DEVELOPMENTAL JUDAISM: CHALLENGING THE STUDY OF AMERICAN JEWISH IDENTITY IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

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Introduction

The social scientific study of American Jewry was an important development of post-war American scholarship. Reflecting the social sciences of the period, its aim was to generalize about Jews' normative behavior that located them within ethnic and religious patterns of American life. Milton Gordon's work on assimilation and acculturation, Marshall Sklare's work on Jewish acculturation, and Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan's on ethnicity, proposed models for understanding Jewish particularism as a vehicle that both promoted and contained acculturation. At the same time, sociologists of this period were also taken up with the existence, persistence, and nature of antisemitism, and how Jews had adjusted to it. The effects of suburbanization, prejudice, assimilation, and to some extent mobility on American Jewish life provided the landscape of a sociology of Jews of this period.[1]

The 1970s ushered in an era that would be characterized by widespread use of survey research in American Jewish scholarship, and an increasing focus on studies of identity and continuity. Its effect on the study of Jews was powerful. That work moved beyond generalizing about broad social processes to meticulously measure what became defined as Jewish behavior–ranging from ritual observances to male occupations to patterns of friendship–and to argue for the critical social processes that challenged and supported the persistence of a Jewish life. As a result, their tables and analyses provided a compelling picture of the lives of American Jews. Religious practice was declining measurably with each generation. Jews, however, continued to identify as Jews. They persisted as members of a religious and ethnic community within the United States.[2]

Lacking a prescriptive view of Jewish life, these sociologists, unwittingly or not, created a set of norms that defined it. These surveys ultimately became the instrument that allowed sociologists to "invent" the very Jewishness that they wanted to measure.[3] The survey method, by its nature, set out Jewish standards that in turn appeared normative. Sociologists constructed models derived from measurable behaviors. Whether theorizing at the level of the systemic or measuring behavior

in terms of categories, the social sciences of this period understood broad historical forces and a set of behaviors differentiated primarily by distance from immigration, by age, by region, by denomination, and other measures as the best way to illumine the post war world of American Jews.[4]

Scholarship in the 1970s challenged many of the assumptions that provided the foundations for these models and assumptions. The very notion of "objectivity" and a science of the social have been particularly vulnerable to attack. It was a period that anthropologists Michael Fischer and George Marcus characterized as creating "a crisis in representation."[5] Scholars in a variety of fields began to lose confidence in their authoritative recounting of human behavior. And the Baby Boom generation of scholars responded to that crisis in representation by pioneering new questions, methods, and problems for research. It was not enough to offer Karl Marx's dynamic theory of class conflict as a corrective to Talcott Parsons' static functionalism, that is to replace one theory with another more effective one. Rather, the effort to explain human behavior through one or another set of predictive social relationships was in and of itself put into question.

In sociology and sociological approaches to history, for example, the foundational theories that depended on such social categories as "worker," or "social deviant," proved cumbersome for analysis. As Victoria Bonnell and Lynn Hunt note:

> Multimillion-dollar studies of census records, huge collaborative endeavors to investigate everything from medieval religious orders to the incidence of Collective violence in the nineteenth century came up with contradictory rather than cumulative results. Social categories-artisans, merchants, women, Jews-turned out to vary from place to place and epoch to epoch, sometimes from year to year.[6]

What could be explained and what constituted explanation were put into question.

In anthropology this crisis was articulated as a radical rethinking of the nature of ethnographic research. A new generation of anthropologists challenged the notion of a field as a location "out there," where an expert might enter, gather data, and leave. Issues concerning the ethnographer and the subject, the subjectivity of the ethnographer, and the construction of a place as the ethnographic site in the eternal ethnographic present were all radically questioned. What James Clifford called the "authority" of the ethnographer, like the larger issues of how to represent reality itself, raised questions about the fundamental enterprise of scholars. How do we know what we know? From whom

do we learn what we claim to know? What are the best ways to represent what we know? How can the "authoritative" voice of the ethnographer make room for the many voices of those who are studied? Across many, though not all, of the social sciences of course, the questions to be asked, and the claims of what could be known were reformulated.[7]

These methodological issues were inextricably linked to the stormy relationships that generated the "crisis in representation." Grand theorizing was put into question precisely because issues of race, gender, and sexuality in which classic European social theories had little or no interest were so compelling. The wrenching social conflicts of this period shaped the ways in which a new generation of scholars was to think about social experience. In order to accommodate the complexity of human social experience, which demanded attention to issues of class, gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity, scholars from the 1970s to the present have sought different modes of analysis, and different methodologies as well.

The post modern turn, with its fundamental interest in the nature of categories–the discursive foundation of culture–challenged the nature of a knowable reality on which positivist approaches rest. Even scholars, who criticize post-modernism for its failure to address power relations, are also dubious of grand theorizing in the social sciences. Social categories, seemingly essential to interpreting behavior, were unable to accommodate the complexity of human experience as it came to be understood after the 1960s.

The small field of the social scientific study of American Jewry has not, on the surface, been caught up with most of these debates. Survey research has continued to be its dominant mode.[8] Yet the questions posed by these challenges to how knowledge is constructed have had some small effect. In particular, interests in "culture" and the "self" are newly apparent in some of this research about American Jewish life.

The Life as Subject

It was in this context of questioning fundamental assumptions about models of society and culture that a variety of scholars turned toward issues of biography, life history, and a radical and innovative interest in actors as anchors of social experience.[9] In anthropology, sociology, history, and other fields touched by this crisis in representation, there was a rush to understand the experience of ordinary people, to richly account for their constructions of the world and a vision of that world when viewed from "the bottom up."

Scholars radically rethought the categories of "self" or social actor and offered them as an alternative to totalizing theories of social experience. Issues of gender and race, of class and sexuality, were all to

topple the possibility of producing the systemic analysis. A Marxism that could not account for gender or race as critical foundations of action could no longer stand on its own. A normative analysis that did not question the place of gender in behavior and belief was offering a very partial understanding of society. Generalizations were tested against the concreteness of specific experience.

Because this critique was embedded in the general crisis in representation, it took place within the post-structuralist challenge to the notion of a coherent self capable of a linear development. Anthropologist, Matti Bunzl has written about the complexity of understanding ethnicity and ethnic identity in light of that insight in his work on Austrian Jews. Bunzl suggests that the notion of a "genuine ethnic self" is challenged by the post-structuralist focus on "the processes by which human beings come to think of themselves as embodying particular social categories."[10] However, he argues that the construction of an ethnic self as a discursive act must be understood within unevenly distributed relations of power, a particularly compelling problem for Jews in post war Austria. Hence, he is interested in the way Jews are made Other.[11]

Bunzl underlines the complexity of studying the ethnic self in the present moment. The study of the personal narrative, biography and life history are set within a field of inquiry that is both interested in and distrustful of unquestioned social categories, including the self. What created an interest in subjectivity also challenged it. Social experience cannot be reduced to the self, nor deny its analytic significance. Nevertheless, the life history and biography provided the foundation for a far more textured view of social processes and social experience. Hence the focus on human "agency" in creating change or maintaining cultural identity has allowed the social scientists and historians to value "local" experience and "everyday practice" as loci of social experience.

Jewish Identity

This approach does more than to suggest that isolating norms may limit our understanding of social life. In the case of the social scientific study of American Jews, I suggest that it provides the basis for challenging a " deficit" model of Jewish life constructed by some social scientists of American Jewry. What is sometimes called "straight line" ethnic theory suggested that over time ethnicity would wane as the children and grandchildren of immigrants became more fully integrated into American society. In fact, since the 1970s, the persistence of ethnic identification has developed as a central feature of scholarly study that parallels an interest in its waning significance. Nevertheless, studies of Jews have been biased to greater and lesser degrees toward the study of

the decline in certain behaviors that define a normative view of Judaism.

For example, both Herbert Gans and Marshall Sklare in their earliest work on American Jewish life laid the groundwork for comparing Jewish life against an "authentic" core of behaviors, hence biasing their studies toward demonstrating a decline in Jewishness.[12] Gans' 1949 study of a Chicago suburb offered an early version of his seminal work on "symbolic ethnicity" as a vehicle to understand a shallow, if persistent ethnicity in the United States.[13] The organizational and social world that Jewish suburbanites created in response to their desire for group solidarity and the enculturation of their children revealed both the persistence and reinvention of Jewish identity, even as these men and women largely resisted the authority and expectations of traditional Judaism.

Gans' important focus on "child orientation" demonstrated that there was an absence of content to Jewishness. "Jews came together not only because they were Jews but because they shared a subculture, though it was actually devoid of Jewish themes. This (transmission) has permitted parents to select their own involvement pattern even while seeking ethnic allegiance from their children."[14] Gans found an active organizational subculture of Jews, but he understood it as entirely associational, and the motivation for association was to keep ethnicity visible for another generation of Jews. He deemed all of these activities to be largely contentless.

Marshall Sklare's more complex study of late 1950s suburban Jewish life examined the meaning of Jewish identity for these suburbanites. Sklare studied, among other things, what he called "sacramentalism," the observance of normative Jewish behaviors. He determined that sacramentalism was on the decline for suburbanites when compared to the practices of their parents.[15] When religious observance persisted, Sklare argued, it was as a result of its compatibility with the attitudes and values of the larger culture on the one hand, and provided a Jewish alternative to Christian behavior on the other. He accounted for the increase in lighting Hanuka candles by Lakeville residents, for example, because they offered the children an alternative to Christmas.

Identity, then, as in Gans' account, was measured not only by decreasing observance, but the fact that those behaviors that persisted served latent ends. They usually were means to creating and expressing group bonds, rather than for the purpose of religious observance alone. Sklare, Gans and others argued that the ethnicity of contemporary American Jews was rooted in memory and institutional life. It was measurable by behavior and the affinity between Jews that resulted, and

what it was produced was shallow. Jewishness persisted in the United States, but it was in decline.

In the 1980s a more complex and interesting accounting for Jewish identity emerged with a far more sophisticated set of methods. Sociologists Steven M. Cohen and Calvin Goldscheider, exemplars of this approach, began to provide a more nuanced understanding of American Jewish life. They drew on much larger data sets, and offered more complex pictures and interpretations of American Jewish life. Each of them also grounded some of their research historically and comparatively to understand the more precise social conditions under which Jewish identity was formed.[16] In contrast to earlier research, each of them drew on a variety of social characteristics–generation, family formation, education, geographic mobility, and friendship patterns among others–to understand what constituted Jewishness over time.

In the 1980s both Goldscheider and Cohen analyzed surveys of Boston Jewry with data collected in 1965 and 1975. Each focused on educational attainment, occupational similarity, organizational participation, and the maintenance of some "sacramental" behaviors to demonstrate the persistence of Jewish identity. Each of them underlined the complexity of identity and rejected decreasing observance as the primary measure of it. In different ways each of them attempted to avoid a normative bias in their work. Goldscheider focused on group cohesion, rather than the content of and meaning of Jewish practices. He demonstrated that cohesiveness achieved through friendships and occupations shared with other Jews often functioned to tie Jews to one another and maintain Jewish identity quite apart from behaviors with Jewish 'content,' such as the dietary laws. Cohen used conventional measures of Jewish observance, but demonstrated their utility to measure or even predict Jewish involvement by linking them to a wider set of variables than previously measured. The data from a Jewish population study in Boston, for example, revealed a decrease in ritual observance, but persistent Jewish identification that could be linked to the density of the Jewish population where one lived.

Survey research inevitably flattens how one can define a Jewish identity and in order to generalize or be comparative, must be highly concrete. In *American Modernity and Jewish Identity* Cohen wrote in 1983 with genuine modesty about what survey research was also unable to achieve. "However, this type of research–given the limitations of both method and available data–raises and leaves unanswered several interesting questions...We need more understanding of the precise ways in which changes in the life cycle result in changes in affiliation or ritual practice. This question in turn, may be subsumed under the larger issue of discerning the meaning(s) of Jewishness to most American Jews. ...What salience, what values, and what significance do

Jews attach to the central myths, symbols and practices of contemporary American Judaism?" (178, 179)

Jewish Selves

If survey research can, at its best, provide a story of the effects of broad social processes on changing formations of Jewish identity, then what does an accounting of Jewish life anchored to biography and life history offer? Goldscheider demonstrates the importance of the life cycle to understanding Jews' participation in Jewish organizations and behaviors. However, the specificity of those practices has not been closely studied. With the turn away from the great social categories of social science inquiry toward the specificity of local and life course experience, social scientists can more closely examine the construction of experience from that point of view. What the life story offers is the opportunity to look at the development of a Jewish self and in particular to understand how Jewishness is constructed in relationship to the life course. The focus then is on the meaning of choices, rather than the choices alone, and the conditions under which such choices are made or not made. It underlines the dangers of the survey's snapshot approach to define Jewishness within any particular moment. Just as Goldscheider and Cohen drew attention to the complexity of the social conditions that enabled Jewish acculturation, the study of the construction of Jewishness in personal narratives focuses on the complexity of the meaning of being a Jew to those who continue to define themselves in those terms.

In 1995 and 1996 I undertook an ethnographic study in two Conservative synagogues in the suburbs of Minneapolis and St. Paul. I did in-depth interviews with 20 men and women between the ages of 30 and 55 who were members of these synagogues. Within this grouping there was a wide range of observance and outlooks that encompassed what might be defined as Modern Orthodoxy as well as a "minimal," practice of Judaism, yet whose adherents have strong feelings about their Jewishness. I did not intend to study how Jews created a Jewish life over time. I had not assumed the process was so dynamic. Rather, in the course of interviewing them about how they came to join this synagogue and the effect of the synagogue on their Judaism, I discovered that Jewish practice among this divergent group of Jews was surprisingly dynamic over time.

My findings, though I did not know this at the time, overlap with the results of recent research on American Jews, and were parallel to the ethnographic research Samuel Heilman was conducting in New York simultaneously with mine in Minnesota.[17] In my research I was struck as much by the content of how these men and women described their Jewishness, as the process by which they constructed their Jewishness.

Whatever their level of observance, they linked their Jewishness to their life course, and as they grew and developed over time so did their Judaism change.

When I asked these men and women to tell me about their Jewishness, I did not ask them questions chronologically. Rather, they tended to describe their practices, beliefs and self-definition to me in terms of their own chronologies. Most of those interviewed saw themselves making a series of choices about their participation in Jewish life and home observance, but at the same time, the language of personal "choice" hardly exhausted their vocabulary concerning their sense of identity.

My research was also shaped by the work of the anthropologist, Michael Fischer's study of comparative ethnic autobiographies written in the 1970s. Fischer's complex and important work above all emphasized that "ethnicity is something reinvented and reinterpreted in each generation by each individual and that it is often something over which he or she lacks control. Ethnicity is not something that is simply passed from generation to generation."[18] His examination of an interior construction of ethnicity was important for me in linking a complex notion of a Jewish self to religious behavior and pointing me to study how people thought about Jewishness.

Bethamie Horowitz rightly notes that in contemporary America, because it is marked by the real opportunity for Jews to fully integrate into the dominant society, Jews' subjective relationship to their Judaism makes choice one of the key issues of the moment. The social category Jewish, in contrast even to fifty years ago, signifies very little about a Jew's experience. Self-definitions, and most likely changing self-definitions, then are particularly salient. Classic categories of occupation, class, and endogamy cannot in and of themselves reveal the foundation of Jewish participation in Jewish life.

Constructing Jewish Lives

Among these Conservative Jews I found three models of how Jewishness was operative in their lives, specifically the process by which these Jews understood how they shaped a Jewish life as an adult. Each "native model," in one or another way problematizes "behavior" as the most salient feature for the study of Jewish identity. These three models are: "imprint," "step-by-step," and "transmission." If the survey method was by necessity aligned to a model of normative behavior, then these life narratives instead focused on the process of the construction of identity.

A far fuller accounting of the construction of a Jewish identity would most importantly link a person's Jewishness to life as an American, a man or woman, a member of the middle or upper middle

class and myriad other identities. My purpose was far narrower. And my focus on native models of how Jews become Jews is narrower still. I select this single issue both because it is fundamental to defining Jewishness, and because it points up the complexity of understanding how Jews negotiate that identity.

The "models" differ from one another. What they share are definitions of Judaism and Jewishness that imply that change is an intrinsic part of their own identities. Each model underlines the fact that the measurable behaviors or even attitudes on which survey research is built do not serve as a sufficient measure of Jewishness for those interviewed.

"Imprint" was a term used by Rachel Schwartz, a 38-year-old mother of three. Like her husband, she was raised in a small town where there was little chance to practice her Judaism. Their lives in Minneapolis offered far more opportunities for a Jewish life for their family. When their children reached pre-school ages the Schwartz's sent them to the synagogue's pre-school program This schooling encouraged them to observe Friday night rituals of Shabbat. The preschool also offered many opportunities to meet with other Jewish families and to learn more about holidays.

With one child in primary school and two still in pre-school, Rachel was increasingly concerned about the relative balance between her oldest child's Jewishness and the other activities in which she would participate. The growing demands of the community's Talmud Torah for her child's Jewish education-- 6 hours over 3 days in class-- concerned her. She wanted her child to have dance lessons, and other "fun" opportunities. She told me

> I could not imagine sending our children to a Jewish day school, but I am happy we sent them to a Jewish pre school and have given them the connection to the synagogue and religion. They were given a different thing than I could have given them at home. These are the imprint years. What they are getting now will stay with them forever. It gives all the kinds of feelings I want them to have in the long run; a little bit of knowledge, the desire to be in the (synagogue) building, a social group with whom they eventually hook up again at Talmud Torah, the feeling of community. It's in here forever.

Rachel pointed to her heart as the site where Judaism was to last forever. She went on to explain

> My kids feel something by being in this household. They don't learn Hebrew phrases or Jewish dates, but they get some feelings here. If you can put that with some amounts of

> learning, to me that's more important than even knowing a Hebrew letter.

When we spoke Rachel was deeply concerned about that the fact that her daughter had to leave elementary school ten minutes early in order to catch the Talmud Torah bus. She believed that this was probably too disruptive of her life in public school. She and her husband were considering moving to a Reform synagogue with a different type of religious education. This was a serious and difficult decision. What sustained Rachel was the knowledge that her children had been "imprinted" as Jews in their early years.

Rachel viewed herself as serious about her Jewishness. Her husband described their Friday night observance with great pride. His wife had purchased colorful dishes for Shabbat dinner, and the children made candleholders, took turns setting the table, and in many other ways made the evening special. She and her husband were both far more actively practicing their Judaism than their parents had, and Rachel took several classes in order to be able to explain the meaning of Jewish holidays to their children. When I asked Rachel how her Jewish life might look in twenty years, she told me what was most important to her was that "I will be showing you photographs of my Jewish grandchildren." Rachel remarked, "When my kids think of getting married and having their own families (and) they can't imagine it happening without a Jewish mate I will have succeeded. If they decide not to I'm going to feel like a failure."

For Rachel, as for many others who I interviewed, one's Jewishness was a matter of emotion, connection to other Jews, and "a little bit of knowledge." It involved celebration and community, but most importantly it was about a sense of belonging to and with other Jews that should result in marrying within the faith.

Imprint was not the primary way that Conservative Jews described their Jewishness, but the features that Rachel captured with that term were salient for many. This way of marking identity, Jewishness within the chambers of the heart, in Rachel's mind, renders behavior, action, and education as less relevant. Implanting it early in life is what she believes made her a Jew and will do so for her daughters as well. Rachel is not then simply describing something she does to and for her children, as Gans would have had it, but something that has happened to her and her husband and friends as well. While the categories of normative Judaism exist for her (Shabbat, education), they are a means to identity and do not constitute it. Had Rachel been told that her strategy was unlikely to succeed, that a minimal Judaism would not achieve her ends, I do not know what she would have said. However, her concerns about the relative balance of being an American (public

school, fun activities) and being a Jew (Hebrew school) were what her life work was about.

Moving on a Path

The Jews who were the most observant among the twenty I interviewed think of their Jewishness as fundamental, but at the same time many of them look at their Jewishness as a series of actions taken that have incrementally increased over time. The effect has been to make them "more" Jewish, meaning more observant. That incrementalism is often linked to the life course. As I will discuss below, the birth of children is central for these synagogue members, in their experience and definition of their Jewishness. But neither is the matter simply to become Jewish "for the children."

The gradual exercise of Jewish observance may be particularly characteristic of Conservative Judaism, with both a focus on ritual observance and gradualism. In the course of my fieldwork one of the synagogues undertook a "campaign" to encourage increased observance of the laws of kashrut in the home and in congregants' daily lives. In discussing the campaign with congregants many described their decision to keep or increase their observance in terms of the "choices" that they exercised.

A newly married couple in their thirties spoke to me about the great transformation each of them experienced at the synagogue where they met one another. Gene Miller, the husband, a 35 year old convert to Orthodox Judaism the decade before, whose paternal grandfather was a rabbi, explained,

> Since I joined the synagogue I keep a kosher home and I try to think of keeping more commandments. One of the things I like also about the Conservative approach, is the notion of the ladder of mitzvot. You can start at a certain level and gradually work your way up. It doesn't have to be an either or. You can strive for an ideal, but you're not going to get there over night. You take one step for now and think about the next step later.

His wife echoed those sentiments by asserting that the presence of too many rules creates her desire to rebel. Ruth Perl explained, "Tell me all the rules and I'll say 'no.' If I feel that I have room to do what I want I'll go further as long as I have the space to do what I want to do." And that spatial image served Ruth well because she saw herself filling up the space of choice with increased observance, and increased involvement in synagogue life.

Another member Glenn Newman, a man in his early 50's who joined the synagogue about five years ago, is a Shabbat morning

regular, does not yet keep kosher, but understands himself in a process, standing on "a lower rung of the ladder," as the rabbi characterized observance. At a Shabbat morning service the rabbi explained the Torah service in a way Glenn found quite powerful. He told me,

> Not long after that I took a Torah reading class and relearned the trope that at that point I had not used for thirty five years. And I have since read Torah in shul many times. It also enhanced my desire to do other kinds of things. I've taken early steps to learn the haftara trope. I feel a strong sense of commitment to learn to be a *tshliach tzibor*. I've increasingly been making a mental commitment to resume of kashrut (but that's all it is) That began when I began reading Torah, because the more I read Torah the greater became the incongruity between what I was doing on the *bima* and what I was doing in my personal life.

I asked him if the kashrut campaign affected his practice.

> It has begun to affect my practice anyway. Although we haven't yet really completed the commitment to kashrut, and we're only talking about it. We are redesigning our kitchen and we are talking about doing it so that it can easily serve as a kosher kitchen. It has begun to affect my eating patterns. There are certain things that I just don't eat anymore. It's not because I willfully cut them out, but because the incongruity (from eating them) makes them uncomfortable.

Others are brought to Judaism out of personal conviction, a life transformation, or a new way of seeing the world. As is consistent with Judaism as a behaviorally oriented religion focused on practice, virtually no one told me a story of a belief that changed his or her lives. Others, however, spoke of growing convictions and new directions that forever transformed them. One congregant's story is a particularly powerful illustration of that very experience. Sarah Gold, a 40 year old woman, is the granddaughter of synagogue founders. She became a bat mitzvah and went on to pursue a graduate degree in Jewish social services at Hebrew Union College. In contrast with most people I interviewed she was very active in campus Jewish life as an undergraduate and graduate student. Though she never regularly attended synagogue on Shabbat until she was 30, she came from a family deeply engaged with Jewish communal life. Her husband Ken, a high school sweetheart, did not grow up in an observant Jewish home.

They were, almost inexplicably, profoundly moved by a friend of theirs who was also at Hebrew Union College to study for a Masters of Social Work degree. As the woman tells it,

> We didn't even keep kosher or anything when we were students living in LA. A friend talked to us one day and told us why she keeps kosher. It made such an impact on us. It was literally a flash. We decided that day that we were going to keep kosher, which we did when we moved into an apartment. She is this wonderful down to earth person and came from a more right wing Conservative home. She grew up keeping kosher. She said "It's just so beautiful. I remember that I am Jewish with every meal that I eat. Every time I eat food three times a day I remember that I'm Jewish." She said it so directly and simply looking right in our eyes. We trace everything that we've done to that moment. We really feel that once you start keeping kosher that sets you on a definite path.
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> Then we started going to synagogue (when they returned to the Twin Cities), but I don't really know why. When my son was born and he was a baby we started coming to shul. We began to be friendly with the people we met going every week. We started having our kids at the Orthodox day school. All the people whose kids were at synagogue and the day school were going every week. We formed a havurah four years ago which led to us moving into the neighborhood. It was the biggest step we made. We lost a lot of money on our house. We occasionally walked 4 1/2 miles if we attended a bar mitzvah and it would offend the family if we drove. We became Shomer Shabbat and live near our friends.

This woman and her family understand their entryway to engaged Jewish practice to be their friend's translation of kashrut into their lives. Their growing involvement, slow and awkward at first, steadily evolved into their present day commitment to traditional Judaism.

One critical aspect of the step-by-step mode of Jewish identity and practice is the conviction that incrementalism is linked to a personal sense of the meaning of Judaism. One couple in their late 30s described this process in relationship to the observance of Passover. Neither of their families was particularly observant. When they adopted a child they became increasingly interested in developing a Jewish life. Ray's story of how they have come to celebrate Passover is illuminating for both its gradualism and their understanding of a practice that is their "own."

> We've gone to her parents who whip through a service in an unorganized way, to my parents where we have to bring over the kippahs ourselves, and force some basic blessings, and then we went to the rabbi's this year. We were there for what felt like 8 1/2 hours (whew), and I'm not quite ready for this, though it was a very nice experience, a learning experience. So this year we decided that every year we're going to do our own and invite others, Jewish and non Jewish, and make it what our ideas are about what it's supposed to be. Much as we're trying to push for it, our daughter pulls us along.

This ability to make Judaism "our own," in this case in part inspired by a young child, creates as it were, a Jewish adulthood that allows this family to formulate their own Judaism.

Creating Jewish practice does not always move an individual or family from less to more observance, or to a smooth transformation from childhood commitment to young adult autonomy to mature involvement. Sandy Levine, an attorney in her late 30s, worked actively in her 20s to learn about Judaism. Her family of origin was minimally attached to a synagogue. Her interest in Judaism grew out of her work as an attorney with virtually all non-Jews. She became curious about some of their stereotypes about what Jews believed and did. She began a remarkable journey, often with other adults who lacked a Jewish education, hiring teachers, attending classes, attending a learners minyan, and eventually becoming an important force in her synagogue's early years. Now married and a mother of young children, her practice of Judaism has changed. She told me,

> I think that the synagogue exists as a place to build community. Since I've had the kid I can't concentrate in the way that I used to. You're holding the baby on your lap and it's hard to follow; I don't even pick the book up. Half the time I'm in the crying room. Just to be there with other Jewish couples and their kids and to have our baby get to know their babies is important. I have a whole different relationship with it now with the baby. It's still wonderful, just in a very different way. I stopped wearing a tallis because I was getting spit-up on it every week. And it created a very different relationship and I'm going there for different reasons now. I imagine it will swing back once she is in the nursery and you can sit in shul again. There are five or six couples who are regular or once a month. There's a little community and we've gotten much closer.

This congregant has articulated her own self conscious awareness that her experience of Judaism will follow a different channel for this period of her life.

This model of the Jewishness and Jewish practice places far more emphasis on activism, choice, autonomy, self- reflection, and an obligation that is incremental. It echoes Jewish tradition with notions of a path (halaha), and action (mitzvot). Unlike the "imprint" model it conveys a sense of Jewish life as both idiomatically obligatory (if not literally), and requiring concrete observances. It relies on a Jewishness that creates differentiation from non Jews, not simply in marriage choice, but in daily life. Both Conservative rabbis of the synagogues that I studied used the language of choice and gradualism as well in encouraging their congregants, believing that it was a far more effective method to encourage observance.

Its' gradualism, nevertheless, makes behavior only part of a self-definition of Jewishness. This "way" is one full of negotiations, choices, and even contentiousness and opposition. The gradualism model may be particularly effective in integrating the various identities that constitute being a Jew for these Conservative congregants--a mother and a Jew in Sandy's case, a professional and an American in Gene's case, as well as a wide range of other forms of identity.

The step-by-step model is often linked to the life course. The birth of children is particularly important, but that was not the only life stage that shaped Jewish practice. In several cases marriage and beginning to establish one's own home had a similar effect, as did joining a synagogue that then set a series of life changes in motion. What the model makes particularly clear is the fact that "snapshots" of Jewish behavior in any one moment for Jews may be misleading. Jewishness, for these Conservative Jews, is most effectively understood as a process in relationship to life stages, and intention and reflection as well as behavior and attitudes.

Transmission

Not surprisingly, one of the most common ways these Conservative Jews spoke to me about the construction of their adult Jewishness was very closely tied to their relationship to their children. This was not true for all of those interviewed, but for a great many, including those whose children are now grown.

Again, in contrast to the "imprint" model, this was an understanding of Judaism that took more commitment and activity for some, although not all. But with remarkable consistency these men and women described Jewishness as something literally inseparable from the transmission of Judaism.

One couple in their late 40s, like so many others, never joined a synagogue until their first child was nursery school age. Husband and

wife, a corporate attorney and a realtor, spoke to me about their differences and shared ideas about being Jews and forming a Jewish family. Ron Green began, " We became more observant just to make sure that our children had a Jewish identity." His wife Sally continued, "We started observing Shabbat," and her husband concluded, " My attitude was more to do it for the kids rather than for myself. But then it was not meaningful to us before we had kids as it is now. " He explained,

> To me it's perpetuating a culture and a religion. I already had an indoctrination for a ten year period. I didn't need to be connected. But after I had kids it became important and I've seen that importance grow as they've gotten older. I think it's more of a life cycle thing. I take more of a generational, historical perspective. In order to perpetuate it you have to do certain things and teach your children. I feel that Judaism is more a cultural phenomenon than religious. I'm not a very religious person in that sense.

His wife responded, "I'm more religious. Shabbat was equally for the kids and myself. I do enjoy lighting candles and saying the blessings."

In discussing their sons' b'nai mitzvah they again expressed their different ways of constructing their Judaism. The wife learned to read Torah for her oldest son's bar mitzvah and read a few more lines for her younger son's rite of passage. She found it "a thrill to have your kid learning and the experience of having your child on the pulpit." Her husband reflected on the experience "in a generational context; my father was able to participate." She added

> My husband passed his bar mitzvah tallis down to our older son at his bar mitzvah, and then at my younger son's bar mitzvah it got passed down to him. Our older son got the tallit he had bought in Israel the summer before. Our youngest son's job is to pass it on to the next generation.

The transmission of identity, albeit in a private and non-normative ritual of giving up one's tallit, and the knowledge of its meaning for many generations remains a powerful medium for this family and many others.

The link between Jewishness and transmission was even more striking in the interviews I did with Jews who did not yet have children, but were planning on doing so in the next few years.

Belinda, a newly married woman and graduate student in her late twenties who had been an active member of her youth group and then a youth leader told me:

> The second we have children there will be things we will do. We won't just push the bread to the back at Pesach. We will actually remove it from the house. We'll go that extra step. I remember that my mom changed the dishes and it was a pain in the butt. I don't think she did it because she believed it halachically, but it was a matter of making us Jewish and making it a Jewish home. Sometimes we've lit candles, just the two of us, and it almost feels silly. I know it won't even be a hard transition. Going to the synagogue for Purim or Shabbat would feel different if I had kids.

Miriam, a professional woman of about the same age reflected similar sentiments when she told me"

> My Shabbat candles from my bat mitzvah are sitting on the counter just begging to have candles put in them on some Friday night. We don't eat any pork products, but we don't keep kosher. I have a consciousness about doing more Jewish things in preparation for having children. I'm somewhat obsessed about making them Jewish kids.

Children are the foundation of Jewishness in a particularly complex way for these young adults. As one man told me, "Judaism is about transmission." Another man, a physician in his mid forties whose children were nearing college age, saw the centrality of his family to his Judaism very much in contrast with his father.

> I think our parents structured their lives around the synagogue. Then there were a lot of the self-help type organizations that we don't have any more. For us, I think the family is the primary Jewish institution. We do shabbat together; we go to synagogue together; we will often pray and study together.

This man was one of the best Jewishly educated of all of the women and men I interviewed. In fact he rarely went to synagogue and was frustrated by the centrality of prayer to Jewish life when he drew far more meaning from the study of Jewish philosophy and history. Family, in fact, had come to be the defining setting for his Jewishness.

These personal narratives give a rather different meaning to a "child oriented Judaism," than Gans claimed. Children are not only the recipients of Judaism, but they structure its personal meaning for the parents. Children become the rationale and reward for practice and commitment. They keep alive the meaning of a tradition from which these adults have sometimes become unmoored. Jewish practice with

and for children becomes the content of identity. For many of the men and women who I interviewed it was through children that they practiced and cherished their Jewishness rather than having their children's Judaism substitute for theirs.

The fact that several men and women could not understand the observance of Judaism apart from a family, meaning children, was particularly striking. In part they accurately noted that their Conservative synagogues are largely built around families with young children. Perhaps more importantly as American Jews they have transformed Judaism's focus on communal and personal obligation to creating a unique identity for a family. Judaism's significance for them rests in transmitting those meanings to another generation, to avoid assimilation, and to shape the family as unique because its members are Jews. To train, to teach, to give, to provide a context were all critical to the transmission model. The family, in contrast to synagogue, community, and organizations for these late twentieth century Conservative Jews is the most important setting for creating identity and meaning, the best venue for being a Jew.

Personal Narratives

The "crisis in representation" that turned so many disciplines toward ordinary experience has far reaching significance for the social scientific study of American Jews. One of its most important implications is to offer a "bottom up" approach to Jewish life that asks: what do Jews do; how do they make sense of their Jewishness; how do they locate themselves within American society?

There are many ways to understand American Jews- their attitudes, their occupations, their political participation, their family structure and their educational and social class profiles. But one feature of Jewish life that is integrative of all the others rests on understanding how Jews understand themselves, who they are and how they are Jews. I am arguing from a rather small and limited sample to whom only a narrow set of questions were asked, that there is an immense amount to learn by attending to questions of "construction," "identity" and "meaning." By looking at how Jews understand what they do and why they do it some insights emerge.

Jews change their understanding of their Jewishness over the life course. Efforts to fix Jewish identity as a stable self-construction are problematic. Late twentieth century Conservative Jews self-consciously describe their decisions regarding synagogue membership, observance of Shabbat, and how they have raised their children. More in depth questions could certainly yield fascinating information about decisions about the expenditure of resources on their Jewishness and why they have made those decisions. Hence, the study of American Jewish life can only be more dynamic and more faithful to the experience of being

Jewish when it captures Jewishness as a changing and developmental process best facilitated by attention to biography and life course.

In this dynamic process of Jewish "self-making" Jews emerge very clearly as Americans. Even as Jews link themselves to history and generations, they do so with great self-consciousness of their own authorship of the process, their own desire to make Judaism personal and meaningful. The central place of children in that process reveals the extent to which the American middle class in general, and American Jews in particular, surrounds the experience of family with personal meaning.

The study of identity is then critically the study of "self construction." These Jews' facility with describing how they "chose" to be Jews should be further mined to understand how these acts of self-construction are continuously intertwined with other features of their "identity." How is their Jewishness related to their place in the middle class, their experience of being male or female, single or married, heterosexual or homosexual, their occupation, and their use of leisure time? The people whom I interviewed rarely made these connections themselves, which is hardly a surprise. One cannot often easily offer up the fundamental categories of one's identity for scrutiny. But there are questions that surely would give them the opportunity to reflect on these connections.

From the analyst's perspective, it is the study of that self-construction, less as a psychological matter and more as a cultural one which is relevant. Here, the issue of narratives is critical. These Jews have "narratives" of their Jewishness. They have stories to tell about moments of transformation, the significance of personal relationships, strategies for anticipating future behavioral changes, and ways of constructing their Jewishness in relationship to families of origin. Their rich vocabularies of Jewish life formulate an important dimension of how they practice and understand themselves as Jews.

These narratives are important to analyze for their structures and their content. Hopefully, the study of Jewish American narratives will allow for comparisons with other groups in order to understand the ways that these processes overlap and are differentiated from one another. In addition, the comparisons among Jews, by gender, age, region denomination and occupation might also be important as well.

In the social sciences we have relied for some time on models from the post war era. We have assumed that Judaism was the most acceptable form for the maintenance of a Jewish ethnic identity in the United States. Some scholars have looked at the importance of class and occupation for the maintenance of Jewish affinity and solidarity. Jewish organizational life has been an important medium through which to understand how Jews expressed their Jewishness.

The evidence is powerful that these formulations are not the most compelling for the majority of American Jews. In addition, the dramatic pace of Jewish acculturation over the last twenty years for Jews requires a much fuller understanding of what it means to be an American Jew, how boundaries are drawn and identity is formulated within and across them.

Virtually all of these questions make norms of Jewish life–behavioral and organizational in particular–harder to rely on than before. Interior states, processes, the search for meaning, and a host of other fairly abstract concepts translate very concretely into real people's lives. Jewish life in America is, like all other aspects of American life, anchored in the self, the small community, and the blended and changing family. Personal narratives sensitive to the ways Jews construct their Jewishness is a critical method for studying American Jewish life because it allows us to understand the processes of self construction through which Jews make themselves Jews. The study of changing and complex selves must take place within the structural categories in which Jews live, but they must be separated and reintegrated into those processes.

My study of Conservative synagogue Jews, from which I have drawn these data, is meant to be illustrative rather than a complete model of personal narrative research. By laying out the diversity of models through which these Conservative Jews articulated how they construct their Jewishness, I have demonstrated the complexity of what it means to them to be Jews. Their narrative forms, their location of Jewishness in emotion, behavior, and progeny suggest the richness of such narratives for our understanding of American Jewish life. They are an effort to understand Jewish life from the point of view of the actor, and as such to demonstrate how Jewishness is negotiated over time and within relationships. The models also suggest that while gross and normative measures of Jewish life are critical, they are always partial without understanding the meaning participants attach to them.

NOTES

* My thanks to Steven M. Cohen, Sara Evans, and Elaine Tyler May for their comments on previous drafts of this article.

[1] Milton Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life*. New York: Oxford University Press. 1964; Marshall Sklare and Joseph Greenblum. *Jewish Identity on the Suburban Frontier: A Study of Group Survival in the Open Society*. Second edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979. Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot* (Second Edition), Cambridge: MIT press.

[2] For a review of sociology of American Jewry in the 1970s see Samuel C. Heilman, "The Sociology of American Jewry: the Last Ten Years," *Annual Review of Sociology*. Vol 8 135-160. Rela Geffen Monson "The Sociology of the American Jewish Community," *Modern Judaism*, Volume 11, Johns Hopkins University Press 1991, pp. 147-156. Bethamie Horowitz has just completed an excellent review of the literature on Jewish identity for the Mandel Foundation. "Indicators of Jewish Identity: Developing a Conceptual Framework for Understanding American Jewry," 1999.

[3] See Horowitz for a discussion of this literature.

[4] Sociologists in the 1980s certainly took steps to avoid constructing norms in their measurement of one sort of activity over another. I will discuss this at greater length in the section below on that period.

[5] George Marcus and Michael Fischer. *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986.

[6] "Introduction," *Beyond the Cultural Turn*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 1999, 7.

[7] James Clifford, "On Ethnographic Authority," *Representations* 1 no. 1 2:118-146; George Marcus and Dick Cushman, "Ethnographies as Texts." *Annual Review of Anthropology*. 11: 25-69, 1982.

[8] Jewish history and classical studies have reflected a greater concern with these issues. For example, Laura Levitt and Miriam Peskowitz's *Judaism Since Gender*, Routledge, 1997, is a good review of both feminist and post modern approaches to the study of Jewish text and culture. Two sessions of the 1999 Association of Jewish Studies in Chicago, Illinois, examined "The Normatlization of Jewish History," in which papers explored the impact of scholarly trends of the last two decades on Jewish history.

[9] Personal Narratives Group, *Interpreting Women's Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1989; Daniel Bertraux ed. *Biography and Society*. Beverly Hills, California: Sage Press, 1981; Mary Jo Maynes, *Taking the Hard Road: Life Course in French land German Workers' Autobiographies in the Era of Industrialization*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995.

[10] I am using post modernism and post structuralism as synonyms for the purposes of this article.

[11] Matti Bunzl, "The City and the Self: Narratives of Spatial Belonging among Austrian Jews." *City and Society*. 1996. 50-81.

[12] Herbert Gans, "The Origin and Growth of a Jewish Community in the Suburbs: A Study of the Jews of Park Forest," in Marshall Sklare editor, *The Jews: Social Patterns of an American Group*. New York: The Free Press, 1958.

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[13] Herbert Gans.
[14] Gans, 230, 232.
[15] Marshall Sklare and Joseph Greenblum, *Jewish Identity on the Suburban Frontier.* : A Study of Group Survival in an Open Society. Second Edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1079 53.
[16] Calvin Goldschedier and Zukerman, *The Transformation of the Jews*; Charles Liebman and Steven M. Cohen, *Two Worlds of Judaism.* New Haven: Yale University Press.
[17] Bethamie Horowitz, "Connections and Journeys," 1999; Steven M. Cohen and Arnold Eisen, *The Jew Within.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000; Debra Renee Kaufman, "Embedded Categories: Identity Among Jewish Young Adults in the United States. *Race, Gender, and Class* Vol 8, 1999 213. The research on which this draws appears in "Communities of Choice and Memory: Conservative Synagogues in the Late Twentieth Century," In Jack Wertheimer, ed. *Jews in the Center.* New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2000.
[18] Michael Fischer, "Ethnicity and the Post Modern Arts of Memory." *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography.* James Clifford and George Marcus, editors. Berkeley; University of California Press, 1986, p. 195.