describes. It is disappointing, though, that Heilman does not acknowledge that other Jews might observe mourning differently, but rather merely makes occasional and condescending references to Jews who are alienated from tradition and community (he actually calls them "rootless cosmopolitans").

The question we are left with is how this rich *yerushah* (inheritance) of Jewish mourning wisdom relates to Jews who do not start from the point of connection with community and observance. In my work in the nursing home with families grieving for their elderly relatives, I was often saddened by their responses to my inquiries about their plans for *shivah*

and Kaddish. “We’re just going to go to a restaurant after the burial, and that’s it. We don’t want to have to entertain. We don’t feel like having a party.” “We’re just going to sit for a day; we don’t have that many people to visit.” “I don’t belong to a congregation, and wouldn’t have anywhere to say Kaddish.” “I don’t know how to read Hebrew; I can’t say Kaddish. Can’t I just make a contribution and have someone else say it for me?” The largely unaffiliated people with whom I worked had neither the social nor liturgical resources to make tradition’s healing power available to them.

Ways of Responding

It seems to me that there are a few ways of responding to this challenge:

- Adapt the tradition. Sometimes, mourners will find it meaningful to engage in a regular ritual drawn from their relationship with their loved one rather than from Jewish tradition. Rabbi Patricia Karlin-Newman decided that her “Kaddish” for her non-observant mother would be to put into practice what her mother had taught her about knitting. Every day during her year of mourning, she put aside time to knit a blanket for the baby she was expecting, using that time to connect with her mother’s spirit.⁴

- Use bereavement as a teachable moment. Some mourners will find that the year of mourning is an op-

portunity to finally conquer Hebrew, to unlock the mysteries of the daily service or to learn to lead a service. Most likely, they will be shy, and will need an invitation, good teaching and loving encouragement along the way. Ongoing education about rituals of death and bereavement is another way that teaching can be helpful. Members of our communities are more likely to engage in these rituals if they have them in their minds before a moment of crisis.

- Make communal support universally available. Those least likely to have social or community resources need them the most, and may be least able to ask for them. For this reason, it may be helpful to set up systems in our communities that ensure that every mourner will be offered *shivah* meals, a minyan, rides to services and whatever else they might need. As Heilman points out, the structure of *shivah* pierces privacy in ways that may at times feel invasive. It can feel awkward to attend a minyan at the home of someone we barely know in our community — who am I to this mourner, and how will she feel about my presence at this vulnerable moment? Nonetheless, it is this breaching of normal social distance that makes the comfort of the ritual possible for the mourner.

These are just beginning answers to the critically important question raised by Heilman’s work. In describing how powerfully mourning rituals work within a traditional commu-

nity, he unintentionally lays down a challenge for committed liberal Jews: How can we make our tradition's comforting power available to those who lack Jewish knowledge or are cut off from community? We will do well to contend with the challenge of connecting our communities with these rituals in forms that will make them relevant and accessible to them.

1. It is worth noting that Heilman's endeavor closely parallels that of Leon Wieseltier, who reflected on the loss of his father through journal entries and scholarly analysis of tradition in *Kaddish* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), published shortly before *When a Jew Dies*. These books, and the growing contemporary

Jewish literature on death, dying and the afterlife, reflect the aging baby boomers' quest for meaning and guidance as we contend with the deaths of parents and our own ever more evident mortality.

2. In depicting Orthodox practice, Heilman is generally describing the experience of male mourners. He makes note of the increasing numbers of Orthodox women who choose to participate in some way in these rituals, but does not tell us how the others (such as his mother) are affected by their exclusion from most of these rites of mourning.

3. See, for example, his excellent analysis of the contemporary community in *Portrait of American Jews: The Last Half of the Twentieth Century* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press) 1995.

4. Presented at a conference of the Women's Rabbinic Network.

Vintage Perspectives

Subsequent to the events of September 11, 2001, many drew an analogy with the attack on Pearl Harbor. We thought our readers might be interested in what *The Reconstructionist* had to say at that crucial juncture in the history of the United States.

“Our Country at War”
(An Editorial, Vol. VII, No. 17,
printed December 26, 1941/6 Tevet, 5702)

On December 7th, the armed forces of the Japanese Empire launched a brutal and unprincipled assault against the territory of the United States and the lives of its citizens. Within a few days, the totalitarian governments of Italy, Germany and captive lands under their control issued formal declarations of hostilities against us. Thus suddenly, America was precipitated from a state of tenuous peace into a planetary total war.

To our beloved country, *The Reconstructionist* pledges its unswerving loyalty. That this is to be not only a long but a hard war as well was made clear both by the candid words of President Roosevelt and by the news of the initial defeats which we and our allies have suffered in the Pacific. But, however long and hard it may be, we shall be, together with all other Americans, steadfast in our prosecution of it. We shall not rest until the wrong done to others and to us has been rectified, and until our country has made it forever impossible for similar outrages to be visited either upon it or upon any other peace-loving people.

The Reconstructionist, though consecrated to the cause of peace, endorses this war without reservation. For if war it must be, then never has any country's right been more clear. In the Far East our government has striven incessantly for a just peace. It was prepared to make any sacrifice to that end, except the sacrifice of justice to others. It has engaged in patient, protracted negotiations with the government of Japan, exhibiting a vast tolerance and forbearance. It has wanted peace and worked for it. Now it has been treacherously attacked. Neither in reality nor ideally has it any alternative except a vigorous self-defense.

And so far as our enemies across the Atlantic are concerned, declarations of war serve only to give formal status to a struggle which has long been in process. Hitler has been engaged in undeclared war with the United States ever since he came to power. He has sent paid agents to these shores, he has subsidized subversive activities in the land in the effort to destroy our freedom, our power

of action and our system of government. He has made it clear that we were “next” on the list in his program of world conquest. At the very moment when we took cognizance of our peril and adopted our first measures of self-defense through aid to the democracies, hostilities were on in all except name. On both fronts, the Eastern and the European, which are together aspects of one attack against us, we have taken the only possible course. The most sensitive conscience need feel not the slightest scruple over the justice of our cause.

A great lesson has now been taught us — that lesson to which President Franklin Delano Roosevelt referred when, in his first war address to the nation, he said: “There is no such thing as security for any nation — or any individual — in a world ruled by the principles of gangsterism.” We have learned at last the empty futility of isolationism. We know now that mankind is all one, that peace is indivisible, that no one is safe so long as anyone is threatened by force. And from that lesson, so tragically administered to us, has come a great ideal — that, this time, when the struggle is over and we have won the war, we shall win the peace as well. We must understand that America “can never again isolate itself from the rest of humanity.” Out of the blood, sweat and tears of this conflict must emerge a new system of international relations, one in which no political state shall be able to claim for itself unlimited sovereignty, one in which every national government shall be sub-

ordinated to some international authority representative of all mankind, one in which every people, no matter how small and weak, shall be protected by the concerted efforts of all peoples against oppression and brutality.

We are fighting then, as President Roosevelt made clear, not only against an immediate evil but for an ultimate good — the achievement of that era of universal freedom, justice and peace which the prophets of Israel first envisaged and proclaimed to mankind. All of us have grown suspicious of crusades and “holy” wars. But this is a holy war, or rather, it can be made such, if we keep its ideal purpose clearly in view throughout the conflict and after it. If, out of the smoke and flame of battle, the first foundations of God’s kingdom on earth shall arise, our cause will truly prove to have been sacred. This struggle has been forced on us. Its justice is clear. Its holiness depends on us — on our clarity of vision and firmness of moral purpose.

Many sacrifices will be required of us. Each of these and the totality of them are, to quote our truly great President once again, “not sacrifice but privilege.” It is indeed a privilege to endure hardship for our country, its existence and its freedom. It is a duty to defend ourselves against the onslaughts of an arrogant and vicious enemy. And it is a privilege to be permitted to share, no matter at what cost, in the winning of that international society in which at last, every people and every individual shall be able to live out life, free and unafraid.

Subscribe to

The Reconstructionist

Our Spring 2002 issue will feature **Texts in Context:**

- ✧ Studying Jewish Texts vs. Jewish Text Study
- ✧ “Truth” in the Textual Encounter
- ✧ The Texts of Prayer
- ✧ Spiritual Texts as Personal Resources
- ✧ The Triangle of Teacher, Student and Text

and more

Four Issues for \$40

Please make check payable to *The Reconstructionist*
and mail to: *The Reconstructionist/JRF*
7804 Montgomery Avenue, Suite #9
Elkins Park, PA 19027-2649

- Please enter my subscription to *The Reconstructionist* for four (4) issues beginning with _____. I have enclosed a check for \$40 (\$36 for members of JRF affiliates). Back issues are available for \$10/issue.

NAME

ADDRESS

CITY

STATE

ZIP
