

AMERICAN JEWISH IDENTITY CONTRUCTION: CAPTURING YOUTH
INVOLVEMENT

by

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Abstract

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In 1986 the founder and President of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs (JCPA), Daniel Elazar, in his address to the Jewish Theological Seminary titled, *The Changing Realities of the North American Jewish Community*, in consideration of the integration of American Jews, wrote that it “Means more assimilation, more secularization and the acquisition of habits previously considered un-Jewish. This in turn leads to increased intermarriage as a new generation which is culturally less Jewish is at the same time more American and more easily able to find common language with non-Jewish partners of otherwise similar backgrounds”.

The idea that Jewish relationships are threatened by the non-Jewish society is still present and has led to the adoption of techniques within the American Jewish community in attempts to revive cultural connections for the emerging Jewish youth. There are programs currently deployed within the American Jewish community that are combating these threats. What I claim is that since American Jews exist within a broader, non-Jewish community, the emerging youth are those who are most vulnerable and susceptible to the effects of multiculturalism. Thus, by providing youth with programs that are sensitive to both the preservation of a Jewish cultural identity separate from the collective and the necessity of performing an active role in the much larger non-Jewish community, they are securing a future for Jewish cultural identity.

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Chapter 1

Identity Maintenance

“Adaptation of immigrants and their descendants to the dominant society is a multidimensional process. In addition to an identification or psychological component, it includes structural integration and extrinsic and intrinsic cultural elements.”¹ Cultural identity as a point of study brings with it the problem of attributing to it some level of importance. In the face of a secular society in which various cultures coexist, there is an expectation from divisions within the group to maintain a unique identity separate from the collective. If one is to consider the notion that America is a country where the ‘melting-pot’ mentality is best realized, how are we to account for the issues of identity preservation that exist within Jewish communities and congregations in the United States?

The implication is that there are real threats to cultural identity that must be comprehensively addressed and pacified. Clifford Geertz states, “human being is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs”². I use Geertz’s understanding of man’s relation to culture to emphasize the point that ideologies of Jewish culture are ones that are collectively constructed and so are threats as they are perceived by the American Jewish community at large, i.e. assimilation, intermarriage, and growing individualism. Thus cultural insecurities, “rather than being natural facts, are social and cultural productions”³.

In order to grasp why a paper like this should be written the question must be asked, why would Jewish leaders in America attempt to further the gap between their community and secular

¹ Moore, Deborah Dash, and S. Ilan Troen. 2001. *Divergent Jewish cultures: Israel and America*. New Haven: Yale University Press. 277.

² Geertz, Clifford. 1973. *The interpretation of cultures: selected essays*. New York: Basic Books. 5.

³ Weldes, Jutta. 1999. *Cultures of insecurity: states, communities, and the production of danger*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 9.

culture? One can look at demographic data for insight as to the projections of how the emerging youth is expected to neglect their cultural connections. Touching on the effects of assimilation on American Jewish identity, Hasia Diner states that “Jewishness became a matter of minor significance, a mere fact of parentage, perhaps a curiosity, but devoid of personal meaning and making no difference in how they led their lives. Many did not involve themselves in the ongoing struggles over the nature of Jewish life, nor did they search for ways to express their identity.”⁴ This outlines the current condition of American Jewry.

Another example comes from a research article conducted by Antony Gordon and Richard M. Horowitz under the title “Will Your Grandchildren be Jews?”⁵(2003-2005). Their findings indicate that while there is an increase in the number of Jewish religious practitioners within the Orthodox community, the numbers from Reform and Conservative American Jewish communities are dwindling, and the future projections indicate a declining trend. The summation of the findings within the chart suggests, “Based on current intermarriage rates and the average children per family, the chances of young, contemporary Jews having Jewish grandchildren and great-grandchildren, with the exception of the Orthodox are increasingly remote”.⁶

Alan M. Dershowitz, in the introduction to his book *The Vanishing American Jews: In Search of Jewish Identity for the Next Century*, supports Horowitz and Gordon’s findings reinforcing the notion of the fleeting nature of Jewish identity in contemporary America. He states “The good news is that American Jews--as individuals--have never been more secure, more accepted, more affluent, and less victimized by discrimination or anti-Semitism. The bad news is that American Jews--as a people--have never been in greater danger of disappearing through

⁴ Diner, Hasia R. 2004. *The Jews of the United States, 1654 to 2000*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

⁵ <http://www.simpletoremember.com/vitals/will-your-grandchild-be-jewish-chart-graph.htm>

⁶ <http://www.simpletoremember.com/vitals/will-your-grandchild-be-jewish-chart-graph.htm>

assimilation, intermarriage, and low birthrates.”⁷ As Dershowitz outlines, the basis for his book is to identify that the methods in which Jews have approached identity preservation has not worked towards embracing a more adaptive understanding of the world in relation to American Jews. He reinforces the notion that Jewish American identity is disappearing and states “We must take control of our own destiny by changing the nature of Jewish life in fundamental ways. The survival of the Jewish people is too important--to us and to the world at large--to be left in the hands of those ultra-Orthodox rabbis who would rather face Armageddon than change the religious status quo”.⁸

Just as Jews of the past changed the nature of Jewish life in order to adapt to external necessities and to survive the ravages of their external enemies, so, too, must today's Jews change the nature of Jewish life to survive the demographic challenges of intermarriage, assimilation, low birthrates, and the breakdown of neighborhoods and communities.”⁹ This is exactly what I intend to achieve with this paper, to demonstrate that there are steps that are methods currently in place that confront the issues enumerated by Dershowitz.

The ability for future generations of Jewish youth in America to preserve a culturally unique identity depends on the actions of contemporary leaders within the United States and abroad. The reality is that Jewish youth will wake up everyday aware of their status as kids who establish bonds and identities based off of common interests, outlooks and goals. For their personal drives to coincide with active participation in constructing their Jewish identity there

⁷Dershowitz, Alan M. 1997. *The vanishing American Jew: in search of Jewish identity for the next century*. Boston: Little, Brown.

⁸ Dershowitz, Alan M. 1997. *The vanishing American Jew: in search of Jewish identity for the next century*. Boston: Little, Brown.

⁹ Dershowitz, Alan M. 1997. *The vanishing American Jew: in search of Jewish identity for the next century*. Boston: Little, Brown.

must entail incentive, one that displays how a contemporary understanding of how complex relationships between Jews and non-Jews are not conflicting.

There is nothing in the responses to the 'perceived' threats to Jewish identity maintenance that projects the idea of total separation from the collective. Rather, the opposite is encouraged. What is offered by leaders in the American Jewish community is the message that being Jewish does not imply any detachment, but a way in which to better understand ones place amongst the collective. By acquiring cultural knowledge Jewish youth are not only participating in the continuation of their faith but the equally important task of constructing an identity that will enable them to function within broader society.

“Coming on the heels of reports showing that greater New York has fallen from its perch as the "greatest Jewish city in the world" and now ranks second to greater Tel Aviv, and that Israel's total Jewish population is about to eclipse that of the United States, American Judaism's demographic decline cries out for attention.”¹⁰ Attention is exactly what Jewish American leaders are giving this trend in the decline of Jewish practitioners. The youth are the means of achieving this goal, hoping that issues of intermarriage and assimilation will be points for expressing ones Jewishness and thus more likely to continue the identity preservation process.

¹⁰ Sarna, Jonathan D. 2004. American Judaism: a history. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Chapter 2

Contemporary Threats

David Boroff in his 1961 analysis of the current state of Jewish teen-age culture begins by issuing a warning, “Jewish teen-age culture is enormously complex, And one can make observations about it only at great risk”¹¹. While it might be true that complexities exist within the dynamic of American Jewish-teenagers as compared with their non-Jewish peers, I believe that attempts to understand the state of Judaism for teenagers in America was neither risky then nor is it now. It is also possible to discern the stresses and concerns that Jewish leaders in America are successfully confronting. “To most Jewish teen-agers, being Jewish is no longer a burden or an obligation but merely a fact of life generating neither anguish nor exaltation. The sense of unique destiny that characterized Jewish consciousness in the past has virtually disappeared.”¹²

Boroff’s analysis touches on the direct issue that Jewish leaders in America are motivated to confront. But his claim regarding the disinterest of Jewish youth is an unwarranted statement if applied to the current state of Jewish teenagers in America. It may be a result of analysis like his that the current structure of Jewish education and socialization centers on quelling issues of faltering identities. The culturally independent identity that Jewish leaders have expected to maintain requires a particular degree of effort that both solidifies the historical and cultural identity of Judaism as well as understands the appeal and necessity of existing within a broader social system where cultural norms are stressed and challenged.

¹¹ Boroff, David. 1961. "Jewish Teen-Age Culture". *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. 338: 79-90.

¹² Boroff, David. 1961. "Jewish Teen-Age Culture". *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. 338: 79-90.

The way Jews have historically been able to preserve a uniquely Jewish identity in the face of extreme prejudice and injustice has motivated contemporary Jewish leaders to maintain continuity of identity. The modern translation of the threats do not derive from any rampant anti-Semitism; rather has developed more gradually, impacting the way Jews have looked at their culture in comparison to the broader non-Jewish community.

All threats to modern Judaism are found in seeds planted by overarching anxieties concerning assimilation and its potential for leading generations of Jews away from acknowledging the necessity of cultural preservation. As it becomes easier and more likely that individuals within the collective that work together, leisure together, and learn together will develop tighter bonds, those relationships will not be based on some ethno-cultural distinction, but rather through relationships founded on common interests. “The disappearance of group ethnic identity constitutes one of the final stages of the assimilation process, proceeded chronologically by sustained participation of ethnic actors in mainstream society’s civic-political organizations and activities and by their involvement in primary social relations with members of the dominant group(s).”¹³ This is what is directly trying to be understood and approached by Jewish leaders in America, how to confront the ‘primary social relations’ with non-Jews. Their objective has been to determine how to create and solidify relationships amongst Jewish youth.

The reason youth are the target of concern is a result of their state as adolescents who are forming their identities and can still be influenced. “Adolescents are a population that many religious organizations, both congregations and para-church ministries, particularly target in order to exert influence in their lives. Adolescence and young adulthood is also the life stage when

¹³ Moore, Deborah Dash, and S. Ilan Troen. 2001. *Divergent Jewish cultures: Israel and America*. New Haven: Yale University Press. 278.

religious conversion is most likely to take place".¹⁴ We can take the previous statement and attribute to it a quality of competition, in which youth are inundated with propaganda from all sorts of angles which all contribute to their self-composition. This is how I believe Jewish leaders view issues of cultural identity, the mentality is to get to the youth before the rest of the world has the chance to disrupt or disavow their Jewish connection.

Growing Individualism

The means by which a child develops the proper skills in which to function in this world is of great concern to religious leaders in America. What the world offers kids now is the ability to go through life, not as a cookie cutter drone, but as an individual who has a myriad of opportunities to shape his/her own identity depending on how they deal with situations that arise. This is not good for religions that depend on continuing the drone-like standard, maintaining congregants and practitioners that contribute to the faith and culture devoutly.

This is another threat to American Jewish leaders, the idea that the youth are emerging more and more as their own people with their own identities developing at different paces as a result of the multi-cultural and multi-ethnic environment in which they live. Since youth begin to absorb the world around them from such a young age, there is a need to begin early the process of grounding children in the culture. This is accomplished by establishing bonds between each other at a young age, making them culturally dependent upon their Jewish peers.

The threat of individualism is fully understood when considering the family dynamic, the aspect that Judaism in America depends on most. The family unit is independent yet expected to function as part of a larger culturally distinct group, comprised of other families performing the same function of continuing traditions and promoting cultural continuity. If the family unit does

¹⁴ Smith, Christian, Melinda Lundquist Denton, Robert Faris, and Mark Regnerus. 2002. "Mapping American Adolescent Religious Participation". *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*. 41 (4): 597-612.

not subscribe to the same standards as other families there is a break in their connection with the group. If the parents do not acknowledge the necessity to attend religious school, social events or Shabbat and high-holiday services than there is no ability or incentive to be part of the group for children.

By establishing programs that appeal to the contemporary Jewish youth in America there is an expressed sentiment that preserving a shared identity is attainable. There is reason to believe that many Jewish youth will continue to develop as individuals in the non-Jewish, secular world while maintaining a Jewish identity closely bound in a compulsory manner so that it is the main designator of their daily identity construction.

Proximity

Where one lives is more of an indicator of social and economic status rather than any cultural or religious affiliation. Of course there are groups that segregate themselves to certain areas that they feel comfortable. These are groups in which mobility is not of great concern. What is of concern is preservation of old ways, trying to avoid immersing oneself in distractions that corrupt cultural traditions. Historically, Jews have either by their own hand or that of others, constructed their lives centered around a temple or synagogue as was in the case of the shtetles in Europe and the ghettos in cities, i.e. New York, Chicago, Cincinnati and Philadelphia. As Jewish immigrants became more focused on social mobility, the need to segregate oneself to a particular community was still present, but opportunities that lay elsewhere became more appealing and necessary to follow. It is not that Jews abandoned their roots in their pursuit of a better life; rather they took cultural traditions with them and adapted them to their new environments.

Ever since that time there has been an issue of reconciliation concerning what impact living outside the controlled environment has had in preserving a unique identity. The Orthodox Jewish community is indicative of a group that still persists in maintaining a close relationship within the group. They send their children to all Jewish schools and devoutly practice their faith

with the intention of providing their children with the qualities that are necessary in becoming just like them. It is not that it is a repressive belief structure; it just requires more from their practitioners than the Conservative or Reform movements.

“For the Orthodox, who constituted about 7 to 9 percent of the American Jewish population by the end of the twentieth century, details of observance became increasingly more significant and unswerving. They built their lives not only on all-Jewish institutions but on all-Orthodox ones. As they saw it, intermarriage had become a burden carried by those Jews who had chosen to live outside the intricate system of strict halakic observance.”¹⁵

In contrast to the Orthodox, many conservative and reform Jews live in an integrated setting, with their kids attending public or private schools that are not distinctly affiliated with Judaism. It is actually more likely than if it is a private school it is has a Christian based philosophy.

As a result of this, children of Jewish parents are exposed to other kids who are in most cases not Jewish and relatively ignorant of Jewish cultural norms. This is where it becomes easier for the youth to become a part of the non-Jewish community in order to not appear different or separate. This is counter to what religion wants; its intention is to create distinctions between people. When this does not fit in with how the youth translate their world it becomes a point of contention for religious leaders particularly on how to confront youths who feel more compelled to remain secular.

Confronting Threats

We are not talking about how American Jewish leaders confronted Anti-Semitism because that is an aspect that Jews have understood as a part of every society they enter or attempt to excel within. Rather focus is on the American Jewish community, specifically the attitudes toward their own people, what aspects they put emphasis on for maintaining bonds. Zionism, for

¹⁵ Diner, Hasia R. 2004. *The Jews of the United States, 1654 to 2000*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

example, has been a major aspect of Jewish Identity in America. What Zionism offers is a way for American Jews to connect themselves with other Jews who feel that identity preservation is dependent upon the construction and maintenance of a Jewish 'homeland'.

It is not to imply that Jewish leaders in America do not have that same objective, because they do, and, as we will see they are working with other international Jewish groups ensuring that the Israel/Jewish connection is maintained. What is different is the world in which they attempt to project that same message. Zionism is not a central aspect that many of the American Jewish youth seriously consider as an impacting force in their lives. As growing individualism leads youth to a more open, accepting and progressive community, we see a decline in the Zionist movement as having an impact on the youth in their preservation of a uniquely Jewish identity in America.

What previous Jewish leaders in America have viewed as threats is similar to what are prevalent today, assimilation and secularization. The methods in which they were approached are different than they are now. There has always been an attempt to live side by side with the non-Jewish community in ways that do not threaten their Jewishness. What must be understood is that the immigrant population that constituted the American Jewish population had their own traditions and practices that did not translate to all Jews from other regions of the world. The 'ghettoization' effect, where Jews first remained segregated in their own communities, never straying too far from the synagogue and their familial connection was diminishing. The post World War Two environment ushered in a new time period where more Jews spread out and constructed temples within non-Jewish areas, bringing with them their cultural traditions.

What developed before this time period was an emphasis on maintaining a Jewish family as the best way of confronting issues of continuity. Focus was placed on marrying other Jews within the community providing an absence of outside influence. We must not underestimate what is typically phrased as 'Jewish guilt'. The idea of betrayal and attack against a historical identity

that has been taught and propagated as the most important aspect of life plays a major role in why American Jews were and sometimes are still expected to marry within their faith.

This is not the situation that modern American Judaism is functioning within; rather for several generations Jews in America have been intermarrying at higher and higher rates. This is not to imply that something is lost in their Jewish connection or the connection that their children are able to construct and maintain. It just means that what American Jewish leaders have previously depended on is no longer a dependable point of focus. Zionism is still present, but as I stated, is not the main focus or point of concern of the youth today. This is a result of a political and social awareness that is prevalent, a move past the narrow approach taken before, the dynamics are much greater. Ghettoization is only something that is present within the orthodox communities, which is not the point of focus of this paper. Their connection is relatively the same; it is the Conservative and Reform communities in America that spread outward and absorbed the culture of the society around them.

Jewish Guilt & Intermarriage

Since many of the Jewish youth in question are the products of interfaith marriage, their tendency is not to emphasize the importance of marrying within the faith. The world is not seen as black and white as it once was. It is not a matter of us against them, and has become a mute point in the preservation of Jewish identity in America. Growing individualism and the presence of youth that choose to construct their own identity is putting pressure on the effectiveness of 'Jewish Guilt'.

As obligation becomes redefined we see that what contemporary youth feel obligated to do not align with what is propagated by archaic notions of tradition. These traditions may in effect deter youth from participation in Jewish activities. This is why contemporary Jewish leaders in America do not turn to these as the central means of confronting the relevant concerns of today. Today's Jewish youth community needs to feel a social relevance to their identity, one they can

grasp and manage themselves, one where they are able to maintain a secular identity all while preserving the Jewish cultural connections. This is why so much emphasis is currently designated to programs that do just that, they bring Jews together and focus on a shared identity, one that can be maintained within the broader non-Jewish community.

Techniques In Effect

There are tools and programs currently deployed by Jewish leaders in America to confront issues of identity maintenance and continuity. They come in three forms all of which depend on each other for their mission to be accomplished. The importance of education has always been a paramount focus for Jews in America. More so is how Jewish youth are educated in such a way as to reinforce a superficial ancestral connection by siphoning bits of biblical relevance and applying it to their identity in the contemporary world. Coupled with education are social programs whose chief concern is creating an environment where youth are directed to join youth groups and social programs furthering their connection with other Jews in their communities. This clearly crosses paths with education programs as the youth are expected to remain connected to those within their congregations that are of a similar age and thus obtain similar interests.

The idea is to provide incentive to remain within the boundaries of the culture by maintaining Jewish relationships. These relationships within the Jewish community are valued higher than acquaintances made in secular society. These social programs provide space for Jewish youth in America to solidify their position as adolescents who can take ownership of their position in their culture by actively pursuing socio-cultural events. Building off the former two points of focus, education and social, immersion programs that remove the youth from their community in turn for an invaluable experience of becoming fully engrossed in a more Jewish environment. Typically this means an extended trip to Israel or other places where Jewish identity is greatly present in society. The education process introduces Jewish youth in America to their intended identity as it is acceptably constructed. By creating a common identity amongst youths,

social organizations such as youth groups become an eventuality in which Jewish peers become closer as friends as they go through the same processes, for example, bar/bat-mitzvah, confirmation and eventually fraternities and sororities.

It is from the reinforcement of these social relationships that Jewish congregations in America support immersion programs. It is from here that individual experiences are absorbed into the Jewish community, who depend upon youth involvement to continue providing an environment conducive to maintaining a uniquely Jewish identity in America.

Chapter 3

Education

Education has been a point of focus for Jewish families for centuries, so it is of no surprise that the continuance of this sentiment is present in contemporary Jewish homes and congregations in America today. Speaking on Jewish education in 1890 is Alice Lucas, a Jewish woman who was confronted with the same issues that Jewish educators in America are currently faced with: how to reconcile the preservation of traditional texts and religious observations while blending seamlessly into the secular society around her. Her summation below can be the assumed position of all Jews who place great focus on cultural identity:

“For those of us who wish our children to grow up Jewish by faith and by name, the subject of religious education must always be one of deep and serious responsibility. We want our children to be not merely well acquainted with the tenets and observances of Judaism; we want them also to hold the former and practice the latter, more than this, we desire them to do so willingly and intelligently, when they shall have grown to manhood and womanhood. We wish them to remain true to the religion of their fathers, not form filial piety, still less from habit or superstition, but from a sincere and enlightened attachment to their religion, an attachment which we earnestly hope may enable them to say through life, in the words of the late Dr. Frankl, “Ich bin so gltickleck in meinem Judenthum” (I am so happy in my Judaism)”¹⁶.

In her article Lucas continues to outline three concerns in imparting a Jewish education to children in her contemporary environment. First is what she defines as the:

“All pervading spirit of theological and biblical criticism, secondly, the tendency of the age to laxity and indifference to the ceremonial part of religion, and thirdly, among the Jews themselves, the ever-increasing difficulty of holding the middle course between those who for various reasons desire to throw down all barriers that separate them from the Gentile world and those who endeavor not only to keep up those barriers in their entirety, but even to fill up the breaches which time and altered

¹⁶ Lucas, Alice. 1890. "Jewish Religious Education". *The Jewish Quarterly Review*. 2 (3): 270-290. 270.

circumstances have made.”¹⁷

It appears that the trend Boroff spoke of is frozen in time. The threat of what can be termed ‘excessive assimilation’ is presented as a negative aspect of Jewish leaders attempts to impart the necessity of maintaining a uniquely Jewish identity. Education is the most relevant and accessible method of exposing Jewish youth to their culture.

The previous focus for many religious leaders has been to regurgitate biblical stories that become such common knowledge that it loses any real insight into what the culture represents or any relevancy to the world today. For those revelations, rabbis and religious leaders have depended on extra-biblical sources like the Midrash and Talmudic writings. There is nothing wrong with these sources as a point of study, but when you are trying to translate the importance of a distinctly different cultural identity to children, the methods in which they are relayed to them must be put into a context they can grasp. I place Educational programs within the range of youth between the ages of 4 and 18 because this is when direct cultural exposure is greatest, and it also is the setting of where many of the long-term social bonds are established.

What the educational programs do first and foremost is provide Jewish American youth with the background of a shared history, emphasizing the uniqueness of the Jewish story in relation to the other cultural groups. This is the connection that is most easily established because of all of the emphasis placed on biblical stories. This introduces Hebrew to the kids in a way that makes them feel part of a shared unique identity.

Hebrew is a means to an end in that sense, as the youth are encouraged to attend services, where they will see their friends and have time to socialize, they are exposed to the tropes and traditions that become second nature. The problem is that once it becomes memorized the value is

¹⁷ Lucas, Alice. 1890. "Jewish Religious Education". *The Jewish Quarterly Review*. 2 (3): 270-290. 273.

lost unless emphasized by another source. This is why Hebrew is taught to children beginning from a young age, the expectation being that one will learn and want to continue pursuing the language through cultural bonds. So, if we consider pre-school through seventh grade religious school, this is where emphasis is placed on memorizing the biblical stories and learning the proper amount of Hebrew to get one through the Bar/Bat-Mitzvah stage.

It is after this period that emphasis transitions from a focus on 'stories' to an importance placed on interpretation. This is a more dialogue based, philosophical structure that enables the youth to ask relevant questions allowing educators to use Jewish sources to translate their issues and concerns with Jewish commentary, calling upon Talmudic and Midrash sources. The reason and explanation of the emergence of this phase of Jewish study is a sentiment represented by Harold S. Himmelfarb in his 1977 article 'Comparing the Impact of Jewish and Catholic Schools'¹⁸. He states that "The ineffectiveness of schools as people-changing institutions is probably not due to factors inherent in the process of schooling, but rather to the lack of characteristics which would maximize change. That is, schools are not ineffective in producing changes because they cannot be effective, but rather because they are not organized to be effective".¹⁹ This is where contemporary Jewish leaders are excelling; ensuring that the educational model they function under is indeed effective. The uses of theoretical methods in Conservative and Reform synagogues depend upon the promotion of the independent practitioner finding his own path for understanding why the preservation of Judaism is so crucial. This more

¹⁸ The Interaction Effects of Parents, Spouse and Schooling: Comparing the Impact of Jewish and Catholic Schools □ Author(s): Harold S. Himmelfarb □ Reviewed work(s): Source: The Sociological Quarterly, Vol. 18, No. 4, Thematic Issue on Race Ethnicity (Autumn, 1977), pp. 464-477 □ Published by: Blackwell Publishing on behalf of the Midwest Sociological Society

¹⁹ Himmelfarb, Harold S. 1977. "The Interaction Effects of Parents, Spouse and Schooling: Comparing the Impact of Jewish and Catholic Schools*". The Sociological Quarterly. 18 (4): 464-477. 468.

exploratory phase in the education process is where their knowledge of biblical accounts become less relevant as actual history in turn for a way of interpreting cultural distinctions, reinforcing why it is important to maintain a continuity of thought that has lasted for so long.

Another major drawing point for the youth is also the understanding that they can contribute to the educational dialogue. There is no sense in Judaism that there is an end to what can be drawn and interpreted from biblical and extra-biblical sources. The idea in Judaism is that it is through questioning that one learns more. This is a point where religious teachers try to emphasize and promote for their students, which is not just follow blind dogma, but to establish their own understanding of the texts, relating it to their own experiences ensuring a connection that may be stronger than one built off of a more authoritarian perspective.

This is also the time where kids establish bonds with friends and classmates separate from their non-Jewish experience. The relationships they develop are fed by years of growing up together in a community that provides them with the means to form and maintain bonds. Judaism as a religion places great emphasis on the preservation of formal traditions and observance of holidays, the ability to harness and emphasize those connections are dependent upon the use of contemporary methods.

Day Schools

One of the most effective methods of relaying culture to Jewish youth in America is the presence of the Day School, which provides an environment outside of the synagogue and home for Jewish education. Day School's enable parents to play an active role in their child's Jewish identity construction. Initially what Day Schools provided was an alternative to the public school system. Dependence on an environment conducive to both public and cultural education requires active participation on behalf of parents. The role parent's play in the identity forming process is considerable and it is within environments like the Day School that they can both influence the nature of the curriculum taught and provide a connection with their children that reinforces a sense

of Jewishness. “For many of these parents the school serves as a type of Jewish haven, one of the only Jewish institutions where they feel completely at liberty to be themselves.”²⁰

Since it is not the synagogue and since Day Schools do not function under some dogmatic law, parents like their children are participating in the maintenance of Jewish identity in the way that fits best for them. An example of this sentiment can be found in Pomson and Schnoor’s *Back to School: Jewish Day Schools in the Lives of Adult Jews*²¹. Their analysis includes case studies of specific Jewish Day Schools focusing on the interactions amongst parents of Jewish youth. “Without doubt, the most common impulse behind parental involvement is parents’ desire to have influence over their own children’s learning and development. This, it seems, is the corollary of parents’ deliberately selecting the school, often after a lengthy period of consideration and comparison.”²² What the authors provide is an example of Jewish leaders and parents working together in a comprehensive way, incorporating the best and most practical methods at their disposal. They provide an environment of safety and security where their Jewish children can feel a part of a collective and as a part of a unique culture whose preservation should be considered necessity.

The inherent need to feel a part of the collective, to have ones identity affirmed by others within the group, is no different for parents than for their children. The parents’ security in their identity transfers to their children and environments primed for anxiety and conflict will no longer impede the educational aspects of Judaism. “For one parent, the Jewish partner in an interfaith marriage, it was important to give her child and herself a Jewish connection... the school offers

²⁰ Pomson, Alex, and Randal F. Schnoor. 2008. *Back to school Jewish day school in the lives of adult Jews*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.

²¹ Pomson, Alex, and Randal F. Schnoor. 2008. *Back to school Jewish day school in the lives of adult Jews*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.

²² Pomson, Alex, and Randal F. Schnoor. 2008. *Back to school Jewish day school in the lives of adult Jews*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.

parents and their children what Merz and Furman call communities of kinship, neighborhood, and mind. The school “fits” with many significant aspects of who they are.”²³

Jewish education becomes an identifiable feature of the children early on, acting as a designator for their identity construction process. It makes it easier for Jews to meet other Jews knowing that there is a shared history and shared experience that is a point of connection and relation. The bonds established in the social arena are rooted in this historically shared connection. For Jewish leaders this is the aspect that must always be considered to be in a state of transition. As old ‘threats’ continue to reveal themselves in contemporary society, the evolution of the Jewish educational system must transition as well, to not appear dated or irrelevant to the emerging youth. Outside of yeshivas the only places that assist in Jewish education come from Jewish Community Centers and the synagogues and temples themselves.

An example of an education program that assists Jewish congregations throughout the United States come from a program named *The Jewish Education Project*. Their mission statement as represented on their website states “The Jewish Education Project helps congregations create new models of learning to enhance children’s and families’ ability to construct meaningful and purposeful lives rooted in Jewish practice and community.”²⁴ This program gathers resources from several Jewish education outlets and formulates a concept that is separated by age groups instituting what they call “high-impact” education.

The idea is to confront the state of modern American Jewry from a contemporary perspective, placing focus as much on cultural and historical bonds as on community and family cohesion. Leading educational-resource providers like Hazon, StorahTelling, Teva Learning Center, Facing History, Explora-Torah, Avodah Arts, and Moving Traditions. These programs

²³ Pomson, Alex, and Randal F. Schnoor. 2008. *Back to school Jewish day school in the lives of adult Jews*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.

²⁴ <http://www.thejewisheducationproject.org/Conglearning>

function as networks, providing congregations across the United States with the ability to add and contribute to the growing dialogue of how to confront the future of Jewish education in America.

The *Jewish Education Project* is but one of many programs that have taken on the task of restructuring conventional methods for a more contemporary approach. The way the *Jewish Education Project* works is in partnership with congregations that employ the methods they establish. Their focus is towards building and maintaining Jewish connections through events and programs that appeal to all age groups. The social nature of their programs enable parents to take an active role in the construction of their child's Jewish identity, providing them with methods and materials to accomplish that goal. This is a great example of how a comprehensive approach that takes into consideration the contemporary society around them.

To relay the structure of how progressive religious school focuses its studies per age group I will use the methods of *Kol Hadash*, a humanist congregation. The main focus of this congregation concerning their methods of educating is as follows:

“Kol Hadash Humanistic Congregation celebrates Humanistic Judaism, honoring Jewish culture and tradition while empowering independent, human-centered choices. We celebrate being Jewish through our human-focused philosophy of life. Human beings have the intelligence and wisdom to determine the purpose and course of their lives. Kol Hadash empowers its members to make independent choices, to live lives of integrity, and to create positive change in the world. We believe in the fundamental importance of individual responsibility to shape lives of significance and dignity. If you live a secular lifestyle, Humanistic Judaism helps you live Jewish identity with philosophic consistency. Imagine the satisfaction of truly saying what you believe and believing what you say, celebrating your personal beliefs and your Judaism in one voice--that's Humanistic Judaism and Kol Hadash”²⁵

I use *Kol Hadash* as the standard because their approach is one that is replacing the old paradigm of reliance on religious dogma for religious affirmation and identity confirmation. *Kol Hadash's* approach is more relevant to the way in which society is

²⁵ http://www.kolhadash.com/about_judaism/index.shtml

naturally progressing and is not forced to confront issues that other programs might when going against the grain of social progression.

Chapter 4

Socialization

One of the methods Jewish leaders capitalize on in the United States is focusing on social connections. Like in the Jewish community, Christian groups also focus on social relationships to maintain their bonds, separate from a collective who might threaten their ideology. As citizens of a secular environment it is understood that people will congregate with those like-minded and place themselves into groups that have different ways and methods of constructing a unique identity. For the American Jewish youth, who are always in a minority position, the establishment of social bonds becomes of great importance for their identity preservation. The effect on the Jewish youth as they see themselves as the 'other' in comparison to how groups identify themselves has a major effect.

There is an expressed appeal to join with non-Jewish friends to camps or weekly programs, not because of any transition in Jewish identity, but because it is where social connections are constructed. This can be seen as a threat in itself, the idea that there is an alternative to a Jewish lifestyle that outwardly enforces and propagates the message of inclusion and social cohesion. There may be a percentage of youth that search for this connection and find it more easily available within the non-Jewish environment. This is why focus has been put now more than ever on establishing and maintaining Jewish social bonds.

Jewish youth groups, local, regional and national groups all contribute to the identity construction of Jewish youth in America. From the ages of twelve and thirteen, post bar/bat mitzvah, through high school and college, Jewish youth began the transition to a stage where it is not so easy to remain rooted to the Jewish community. When the effects of pop-culture, extra-curricular activities and other outside influences are constantly present, incentive is lost on why they should maintain interested in working towards remaining connected to a group outside the collective. The structure of youth organizations are as follows: First, there are national and semi-

international groups that act as the main source of how all the regional and local groups stay connected. Groups such as these include BBYO (B'nai Brith Youth Organization), NFTY (National Federation of Temple Youth), which function based on fraternity systems allocating responsibilities to the members, imparting a sense of obligation to their Jewish peers. Second, these national groups are divided into highly organized regional groups who then hold conventions and other programs that enable youth to establish ownership and influence. Third are local Jewish groups found within each community, containing the same intention of reinforcing the importance of maintaining their Jewish identity through social relationships.

These local groups are where unit participation and contribution are greatly stressed. Weekly meetings combined with community outreach programs insist on Jewish youth to contribute to their community with Jewish ideals and values as the catalyst for their obligation. As is indicated in the mission statements of the major Jewish youth organizations in the United States, their main objective is to contribute to the revitalization of Jewish teens and ensuring that they continue to pursue a Jewish identity that is congruent with the non-Jewish community around them.²⁶

There are groups that consist of sororities and fraternities, making it easier to transition into one after high school. One of the oldest Jewish fraternities in America, *Alpha Epsilon Pi*, was modeled after the Greek system although incorporating Jewish ethics and ideals, responding to prejudice and anti-Semitism on college campuses in the early 20th century.²⁷ Outlined in Alpha Epsilon Phi's mission statement:

“Alpha Epsilon Pi develops leadership for the future of the American Jewish community. Tomorrow's Jewish leaders are in our chapters today. These are the young men who must be counted upon to support Jewish causes and to prepare to be one of tomorrow's Jewish leaders, so that they may aid themselves, their family, their community, and their people. Those students

²⁶ <http://bbyo.org/about/mission/>

²⁷ <http://www.aepi.org/?page=MissionStatement>

who enter the mainstream of non-Jewish life on the campus are far more likely to assimilate and to forsake their heritage. Working together with the Foundation for Jewish Campus Life/International Hillel, Alpha Epsilon Pi can play a vital role in helping reverse the growing trend among our young people to abandon Judaism at this critical time.”²⁸

From this we can see a direct correlation between anxieties of contemporary and previous Jewish leaders in America as they attempted to confront issues they perceived as projections of the secular world on Jewish cultural identity. Valid or not, the threats expressed are considered relevant and as indicated by national Jewish youth organizations like BBYO, Aleph Zadik Aleph and Alpha Epsilon Pi, are ensuring that an environment primed for Jewish advancement and identity security is attainable.

The sheer structure of these youth groups gives ownership to how they intend to preserve their Jewish connection. In most of these groups positions are voted on to relay the message that they are directly responsible for the success of their group. The activities they take part in range from community volunteer work to putting on services for the members of their congregation, sponsoring lunches and dinners to raise money for Jewish and non-Jewish charities. There is also the social aspect that is always present, it is not all work, and it still must remain appealing to teenagers. There are retreats, dances and conventions that bring Jewish youth from across American and the world together.

Another aspect to the socialization amongst Jewish youth crosses over into the realm of immersion. Many families will sponsor children from other Jewish communities, bringing them into their homes providing them with the opportunity to experience a youth environment that promotes Jewishness. These groups are not solely driven by youth, adults from within the Jewish community make sure the course of the group remains focused on always keeping the Jewish connection present in every aspect of their organization. The names of the groups themselves embody a certain identity that impacts how youth view themselves in relation to other groups.

²⁸ <http://www.aepi.org/?page=MissionStatement>

Names might have a biblical connotation or may represent a prominent Jewish leader in their community, all of which emphasize a Jewish connotation. There is a superficial incentive for American Jewish youth to join these groups and participate in these programs just based off of the adolescent need to socialize.

Pop-culture is always present in these organizations as it would be difficult to maintain steady attendance if there was no crossover of interests between the non-Jewish and Jewish social spheres. Another indirect result of the social aspect to these youth groups is that they develop relationships that translate beyond the group into secular society. These personal relationships are another aspect that Jewish leaders in America depend on developing. Ideally, youth in a Jewish environment, under a Jewish context will find themselves in the position that they want be Jewish because it is a part of their identity that they want to remain intact. They become dependent upon each other, as youth do, in the process of identifying themselves.

Establishing long-term community relations that influence what colleges they go to, what Jewish organizations they join, and ultimately what congregations they will attend is a point of focus for American Jewish leaders. As has been indicated, American Jewish youth are not unlike the masses of youth who feel the social pressures of adolescence. Without a doubt the importance placed on establishing social connections between Jews is not a new phenomenon in Jewish culture. Life for generations of Jews had been centered on the synagogue and temple environment, emphasizing the ritualistic attributes of the culture. In the contemporary world environment, especially on the colligate level; cultural traditions are capable of preservation.

Depending on the group in question emphasis may be out on continuing religious observances but is mostly used as a place that exists so that Jewish youth do not lose their Jewish connection. In whatever fashion it becomes re-vamped and amended to fit in with societal structures, Jewish groups and organizations capitalize on the idea that members join with the intention of playing an active role in the continuity of their Jewishness. The chances that children

of members of Jewish fraternities and sororities will also join the same or similar group is heightened as a result of the fact that the emerging youth have a connection already established. Like most aspects of Jewish culture, there develops a sense of obligation and necessity to remain connected to family and community, which is what this does. The emerging youth can only develop deep Jewish roots if they get the appropriate support and guidance from their families as well as support from members of their community.

Chapter 5

Immersion

The emphasis Jewish educators and leaders place on acquiring cultural knowledge and establishing Jewish bonds is not lost on functioning within the American system. There is also the unavoidable aspect to Jewish identity, the notion of a Jewish homeland. American Jews are so far removed from the daily lives of Israelis yet they have the tendency to align themselves with their political and social motivations.

This is an aspect that is overlooked as the identity construction and preservation process for Jews has been so heavily dependent on the Jewish/Israel connection. As the emerging Jewish youth in American began to develop their own perspective and understanding of the dynamics between their nation of origin and Israel, they likewise feel and are taught that Israel contributes directly to who they are and how they are viewed by members of the more secular, non-Jewish environment. "Increasingly, American Jews relate to Israel directly, by advocating their own political views, funding favored causes, visiting frequently or living there part time, consuming Israeli news and entertainment, and expressing a distinctively "realistic" rather than idealistic orientation toward the Jewish state..."²⁹ The sheer access to information concerning the nation state of Israel as it exists as a political entity influences how Jewish youth in America and their parents speak about and feel towards their 'ancestral' homeland.

The reason for emphasis to be placed on Israel immersion trips is that there is an aspect to being Jewish that cannot be realized in the United States. In a country where Jews are never in the majority, Israel offers itself as a place where American Jewish youth can travel with other Jews from different regions in order to feel what it is like to feel 'completely' Jewish, free from

²⁹ Sasson, Theodore. 2010. "Mass Mobilization to Direct Engagement: American Jews' Changing Relationship to Israel". *Israel Studies*. 15 (2): 173-195. 173.

overarching paradigms that exist within the U.S., where separation between groups translate to cultural survival.

Speaking on the importance the State of Israel plays on Jewish identity, Dr. Deborah Moore states, “While the relationship between collective memory and place continues to be important to the construction of Jewish identity, archetypal images of exile and return are being reconsidered.”³⁰ This is not to imply that the importance of Israel as a Jewish identifier is waning, rather Jews in the U.S. are no longer dependent upon a connection that demands living in Israel to feel like a ‘complete’ Jew. The connection is important and emphasized but for the diasporic Jewish leader it is much more pressing to figure out how to maintain that connection for the emerging youth when ‘aliya’ (to return to Israel) is an option but not the accepted norm.

The place that Israel holds for contemporary American Jews is not rooted in the desire to make it a permanent residence. Moore states in her analysis of the relationships between American Jews in Israel, “Rather than figuring as the source of a collective identity tied essentially to the land, ‘homeland’ signifies first the familiar comforts and potential opportunities in America, and only then, and more ambiguously, a fixed and particular place within that cultural construct”.³¹

While there is a certain amount of flux between each denomination of Jews, Israel is the tangible connection to the culture that is deeply entrenched in a history that has elevated the region of Israel in almost mythological fashion. For Jews it is a living history where the survival of a Jewish identity is dependent upon the survival of a Jewish Israel.

Starting around the age of 15, there are immersion Israel trips that offer a multitude of experiences, ranging from hiking excursions to floating in the Dead Sea, all with the intent of establishing intimate Jewish connections. There is a direct appeal to American youth to want to

³⁰ Moore, Deborah Dash, and S. Ilan Troen. 2001. *Divergent Jewish cultures: Israel and America*. New Haven: Yale University Press. 239.

³¹ Moore, Deborah Dash, and S. Ilan Troen. 2001. *Divergent Jewish cultures: Israel and America*. New Haven: Yale University Press. 240.

travel to Israel; the connection that is expected to develop is an aspect of their identity that has always been present within their Jewish education and socialization process.

Whether it is the impact of biblical stories or just the sheer exposure to the ability to feel what it is like to 'be' Jewish fully, the appeal is there and is enough to inspire a want to connect with other Jews. If one is fortunate enough, an American youth's first experience of Israel will come during the bar/bat mitzvah stage, but even then they are limited in what they experience. It is not until the ages of fifteen and sixteen that real opportunities begin to emerge as a means of acquiring an identity outside of your parents influence.

For many the first opportunity for immersion comes from a program called the *March of the Living*.

“The March of the Living is an international, educational program that brings Jewish teens from all over the world to Poland on Yom Hashoah, Holocaust Memorial Day, to march from Auschwitz to Birkenau, the largest concentration camp complex built during World War II, and then to Israel to observe Yom HaZikaron, Israel Memorial Day, and Yom Ha'Atzmaut, Israel Independence Day. The goal of the March of the Living is for these young people to learn the lessons of the Holocaust and to lead the Jewish people into the future vowing Never Again.”³²

This program is directed towards youth who are at the point in their Jewish education that they are viewed by the American Jewish community to be prepared to experience for themselves the impact of an immersion trip. This trip is unique in that its focus is on demonstrating the hardships and anti-Semitism that Jews have historically had to endure with the intention of imparting the importance of the continuity of a uniquely Jewish state. Leaders of these types of programs begin with very structured and outlined trips to Europe where youth visit old and established Jewish communities, reinforcing what they have learned in Hebrew school, that Jews have been consistently viewed as separate from the collective.

³² <http://www.motl.org/>

Next the youth are taken to visit concentration camps, the reason for which needs little explanation. The intention is to show that what Jews were subjected to indicates a right to a Jewish homeland that is free from ethno-cultural persecution, once again emphasizing the uniqueness of the shared connection. The end of trips like this end in Israel where, after seeing and experiencing the process of visiting the concentration camps and bonding over the lives lost and identities shattered, a renewal and relief is felt. The youth embrace Israel as a necessary connection and as an identifier for what it means to be Jewish in a society that is predominantly non-Jewish.

The effect of this is two fold, first, by taking this route there is a direct correlation made for the necessity of Israel's existence, the flip-side to that is that many of the youth bring back with them an anxiety of a resurgence of anti-Semitism, viewing themselves as Jewish Americans rather than American Jews. This is not the overall intention of Jewish leaders within the Reform, Conservative or even Chassidic movements, to propagate a message of fear. The focus is, yes, cultural identity preservation, but not at the cost of separating oneself even more from the collective mindset.

Once again Zionism is not the only perspective Jewish youth are exposed to. Zionist notions of Israel differ greatly from what is represented in most contemporary Reform and Conservative Jewish communities. The physical land itself is considered to be a national homeland, identifying Israel as not just their cultural 'home' but in the most literal sense, as a place of refuge³³. The social aspect of the culture is emphasized not to separate from the collective but to be able to maintain their Jewishness within the boundaries of the United States. The previously mentioned program is only one of many options Jewish youth in America have in connecting with the land of Israel. Another is through sponsored programs such as *Birthright Israel*.

³³ Moore, Deborah Dash, and S. Ilan Troen. 2001. *Divergent Jewish cultures: Israel and America*. New Haven: Yale University Press. 240.

Birthright Israel is a program that sponsors Jewish youth between the ages of 18 and 26 to travel to Israel for an immersion experience, hoping that they will acquire a new and revived sense of being Jewish. *Birthright* is an example of a functioning international organization that sponsors youth from the U.S. for a uniquely structured immersion trip. Like any of these organizations mentioned, *Birthright Israel's* mission statement clarifies the necessity of their existence:

“Taglit-Birthright Israel provides the gift of first time, peer group, educational trips to Israel for Jewish young adults ages 18 to 26. Taglit-Birthright Israel's founders created this program to send thousands of young Jewish adults from all over the world to Israel as a gift in order to diminish the growing division between Israel and Jewish communities around the world; to strengthen the sense of solidarity among world Jewry; and to strengthen participants' personal Jewish identity and connection to the Jewish people.³⁴

Their mission statement clearly falls in line with the concerns and anxieties that are expressed by Jewish leaders in their attempts to secure a future for the Jewish culture in America. Even after the trip is complete there are reunions and conventions that reunite groups together reestablishing those bonds, drawing upon those past memories to reemphasize the connection between the individuals to each other as Jews and each ones individual relationship with Israel.

As mentioned before, if one is to consider assimilation and individualism as a threat to Jewish identity in America, Jewish leaders must understand the necessity to embrace individuals who are actively choosing to explore a Jewish identity, however the initial connection is established. The way these programs work is through a combination of social and cultural activities lasting anywhere from a week to a month. Friendships are established that continue when they are back in the states by means of sponsored reunions and opportunities to return as guides. These programs also work closely with other established programs in Israel that may offer

³⁴ http://www.birthrightisrael.com/site/PageServer?pagename=about_main

extended opportunities through kibbutzim, yeshivas or ulpanim, thus adding more substance to their Jewish identity.

Granted, this is not representative of every participant, there is however a great return number whom, as a result of their experiences, become advocates for future functions. “The number of American Jewish teens and young adults visiting Israel has surged, but most are going with private tour companies under the auspices of Birthright Israel rather than programs of the North American denominations.”³⁵ This is not the only intended consequence as will become apparent. The way in which the returning youth is treated is indicative of how emphatic the importance of Israel is to the American Jewish community. There is a tradition amongst non-Israeli Jews that has developed, sending youth in their stead to establish a connection for them with the land.

Morsels of paper with prayers written on them are entrusted to travelers with the expectation that he or she will place those prayers in the western wall of the holy temple in Jerusalem. So, not only is there an emphasis placed on the experience of the youth but what they can in return do for their community. By attributing them with some ownership over their experience, the youth come back to their ‘normal’ lives with an intense connection of being Jewish which in turn boosts the moral of their congregation.

Without a doubt immersion trips are structured in a way reinforces the importance of maintaining a uniquely Jewish identity. Israel offers an experience like no other to American Jewish youth. The context may be different and the implications of what the region represents to members of different faiths all over the world may also differ. What remains is a land that is consistently attributed to Jews by Jews that have fought for the preservation of a Jewish identity in the region.

³⁵ Sasson, Theodore. 2010. "Mass Mobilization to Direct Engagement: American Jews' Changing Relationship to Israel". *Israel Studies*. 15 (2): 173-195. 173.

Trips to Masada, Yad Vashem (holocaust museum) the Kotel (western wall area) and Independence Hall account for some of the most impactful stops during the trip. Each place visited is selected to embody a particular aspect that Jewish leaders want the youth to add to their identity in America. The Jewish adage “Never Forget” is constantly present and is arguably the main motivation behind the sponsoring of these trips. To never forget your identity, to always want the presence of Jewishness in your life, to ensure that you will pass on and share the same experience with your children, this is the Jewish objective behind Israel immersion programs.

Chapter 6

Continued Prevention

“At the dawn of the twenty-first century, no religious group in America is more number conscious than the Jews.”³⁶ This expressed need to monitor numbers of American citizens who identify themselves as Jews leads to the understanding that there is some reason to attempt population studies. The anxieties that assimilation causes in Jewish leaders in America is due to several factors, each of which are more likely to increase. “First, the American Jewish community suffers from low fertility and is not reproducing itself. Each year more Jews die than are born. With the Jewish birthrate pegged at about 1.8 children per couple, below the 2.1 needed for replacement, the Jewish median age is rapidly rising and the number of Jewish children under the age of seventeen has fallen to historically low levels.”³⁷ The type of message that is propagated by Jewish leaders is not one of actively pursuing conversion or altering Judaism beyond recognition to revive numbers. Rather the focus is on the youth in America who are susceptible to ‘losing’ their cultural identity in exchange for a more general American one. The youth are the target of so much effort because of the dependency on their involvement in the continuation of Jewishness in America.

As the world moves even further towards an environment where cultural distinctions become either lost or blended into the mainstream, efforts of Jewish leaders in America are contributing to the ability for a uniquely Jewish cultural identity to thrive. As indicated, the educational, social and immersion programs are dependent upon the youth’s ability to acknowledge their importance and role they play in preserving Judaism. The threats assimilation and growing individualism have on the continuity of a uniquely Jewish identity may not be the

³⁶Sarna, Jonathan D. 2004. *American Judaism: a history*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

³⁷Sarna, Jonathan D. 2004. *American Judaism: a history*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

only potential threat to Jewish identity preservation. As we see an importance focused on the connection Jews are able to establish with Israel, there is also a threat that is emerging from within the contemporary world that is not directly rooted in anti-Semitism or ethnic conflict. Rather it is born out of clashing and competing political ideologies that impact how Jews in America view the connection with a land 6,000 miles away.

There seems to be developing a movement away from the pro-Zionist notions that pushed so hard for the foundation of a Jewish nation state. The historical and biblical connotations surrounding the region will always be present as will the need to acknowledge its importance for the other two monotheistic faiths, Christianity and Islam. But as a cultural designator Israel still plays an important function, uniting Jews from across the world in an environment where being Jewish is the norm. Jewish leaders in America, view this dynamic as a threat and most likely, new programs will be developed transitioning away from a more open Jewish experience. Cultural distinctions will be a point of contention rather than a place for open dialogue and understanding. So, in my perspective, if there are new threats developing, they will derive from within the group itself. If the methods Jewish leaders are currently employing work as they are currently then the anxiety of defining oneself as Jewish will no longer present itself as a viable threat. Thus the Jewish youth in America can then shed themselves and generations after them from the historical baggage that has played such a major role in preserving a uniquely Jewish Identity.

A greater question can be proposed which is, what effect does growing anti-Israel sentiment have on the emerging youth who are growing up in a world situation that places great focus on issues of human rights? The idea is that as a result of Israel's proximity to other Arab states, particularly their continued conflict with the Palestinians, it will become harder to align oneself ideologically with the Israeli government. It is unlikely that the way Jews view Israel would ever shift so dramatically that its existence as a Jewish state is questioned. Rather what are questioned are the motivations behind politicians who have truly polarized this issue for many

Jewish leaders in the United States. We have seen protests throughout the world concerning the mistreatment of Palestinians all for the cause of 'security'. Peter Beinart's 2010 article *The Failure of the American Jewish Establishment*³⁸ clearly articulates the current dynamic that exists within contemporary American Jewish community and their attitudes toward Israel when he states

“Among American Jews today, there are a great many Zionists, especially in the Orthodox world, people deeply devoted to the State of Israel. And there are a great many liberals, especially in the secular Jewish world, people deeply devoted to human rights for all people, Palestinians included. But the two groups are increasingly distinct. Particularly in the younger generations, fewer and fewer American Jewish liberals are Zionists; fewer and fewer American Jewish Zionists are liberal. One reason is that the leading institutions of American Jewry have refused to foster—indeed, have actively opposed—a Zionism that challenges Israel's behavior in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and toward its own Arab citizens. For several decades, the Jewish establishment has asked American Jews to check their liberalism at Zionism's door, and now, to their horror, they are finding that many young Jews have checked their Zionism instead.”³⁹

This is not a mute point; security is rightfully a major concern for Israel as is indicated by the past century of invading armies and terrorist groups that have tried so hard to destabilized Jewish control in the region. With that in consideration, at what point will American Jews become affected by a greater worldview that is placing the actions of the Israeli government on their backs?

Where the hope lies is in the effectiveness of the Reform movement within American Judaism and in particular the emphasis placed on playing an active participatory role in the non-Jewish society around them. The key objective is not to remain segregated in small-designated groups, but to bring forth a Jewishness that is understood and accepted by other groups because American Jewish youth will no longer view themselves as the 'other'. Instead an aura of openness and inclusivity has and will continue to become the norm, shedding light on what it means to be

³⁸ Beinart, Peter. 2010. "The Failure of the American Jewish Establishment: An Exchange with Abraham H. Foxman". *The New York Review of Books*. 57 (11): 61.

³⁹ Beinart, Peter. 2010. "The Failure of the American Jewish Establishment: An Exchange with Abraham H. Foxman". *The New York Review of Books*. 57 (11): 61.

culturally and uniquely Jewish in an open society that accepts and is growing ever more tolerant of diverse group identities.

What this tells us about communal identity today is that society can function in the face of self-defining characteristics that enable individuals within a sub-group to feel like they can embrace an identity that does not require an exclusive environment.

“Though their adaptation was perhaps less drastic, Jews in the United States also drew on elements of the Jewish tradition that facilitated their successful incorporation into U.S. society. By the late twentieth century, ‘the contents of liberal American and Jewish cultures ... appear to many American Jews as almost identical’. If such syncretism is common, then the spread of Judaism across the globe may not have produced a transnational religion, but rather a set of "national" religions sharing a family name but varying significantly from one another in matters of style and practice.”⁴⁰

The previous statement is indicative of how Jews across the world are able to view themselves in relation to a culture that translates differently dependent upon the region.

What Jews in America are concerned with is how to make contemporary Judaism relevant to the emerging generations of youth.

Tentatively the programs mentioned in previous chapters are and will be deployed around the world. Different regions bring different qualities and attributes of what it means to be Jewish in a world where Jews are increasingly the minority. The United States and its contribution to Jewish identity construction is one in which groups can propagate stereotypes thus produce and reinforce the same anxieties that have existed for centuries in the Jewish community. The redeeming attribute of America is the ability for groups to adapt and evolve parallel to secular society. What is unique about the current and emerging generations of American Jews is that they are beginning to identify themselves in ways that are not limited by dogma. There is an acknowledgement of contemporary society and what it demands of youth in general. To remain

⁴⁰ Wald, Kenneth D., and Michael D. Martinez. 2001. "Jewish Religiosity and Political Attitudes in the United States and Israel". *Political Behavior*. 23 (4): 377-397. 380.

grounded in a culturally unique identity and actively part of the collective is not only a necessity for cultural preservation, but for the continuation of the ideal that what makes a country like the United States unique is the various groups that comprise its citizenship. As a result of the efforts of Jewish leaders whose chief concern is the status of the youth, Jewish youth in America have been provided with the tools necessary to continue the preservation process for themselves and future generations.

My overview of the different methods deployed currently in the quelling of assimilation, represent how contemporary Jewish leaders understand the wants and needs of Jewish youth in America today. The necessity of establishing close-knit interdependent bonds at a young age has been heightened; alluding to the notion that this time period in Jewish American history indicates a threatening environment still exists. Self-perceived and propagated or not, fear of assimilation does not necessarily imply a fear of anti-Semitic resurgence. The identity maintenance process is not to keep Jewish youth separate from the collective or to project some sense of exceptionalist ideology. The product of what has been in effect for the past 10 years are a group of Jewish youth that feel that being Jewish does not conflict with their personal beliefs. There is more freedom to construct one's Jewish identity in the way that works for them, contributing to the face of their culture, projecting values that are important to them and yet rooted in Jewish philosophy.

What I present is not individual case studies of the effects of these programs on particular Jewish communities, rather an analysis of the current state of Jewish anxiety in America and where exactly concern is placed. The confrontations of these issues have lead to a more comprehensive and less dogmatic approach to assisting Jewish youth in their identity preservation process. If we are to re-ask the question, "Will your grand-children be Jews"⁴¹ the answer is not a definitive 'yes' but a promising 'probably'. There are no indicators outside of intermarriage to

⁴¹ <http://www.simpletoremember.com/vitals/will-your-grandchild-be-jewish-chart-graph.htm>

denote that the future of American Jewish identity is threatened. Jewish leaders have provided the environment and the tools necessary to the continuity of a Jewish identity in America. The future of Jewish culture in America depends on successive generations who actively participate and promote Jewish culture, thus assuming leadership positions themselves. If the threats are indeed a result of generational anxieties then one could gather that the further history moves away from those time periods of rampant anti-Semitism and the more society becomes tolerant and open to cultural exchange, social anxieties should no longer exist and actively play a role in promoting an insecurity that is entrenched in Jewish Americans.

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Biographical Information

Joseph Lincecum began his academic career at UTA in 2007, earning a double major in Philosophy and History as well as double minor in Latin and Early Modern Medieval Studies. He has continued his education at UTA in pursuit of two Master degrees as well as a PhD in Transatlantic History.

While a Humanities M.A. student, Joseph took classes in the fields of Sociology, Political Science, English, History, and Philosophy. He Focused on International Issues, including human security, genocide, gender, race, peace building, and migration. Joseph constructed several presentations ranging from political to social issues including the 'Arab-Spring' and processes of establishing justice in post-conflict Rwanda. Issues surrounding Jewish identity construction are his main interest and plans to continue exploring this topic within an international context.