

Children of the Movements: Differences among American Jewish University Students Raised in Orthodox, Conservative and Reform Homes

Mervin F. Verbit

The popular perception of the three major religious movements in American Judaism is that they constitute a continuum of involvement in Jewish life, with Orthodox at the maximal pole, followed, in order, by Conservative and Reform. Indeed, the movements are usually named in that order rather than alphabetically or in the chronological order of their formal organization.

Regarding many aspects of ritual observance and traditional doctrine, the official positions of the movements – as these are embodied in the writings of the movements' leaders and in formal resolutions adopted by the respective rabbinical and congregational organizations – do in fact, constitute such a continuum, as they also do in the emphasis which they place on intensive Jewish education. On many other aspects of Jewish self-expression, however, the official mainstream positions of the movements are the same. All three movements encourage their adherents to participate in synagogue services, at least on Sabbaths and holidays. All three advocate belief in God, the cultivation of religious feelings, and the transmission of Jewish values. All three postulate a special historic role for the Jewish people, and all agree that the content of that role is religious and ethical. All three movements (today if not throughout their histories, and in their mainstreams if not unanimously) recognize the special importance of the State of Israel in Jewish life, and all three assert the special character and importance of the Sabbath, even as they differ over its proper celebration. All three encourage Jewish organizations, and all three agree on the appropriateness of some of the traditional observances of Jewish ritual (e.g. the Passover seder, lighting of Hanukkah candles, circumcision, affixing of mezuzot at least on main entrances).

All of this, of course, refers to the 'official' positions of the movements. Any ideological movement, be it religious or political, will attract adherents for a variety of reasons, some of which are rooted in explicit acceptance of the official ideology, some of which are based on advantages of affiliation which have little if anything to do with official positions, and some of which – falling somewhere between the two poles of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation – have to do with the actual, but not the logically necessary, consequences of a movement's official positions. The smaller, less powerful, and more deviant from the surrounding dominant culture a movement is (that is, the more 'sectarian' it is), the more likely are its adherents to be motivated by intrinsic considerations; there is little else in it for them. The larger and more culturally

acceptable a movement is, the greater the weight of 'mixed motivation' is likely to be in enlisting people to its ranks.

Since the religious movements in American Judaism are perceived as being on a continuum regarding the demands they make on Jews, it is likely that their adherents' attitudes and practices will also form a continuum even on those issues on which the movements are officially in agreement. The question thus arises: to what extent and what aspects of Jewish self-expression do the movements differ at the popular level? Recent research shows that adherents of the three movements do, in fact, form a continuum on many aspects of Jewishness. The purpose of the present paper is to examine this phenomenon further, and to suggest how people whose religious socialization took place in the three movements differ on a wide range of Jewish behaviors and attitudes.

The Data

The data were gathered in a study of American Jewish university students in the mid-1970s. The sample comprised 641 students at two major universities, one located in a large eastern city, the other in a midwestern university town. The sample included equal proportions of lowerclassmen (freshman and sophomores), upperclassmen (juniors and seniors), and graduate students. 46% of the sample was male; 54%, female.

Since the goal of this study was to explore various configurations of Jewish identity rather than to ascertain the overall 'profile' of Jewish students at the time of the study, the sample was purposely designed to include a larger than representative proportion of students who gave some evidence of active involvement in Jewish life, and because of that bias, the marginals should be read only as upper limits. Demographically, on the other hand, the sample is more typical: 81% of their fathers and 86% of their mothers were born in the United States; 45% of the respondents' fathers were businessmen, and 40% were professionals. Because the questionnaire was unusually long, the response rate was low (16%). However, a comparison of early responses, late responses, and a small sub-sample of initial non-respondents who were pressed to respond (80% of the sub-sample eventually did) showed not significant differences on selected test items of Jewish self-expression.

Of the 641 respondents, 65 claimed to have been raised in Orthodox homes, 311 responded that they were raised in Conservative homes, 187 replied that they grew up in Reform homes, and 78 gave other answers or no answer to the question about the religious affiliation of their homes. This paper is based on the 563 respondents who indicated that their parents were affiliated with one of the three major movements and compares them on a variety of measures of Jewish self-expression. No effort was made to determine the extent to which the homes actually conformed to the standards of the movements with which they were claimed to have been affiliated. Self-identification was taken at face value.

Of the 563 respondents, 47% were men and 53%, women. The men were significantly more likely to have been raised in traditional homes. Among the men, 15%, 57%, and 28% were raised in Orthodox, Conservative and Reform homes, respectively, as compared to 9%, 54%, and 37% of the women. Virtually all (97%) of all three

groups had two Jewish parents, and 15% of all three groups were married. There was also no significant difference among the grade-average of the three groups.

The groups did differ in socioeconomic status, with the Reform group having the highest, and the Orthodox the lowest status of the three. 89% of the respondents from Reform homes, 84% of those with Conservative backgrounds, and 79% of the children of Orthodox parents had fathers in managerial or professional occupations. Of those whose fathers were officers, managers, or proprietors of businesses, the percentages whose fathers worked in large businesses were 44%, 37%, and 27%, for Reform, Conservative and Orthodox, respectively. Of the professionals, 67% of the Reform, 74% of the Conservative and 42% of the Orthodox fathers were in professions requiring three or more years of graduate education. The Reform parents generally had more secular education than did the Conservatives, who in turn outranked the Orthodox in this regard. Although most of the respondents were native-born, the more traditional students were more likely to have foreign-born parents. Of the fathers, 10% of the Reform, 21% of the Conservative and 32% of the Orthodox were born outside the United States; the corresponding percentages for the mothers were 9%, 15% and 26%.

As has been pointed out, the length and detail of the questionnaire used to gather the data reported here enable us to compare the three groups on a large array of Jewish beliefs, practices and attitudes. These have been grouped under several headings in the tables.

The first two tables deal with background factors (home, Jewish environment and Jewish education); the remainder deal with aspects of current identity. The figures in the tables are the percentages of the maximum (i.e. most traditional) possible score. For dichotomous variables, the scores are the actual percentages that gave the traditional answer. For questions whose response options were not dichotomous, responses were scored evenly from 0 to 100, and arithmetic means were calculated. Thus, if all respondents in a group had given the most traditional answer provided by the response options in the questionnaire, the score would be 100; if all respondents had chosen the least traditional response, the score would be 0.

Since the scores are a result of the indicators used, comparisons of the score values across various aspects of Jewish expression should be made only with great care and reticence. Such comparisons really require an even more comprehensive research instrument and a more subtle weighting of items than is now possible. Simple cumulative scales cannot adequately address the relationship of individual items to the overall concept which they are used to measure, and the usual statistical methods for assigning weights to individual scale items do not apply here. Comparisons among the movements or among the individual items, on the other hand, do have clear meaning.

Since it is the degree of the differences rather than the fact of such differences among children of the movements that concerns us here, and, in any case, the samples cannot be claimed to be strictly representative, measures of statistical significance are omitted. Obviously, small differences should be discounted as the possible result of sampling chance.

The Findings

As we see in Table 1, the Jewishness of the homes in which the respondents were

TABLE 1. HOME JEWISH ENVIRONMENT^a

	Orthodox	Conservative	Reform
Ritual practice overall scale	61	49	33
Individual rituals:			
Light Hanukkah candles	95	96	89
Have or attend Pesach seder	92	94	87
No bread in home on Pesach	88	82	52
Fast all day Yom Kippur	80	74	48
Light Sabbath candles	74	66	40
Special Sabbath family dinner	62	51	33
Sabbath observance other than candles, meal, services	23	8	6
Mezuzah - at least main entrances	88	89	57
Mezuzah - all doors	43	22	6
No ham or bacon at home	66	36	4
Separate dishes	39	17	2
Daily prayer	36	11	8
Overall assessment of Jewish knowledge:			
Father	70	61	53
Mother	63	57	51
Jewish objects in the home	78	74	58
Parental opposition to:			
Intermarriage	85	86	66
Interdating	74	73	41

a. In this and the following tables, figures represent percentages of the maximum possible score - unless otherwise indicated.

raised is related in the predicted direction to the movement with which the family was affiliated, and the relationship holds for all measures used (ritual practice, parents' Jewish knowledge, presence of Jewish objects, and attitudes toward intermarriage and interdating). The exceptions to this general pattern are so few and so small as to be insignificant. (The term 'Jewishness' is used here not in its literal, dichotomous sense, but rather in its more colloquial sense as a continuous variable meaning the extent to which people evince the positions advocated by traditional Judaism.) This pattern holds not only for those items on which the movements have different official positions, but also for those on which they formally agree, and the differences between Conservative and Reform homes tend to be larger than those between Orthodox and Conservative homes.

The same continuum is evident regarding the respondents' Jewish education, both formal and informal. As shown in Table 2, the more traditional the affiliation of the respondent's home, the higher are his/her assessments of his/her Jewish knowledge, the more time s/he spent in formal Jewish education, the greater is the likelihood of his/her having attended a more intensive Jewish school, and the more likely s/he was to have gone to a summer camp with clear Jewish content.

These findings are expected, of course. They all concern the homes in which respon-

TABLE 2. JEWISH EDUCATION

	Orthodox	Conservative	Reform
Overall assessment	65	59	46
Mean assessment by subject	54	50	42
Mean year - hours	30	19	9
Median year - hours	21	18	6
Type of Jewish education:			
Tutor	15	16	15
Sunday School	31	43	69
Afternoon Hebrew School	55	72	43
Talmud Torah	11	11	3
Hebrew High School	22	25	13
Yeshiva - Elementary	28	9	2
Yeshiva - High School	22	5	1
Camping experience:			
Hebrew-speaking or other Jewish content	33	25	20
Some Jewish observance	25	39	38
Jewish clientele, but no Jewish program	17	21	31
Not Jewish in clientele or program	14	28	45

dents were raised and reflect the 'denominational' character of those homes. But what of the respondents' current positions? Do they still reflect their parents' preferences among the movements?

Table 3 shows that the children of the movements do constitute a continuum in their acceptance of traditional doctrine. The continuum holds not only on the overall doctrinal scale, but also on each of the six items that were examined. We also see that on most of the items, the difference between children of Orthodox and Conservative homes is somewhat greater than that between children of Conservative and Reform homes. The same continuum holds for ritual practice, as seen in Table 4, except that in ritual the differences between children of Conservative and Reform homes are more often larger than those between children of Orthodox and Conservative homes.

TABLE 3. DOCTRINAL BELIEF

	Orthodox	Conservative	Reform
Overall Scale	55	45	39
Individual issues:			
Concerning God	77	70	60
Concerning the uniqueness of humanity	51	47	44
Concerning authorship of the Bible	41	26	16
Concerning immortality	48	33	23
Concerning the specialness of the Jewish people	65	51	40
Agreement that the will of God was an important factor in Jewish survival	55	38	27

TABLE 4. RITUAL PRACTICE

	Orthodox	Conservative	Reform
Overall scale	52	45	31
Individual rituals (current or intended):			
Light Hanukkah candles	86	84	73
Have or attend Pesach seder	86	86	76
No bread in home on Pesach	79	70	46
Fast all day Yom Kippur	71	73	46
Light Sabbath candles	62	50	40
Special Sabbath family dinner	49	47	32
Sabbath observance other than candles, meal, services	23	10	8
Mezuzah - at least main entrances	67	72	49
Mezuzah - all doors	28	21	7
No ham or bacon at home	48	27	5
Separate dishes	31	14	4
Daily prayer	40	19	13
Attitude toward wearing kippah	34	29	14
Synagogue attendance	62	54	44
Summary:			
Rituals on which Movements agree	61	54	43
Rituals on which Movements differ	44	32	15

TABLE 5. DESIRE FOR MORE JEWISH KNOWLEDGE

	Orthodox	Conservative	Reform
Took University courses in Jewish Studies:			
In College of Jewish studies	9	7	3
Regular university courses	42	39	27
Non-credit courses	24	13	14
Considering taking Jewish Studies courses	50	45	34
Expressed desire for more knowledge about:			
Jewish philosophy	60	53	53
Conversational Hebrew	60	58	42
Post-Biblical Jewish history	55	54	51
Zionist and Israeli history	60	50	47
Bible	54	53	51
Yiddish	44	52	39
Jewish ethics	43	40	38
Jewish 'current events'	55	40	30
Meanings of the Jewish festivals	46	36	33
Talmud	41	41	32
Israeli culture	41	39	36
Jewish ritual observance	41	35	31
Hebrew of the Bible and Prayer Book	35	30	27

What is perhaps most significant is that the continuum holds regarding the rituals on which the three movements agree, although the differences are, predictably, larger on those rituals regarding which the movements do not take the same official positions.

Table 5 shows that the more traditional a student's home, the more likely s/he is to express a desire to know more about Jewish life and thought, and that pattern holds for virtually every one of the thirteen areas of Jewish knowledge for which the question was asked. (The sole exception is that of a higher proportion of children of Conservative than of Orthodox homes indicated that they would like to know more Yiddish, possibly because so many children of Orthodox homes are already familiar with that language.) What is especially interesting is that that pattern holds even for those subjects which one would expect to be more attractive to the less traditional students such as Jewish ethics (though here the differences are, admittedly, very small) and 'current events'. The differences in the desire for more Jewish knowledge among the three groups is reflected in their university studies. The more traditional the student's home, the more likely s/he was to have taken college courses in Jewish studies.

Judaism places much more emphasis on the significance and proper functioning of the community than do other religions (Islam excepted). However, because of acculturation, many Jews think of Judaism in the largely individualistic context that is more appropriate for Christianity, especially in a secular culture. Several items in the

TABLE 6. JEWISH PEOPLEHOOD

	Orthodox	Conservative	Reform
Overall scale of Jewish Peoplehood	61	54	41
Overall scale of communal responsibility (i.e. opinion about proper communal services)	65	58	46
Agree that the world would be poorer in religion and morality if Jews had not existed	65	60	55
Agree that the Jewish people has a religious/ethical role in the future	55	48	42
Agree that it is important that there always be a Jewish people	87	88	82
Agree that Jews have a special responsibility for other Jews (more than for non-Jews)	61	62	51
Agree that American and Israeli Jews are part of one people	78	70	59
Disagree that the differences between American and Israeli Jews are greater than the similarities	65	54	33
Disagree that religion is entirely private between a person and his/her idea of God	50	34	36
Disagree that prayer is primarily a private and individual experience whose communal aspect is secondary	48	34	34

questionnaire touched on aspects of Jewish peoplehood, either directly or indirectly. On these items (Table 6), responses – with very few exceptions, all of them very small – show a continuum with children of Orthodox homes being most likely and children of Reform homes least likely to express views consistent with an appreciation of Judaism's collective character. Similarly, as seen in Table 7, positive orientation to Israel and Zionism is strongest among children of Orthodox homes and weakest among those raised in Reform homes.

Liberal religionists often assert that they have the same religious feelings as do traditionalists, even though they express those feelings differently. Respondents were asked how often they experience 'religious feelings', and in this regard, too, we find (Table 8) a continuum in the usual direction. The respondents' general assessments of their religiosity were also highest for the children of Orthodox homes and lowest for the children of Reform homes.

On matters of family norms and conventional morality (drugs, drinking, sex), respondents show the same continuum, with traditional norms growing less frequent as we move from Orthodox through Conservative to Reform (Table 9). However, what may be equally significant is that the differences among children of the three movements are generally smaller than they are on the more specifically Jewish behaviors and attitudes that were examined.

A question (or, more precisely, a set of questions) designed to tap the students' real values asked respondents to indicate how actively they would try to persuade their (future) children to accept a number of behaviors. Table 10 shows that on virtually all of the Jewish values in the list, children of Orthodox homes took the strongest average position, and children of Reform homes the weakest, with children of Conservative homes in the middle, and the differences were not noticeably or consistently smaller for those values on which the three movements officially agree. The differences among the average scores of the children of the three movements on the values that are not specifically Jewish, by contrast, are so small as to be negligible.

TABLE 7. ZIONISM AND ISRAEL

	Orthodox	Conservative	Reform
Overall scale of support of Israel	64	61	56
Overall scale of pride in Israel	72	70	63
Agree that Israel is the basic homeland of the Jewish people	79	81	68
Consider self a Zionist	71	66	48
If came to believe that support of Israel were not in America's interest: Percent that would still favor U.S. support	66	55	48
Percent that would reconsider U.S. support	15	25	32

TABLE 8. RELIGIOUS FEELINGS

	Orthodox	Conservative	Reform
Frequency of religious feelings	66	56	51
Degree of 'religiosity'	62	52	47

TABLE 9. FAMILY NORMS AND CONVENTIONAL MORALITY

	Orthodox	Conservative	Reform
Traditional attitude toward marriage	59	53	49
Traditional attitude toward divorce	24	26	23
Percent not living at home who are in touch with parents at least once a week	66	68	56
Percent living with family	30	20	17
Mean number of children desired	2.6	2.3	2.1
Percent living in apartment with opposite sex	3	10	12
Percent claiming pre-marital intercourse	62	71	75
Traditional attitude toward pre-marital intercourse	19	15	13
Traditional attitude toward homosexuality	34	31	27
Frequency of drunkenness	53	59	63
Use of 'soft' drugs: Scale	43	49	60
Percent 'never'	43	35	26

TABLE 10. DESIRES REGARDING CHILDREN'S VALUES^a

	Orthodox	Conservative	Reform
Jewish values:			
Believe in God	75	66	59
Settle in Israel	53	46	40
Observe the Sabbath	64	60	54
Have a kosher home	64	56	42
Belong to a synagogue	75	72	64
Get a good Jewish education	81	81	72
Have mostly Jewish friends	62	58	48
Contribute to UJA/other Jewish causes	77	75	67
Not marry a non-Jew	78	69	62
Enjoy religious celebration	77	75	68
Marry and have children	75	72	67
General values:			
Get a college education	87	90	91
Be a political liberal	67	67	71
Be politically active	61	64	65
Appreciate art and/or music	83	84	85
Develop physical strength/agility	75	76	74
Develop charm and poise	72	71	71

a. A score of '50' indicates average neutrality.

We also find (Table 11) that the children of the movements do not differ consistently or significantly in their perceptions of eighteen selected values of Judaism. (The sole exception is that the children of Orthodox homes are less likely than the others to believe that Judaism favors participation in the larger cultures in which Jews in the Diaspora find themselves.) It would seem that the differences in the positions of the children of the various movements are just that: differences of position. They do not vary substantially in their understanding of Judaism's values.

Respondents were asked to indicate their opinions regarding the appropriateness of several adjectives that might be used to describe four trends in contemporary American Judaism: the three movements and Hasidism. Their evaluations, as seen in Table 12, show a number of interesting patterns. First and foremost, the four trends are ranked on the eight descriptions almost identically by the children of all three movements. The exceptions are so few and so small as to be negligible. Evaluations of the Hasidim were highly consistent among children of the three major movements. However, as would be expected the three groups differed considerably in their other evaluations. The Orthodox and Conservative movements were between the other two trends in the consistency of the evaluations given them by the children of the three movements. It is interesting, though, that while the children of Conservative homes tended to give Conservatism the 'highest marks,' Orthodoxy did not regularly get its best evaluations from the children of Orthodox homes, but rather - in four of the descriptive phrases - from children of Conservative homes.

This last finding suggests that a higher proportion of children of Orthodox homes may have become alienated from, and critical of, the movement in which they were raised than is the case for the other two groups. If that is true, it would also help to explain why the children of Conservative homes are generally closer to the children of Orthodox homes than to the children of Reform homes. That finding may reflect not a greater proximity between Conservative and Orthodox positions, but rather the result of a greater 'fall off' of children of Orthodox homes, who as a result gave, on the average, answers that approached a more Conservative pattern.

Table 13 shows the responses of the children of the three movements on several aspects of antisemitism in general and the Holocaust in particular. The children of Reform homes differed from the children of Orthodox and Conservative homes in that they were more likely to assert that the Holocaust had no effect on their belief in God, less likely to suggest that it is important to commemorate the Holocaust, and less likely to consider themselves survivors of the Holocaust. Children of Reform homes were also less likely to assert that the world cares less about Jews than about non-Jews, to report a sense of isolation after the Yom Kippur War (the data were collected in 1975), and to identify anti-Zionism with antisemitism. There is no significant difference between the children of Orthodox and Conservative homes in these regards. What is interesting in this connection is that the children of Reform homes did not differ from the other groups in their reports of personal experience with antisemitism, their perceptions of the amount of antisemitism in the society, their general alarm over antisemitism, or their sense that the Holocaust was unique. It is not unreasonable to conclude that children of Reform homes have pretty much the same experiences in these matters as do others but that they interpret the meanings of those experiences differently.

Finally, there were some questions designed to tap the overall salience and valence

TABLE 11. PERCEPTIONS OF JEWISH VALUES^a

	Orthodox	Conservative	Reform
Awareness of God's presence	89	86	81
Religious emotion	78	80	75
Jewish knowledge	92	92	89
Endogamy	91	90	88
Having mostly Jewish friends	72	69	67
Respect for other groups	76	76	76
Kindness to animals	74	73	70
Secular knowledge	75	78	78
Intellectualism	89	93	93
Rationality	80	78	77
Participation in the larger culture	47	57	58
Economic success	71	74	75
Political liberalism	69	69	71
Appreciation of art and music	73	74	80
Charm and poise	60	58	58
Etiquette	57	57	58
Athletic prowess	48	49	49
Ascetic self-denial	40	39	35

a. A score of '50' indicates average neutrality.

TABLE 12. PERCEPTIONS OF MOVEMENTS' CHARACTERISTICS

	Ortho- dox	Conserv- ative	Ref- orm	Ortho- dox	Conserv- ative	Ref- orm
	Perceptions of Orthodoxy			Perceptions of Conservatism		
'Internally consistent'	77	82	77	53	56	55
'Emotionally satisfying'	71	83	75	58	66	66
'Authentic'	91	87	80	52	62	57
'Parochial'	82	86	75	47	46	52
'Sincere'	86	89	82	69	72	73
'Modern'	21	15	11	54	60	46
'Hypocritical'	29	29	32	41	36	37
'Assimilationist'	19	10	17	40	37	40
	Perceptions of Reform			Perceptions of Hasidism		
'Internally consistent'	31	45	50	87	85	82
'Emotionally satisfying'	36	52	63	84	89	81
'Authentic'	20	36	49	83	83	81
'Parochial'	18	22	28	82	87	86
'Sincere'	52	63	71	91	91	91
'Modern'	82	86	86	11	10	14
'Hypocritical'	53	41	29	24	26	29
'Assimilationist'	65	70	61	16	11	12

of Jewishness in the respondents' lives, at least as they were prepared to articulate it. The mean responses to these items are given in Table 14, which shows that, unlike the more specific attitudes and behaviors studied, these more general issues do not show the usual continuum. On the salience of Jewishness, children of Reform homes rank clearly below the other two groups. However, on the valence of Jewishness and on the Jewishness of their immediate friendship circles, children of Conservative homes rank highest. This finding may be further evidence to support our earlier observation about the disaffection of a larger proportion of the children of Orthodox homes.

We can conclude that by and large the continuum hypothesis holds. Generally, the children of Orthodox homes are more likely than the children of Conservative homes – as are, in turn, the children of Conservative homes more likely than those of Reform homes – to adhere to traditional patterns of belief, opinion and practice. Those differences pertain to issues which can be said to reflect the differing official positions of the movements. However, the exceptions to the general pattern are also worth noting and could well provide the basis for future research.

TABLE 13. ANTISEMITISM AND THE HOLOCAUST

	Orthodox	Conservative	Reform
Personal experience of antisemitism	45	45	42
Perception of the amount of antisemitism	66	67	69
Feeling of alarm over report about extent of antisemitism	62	59	60
Agree that Jewish behavior causes antisemitism	29	28	29
Agree that the world cares less about Jews than about other peoples	61	63	54
Feel increased isolation after Yom Kippur War	62	61	50
Agree that anti-Zionism is antisemitism	66	64	48
Agree that the Holocaust was unique	64	68	64
Agree that the Holocaust should be commemorated	83	83	69
Feel self to be a survivor of the Holocaust	57	49	39
Percent finding that after the Holocaust:			
It is easier to believe in God	10	6	3
It is harder to believe in God	48	53	40
Belief in God is not affected	42	40	57

TABLE 14. SALIENCE AND VALENCE OF JEWISHNESS

	Orthodox	Conservative	Reform
Relationship between Jewishness and 'self'	61	60	47
Importance of Jewishness	80	82	70
Would want to be Jewish if born again	80	86	81