

JEWISH SOCIOLOGY PAPERS

**T**HE  
QUALITY OF  
AMERICAN JEWISH  
LIFE—TWO VIEWS

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## Foreword

This publication is one of a series of American Jewish Committee papers assessing the Jewish condition in America toward the close of the 20th century and highlighting significant developments in Jewish religious and communal life.

For several decades, serious scholars have predicted that increased intermarriage, declining birthrates and widespread assimilation would bring about the weakening, perhaps even the disappearance, of American Jewry. More recently, however, these dire predictions have been challenged by new studies pointing to a vibrant Jewish community, working confidently for a secure Jewish future. As the debate continues, the American Jewish Committee continues to monitor trends in contemporary Jewish life and to assess their policy implications for the Jewish community.

This pamphlet brings together divergent assessments of the quality of American Jewish life by two distinguished social scientists, Steven M. Cohen, professor of sociology at Queens College, and Charles S. Liebman, professor of political studies at Bar-Ilan University. Both essays were specially commissioned by the American Jewish Committee. Professor Cohen delivered his paper at an AJC conference on "New Perspectives in American Jewish Sociology" that took place in May 1986.

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## Reason for Optimism

Steven M. Cohen

For decades, most observers of American Jewish life assumed that American Jewry was steadily and inevitably assimilating. It has been widely supposed that, for the most part, Jews have been growing less intensively Jewish; and, even more critically, that those at the ever-widening periphery have been intermarrying with mounting frequency, setting the stage for large-scale irreversible numerical and qualitative losses to the Jewish people. In so doing, as historian Arthur Hertzberg and others have claimed, American Jews are merely recapitulating what had become classic Jewish responses to freedom: social success for Jews, coupled with cultural disaster for Judaism.<sup>1</sup>

However, since the early 1980s, several observers have publicly questioned whether American Jewry is largely assimilating, or even experiencing significant declines in what may be called the "quality of Jewish life." Charles Silberman's *A Certain People* goes so far as to contend that Jews have been experiencing a broad-based cultural revival.<sup>2</sup> Sociologist Calvin Goldscheider, who emphasizes "cohesiveness" as the central factor in Jewish continuity (by which he means the extent to which Jews interact frequently and harmoniously), concludes that American Jewish cohesiveness is strong and getting stronger.<sup>3</sup>

Participants in this as in most debates are seen as arrayed on two sides. Those who are more gloomy about the American

Jewish present and future may be called "traditionalists." They adhere to the traditional view of an assimilating American Jewry, and they tend to apply traditional standards in assessing its character. On the other side are the "transformationists." They argue that in the transition from traditional to modern societies, Jewish life most certainly changed dramatically and is changing still; but, for them, that change constitutes no serious threat to Jewish continuity, especially if we apply new criteria for judging the quality of Jewish life, criteria appropriate to Jews in modern rather than traditional times.

As it turns out, the simple division of observers into two camps -- whether they are called pessimists and optimists, or the less value-laden traditionalists and transformationists -- is ultimately distorting. The dichotomy obscures some very important differences within these camps; it glosses over crucial subtleties, nuances, and ambiguities. For, as I shall try to show, one can reject the notion of significant erosion in American Jewish population size and quality of life without endorsing the notion of a broad-based cultural revival.<sup>4</sup>

The controversy over how to understand the past, present, and future of American Jewry is not simply an argument over "facts." Even when observers agree on the evidence, they may disagree on its meaning; and even if they concur on its meaning, they may differ over its larger implications. The controversy is also an argument over how to assess American Jewry -- which standards to apply, which questions to ask, and which trends to judge significant.<sup>5</sup>

## **TRADITIONALISTS AND TRANSFORMATIONISTS: THE DEBATE**

### **Demographic and Structural Criteria**

Before proceeding further, I want to make clear which dimensions of American Jewry this paper largely ignores and why. In particular, I largely steer clear of what may be called "demographic" and "structural" criteria for assessing American Jewish life.

By demographic criteria I mean those processes that bear directly upon Jewish population size: fertility, intermarriage, complete

assimilation, migration, mortality. The most recent literature in this area has divided on two critical issues: the birthrates of Jewish women in their 30s and the eventual patterns of group identification among the children of the mixed married. Regarding birthrates, demographers U. O. Schmelz and Sergio DellaPergola have argued that the small numbers of children born to women in their early 30s portend birthrates around 1.6 children per woman and a resultant shrinkage of the Jewish population. Goldscheider and others contend that women will be having a sufficient number of children to ensure population stability, but they will bear them much later than their mothers did. Only the population studies of the early 1990s can definitively settle this question. As for the impact of mixed marriage upon Jewish identification of offspring, the evidence thus far is both sparse and mixed. In part because these issues are considered in great depth by demographers in recent and forthcoming publications, this paper will refrain from treating them in detail.<sup>6</sup>

Other analysts have focused on a structural standard for assessing American Jewry, one that emphasizes the cohesiveness of American Jews. This perspective is concerned with Jews' location in the social structure, that is, the extent to which they maintain distinctive distributions on the geographic, economic, and political maps of the United States. Insofar as Jews are more structurally homogeneous and differentiated from other Americans, they may be presumed to have a built-in propensity for significant interactions among themselves. Calvin Goldscheider, who has been the most explicit exponent of this perspective, argues that far from uniformly dispersing (as traditionalists often contend) Jews have been reconcentrating in new neighborhoods, as well as in new professions, subspecialties, and companies.<sup>7</sup> These tendencies stimulate not only harmonious and frequent interaction, but the sharing of political aims, economic interests, social values, and cultural styles as well. The distinctive structural patterns, then, foster new bases for cohesion, embracing even those Jews with no particular explicit ideological interest in perpetuating the Jewish group or any overt motivation for associating with other Jews.

Structural analysis, at least the way Goldscheider undertakes it, explicitly avoids making cultural assessments, even as it claims to explain cultural variations through structural determinants. In this sense, many of those with a passionate investment in Jewish

survival and creativity find structural analysis only marginally relevant to their principal concerns. Simply put, most Jews who care deeply about American Jewish continuity (or "Jewish survival") usually have other things in mind than cohesiveness. They maintain some implicit cultural standards for measuring Jewish vitality and prospects for continuity. Their perspectives, no matter what their ideological coloration, see structural issues as only preliminary to a discussion of the more central questions of Jewish commitment and cultural vitality (however measured). Assessing structure rather than culture may be closer to the metier of some social scientists; but then readers with interests in aspects of Jewish life beyond cohesion -- such as beliefs, myths, symbols, cognition, and consciousness -- need to look elsewhere for immediately relevant assessments.

The problem for the so-called objective analyst exploring the cultural side of Jewish life (as I do here) is the choice of cultural criteria. That choice, to say nothing of the assessment of the relevant evidence, is inevitably a highly subjective, if not often an intensely ideological decision. Neither passionate participants in organized Jewry nor even scientifically trained observers concur on which cultural criteria are most meaningful. A UJA fundraiser, a leftist activist, an Orthodox synagogue member, a Reform rabbi, and a social historian of modern Jewry would have widely divergent views concerning the very definition of core Judaism, let alone which aspects of Jewish life are most crucial for judging its quality.

One other complication is that cultural criteria may be applied to elites -- leaders and others intensively involved in Jewish life -- or the masses, the Jewish public. The problem is that the quality of Jewish life displayed by elites may bear little relationship to that displayed by the masses. And here may lie one of the sources of confusion in the debate between traditionalists and their opponents.

### **Elite Achievement**

Interestingly, traditionalists and transformationists tend to agree that, by and large, American Jewish elites are doing very well or, at least, not worse than their predecessors in the 1950s or earlier. In this regard, transformationists (optimists) regularly cite the following facts, which many traditionalists (pessimists)

readily concede:

(1) Politically, Jews are tremendously active and effective on behalf of Israel and other Jewish causes. In just the last decade, they have supplemented their long-standing infrastructure of membership organizations, defense agencies, local community-relations councils, and Washington lobbyists with a network of dozens of political-action committees that contribute to pro-Israel political candidates around the country. As Israel's President Chaim Herzog -- who is otherwise pessimistic about the American Jewish future -- has put it, "Never have Diaspora Jews been so politically powerful since Joseph sat next to Pharaoh's throne."<sup>8</sup>

(2) American Orthodoxy is vastly stronger than it was just a generation ago. Its members are wealthier and far better educated. Retention rates -- the extent to which those with an Orthodox upbringing remain Orthodox -- are far higher than ever before.<sup>9</sup> A day-school education and reasonably strict Sabbath observance have become the norm among the American Orthodox. Their proportion in the American Jewish population seems to be holding steady, and their influence in Jewish communal circles is far greater than it was just 20 years ago.

(3) The American Jewish professoriate is certainly far larger and, very possibly, "better" qualitatively (perhaps owing to its numbers) than it was 20 years ago. As a corollary, the tenor of Jewish cultural life -- whether academic scholarship, magazine writing, public lectures, or adult education -- is arguably stronger, and certainly no weaker than it was in the mid 1960s. In just the last few years, several universities have announced the funding of new chairs and some new programs in Jewish studies. Books of Jewish interest find ready markets and are frequently reviewed in widely read newspapers and magazines.

(4) The federation world is "more Jewish." Far more than was the case 20 years ago, leaders affirm a more survivalist rather than integrationist view of the world; professionals have stronger Jewish backgrounds; social-welfare agencies emphasize serving Jewish clientele over nonsectarian purposes; and funding priorities have reflected increased support for Jewish education, particularly day schools.<sup>10</sup>

(5) Day-school and yeshiva enrollment has expanded dramatically, among Conservative as well as among Orthodox Jews. To take one indicator, there are now over 70 schools affiliated with



the Conservative Solomon Schechter movement, compared to just a handful in the 1960s. This growth means there is a Conservative day school -- with supporting networks of parents, professionals, and lay leaders -- available to almost every Jewish community of any substantial size across the United States. Today, almost all Orthodox and Conservative Jews have access to a yeshiva or day school, a situation far different from that which prevailed 20 years ago.

Transformationists would argue that these and related pieces of evidence point to a redefinition of the meaning of Jewishness. By their actions, American Jews are saying that, in effect, intense political activity, a sophisticated intellectual life, and highly developed social services constitute some of the essentials of American Jewishness. In these terms, the quality of American Jewish life is clearly better than it was not too long ago.

For the traditionalists, though, most of these observations, and others like them, are beside the point. They cannot significantly alter the definition of essential Judaism, and they do not constitute evidence of improvement in the quality of Jewish life. First, some of the five points cited above refer to areas of Jewish life that are tangential to what many traditionalists regard as an essential Judaism (be it commitment to halakah -- Jewish law -- or to a critical social consciousness or to some other aspect of Judaism). Second, all of the five trends refer to the work of elites, who, in their totality, comprise no more than 20-25 percent of American Jews. (This figure includes almost all Orthodox Jews, the most committed Conservative and Reform Jews, all Jewish communal professionals, all day-school students and their families, and all highly active leaders of Jewish federations and other organizations.) Improvements in the orientations, activity, and knowledge of the most involved 1-million-plus Jews certainly have had a visible impact, but what about the vast majority of American Jews who have had no direct role in fostering these noteworthy upbeat trends?

In a very real sense, then, the battleground between traditionalists and transformationists is found in the arena of mass cultural standards. Traditionalists would be prepared to concede the arguments of transformationists with regard to most structural measures and elite cultural tendencies. That is, they may well agree that Jews remain structurally differentiated and are sustaining their cohesiveness. They may concede that Jewish life for the

most involved Jews is more interesting, more creative, and more worthwhile than it was not too long ago. But, traditionalists would maintain, the overall trend among the vast majority of Jews is in the direction of less Jewish intensiveness, of greater integration into American society, and of more remoteness from other Jews, ritual practice, and organized Jewry. Transformationists would object to dismissing the significance of Jewish structural differentiation or of elite achievements. But even if they did so, they would still contend that, on balance, the majority's Jewish involvement is no weaker, quantitatively or qualitatively, than it was a generation ago.

To address the heart of this debate, the section on evidence below deals principally with several mass-based cultural measures of Jewishness, primarily ritual observance and communal affiliation, but also orientations toward Israel, God, and the Jewish people. I examine recent trends in these dimensions as a way of understanding not only the American Jewish present, but perhaps a little bit about its future as well.

### **Conflicting Images of Authenticity and Modernity**

When applied to evidence on the quality of American Jewish life, the lens of the traditionalist and that of the transformationist generate vastly different inferences. That is because traditionalists and transformationists have very different ways of viewing not only essential Judaism but the Jewish past, modernity, and Jewish society.

Using their standards, traditionalists tend to see the Jewish past as richer and more "Jewish" than do transformationists. For them, the past sets a viable standard of authenticity by which to judge the present. Some of the more extreme traditionalists maintain that only those aspects of American Jewish life that resemble those found in premodern Eastern Europe can be seen as authentically Jewish. For their part, transformationists accuse traditionalists of idealizing and romanticizing the past. They argue that a critical study of the past reveals far more diversity, far more evolution, and far more influence of non-Jewish cultures than the traditionalists' usual portrait allows for. Accordingly, for transformationists, the "authenticity" of the Jewish past is a more fluid concept. In its extreme form, this view contends that anything Jews do that distin-

guishes them from others (even if undertaken without an explicit Jewish motivation) is authentically Jewish.

Not only do the two camps differ about the Jewish past; they part ways over the modern present. Traditionalists see the modern world as inherently threatening to Judaism. In their view, the larger societies in which traditional Jews lived were characterized by several features crucial to the plausibility of traditional Judaism. The societies' cultural norms venerated the past; they legitimated the pervasive influence of religious symbols, texts, institutions, and leaders; they emphasized communitarian responsibilities; and they severely circumscribed individual discretion in major life decisions. In contrast, the culture of modernity denigrates the past and exalts the "new and improved"; its secularist tendencies sharply curtail the influence of religious institutions; and it extols both individualism and autonomous decision making in important spheres of life. Even more fundamentally, where the traditional world sharply segregated Jew from Gentile, and sanctioned Jewish self-government, the modern world terminated Jewish autonomy and, at least in theory, opened the doors to full participation as citizens of fully integrated nation-states. All of these contrasts, traditionalists think, have undermined the very basis for Judaism as it has been traditionally understood (that is, historically and by modern-day traditionalists).

Transformationists see the modern world either as neutral or as providing opportunity for developing new forms of Judaism and Jewishness. Certainly the advent of modernity transformed the nature of Jewish community and identity. Most often, these changes presented not perils, but exciting possibilities.

And by extension, the two camps differ over their perspectives on the meaning of America. To traditionalists, America is a potentially seductive and corrupting influence, one that holds out great social rewards in return for social conformity, implying abandonment of many essential elements of Jewish life. To transformationists, the image of a conformist WASP-dominated America is a thing of the past. Since the 1960s, in particular, America has become much more tolerant of all sorts of diversity, ethnic, religious, sexual, and other. And, owing in part to their lengthening generational history in America and their socioeconomic success, Jews no longer regard their group identity as foreign, lower class, or in any other way stigmatizing.

Besides differing over the authenticity of the Jewish past and the perils of the modern American present, the two camps also differ over their ideas of Jewish sufficiency. Since traditionalists see Jewish life in the modern era as inherently precarious, they tend to be alarmed by any declines in measures of Jewish involvement, seeing each of them as yet one more step down the road to assimilation. In most instances, for them more Jewishness is better, less is worse.

Transformationists view declines in measures of Jewish involvement with equanimity. They portray declines in some aspects of Jewishness as inessential to Jewish continuity, often as replaceable by emerging substitutes. And if sometimes no substitutes emerge, transformationists see the declines as transitions to less intensive (or maybe just different) levels of Jewish involvement, rather than as movement toward assimilation, that is, total abandonment of Jewish expression and connection. In other words, when compared with his East European grandfather, today's Reform Jew who attends services only three times a year, sends his children to Sunday school, and knows little, if any, Hebrew, cannot be termed "more assimilated." He may be more secularized; he may well be just as "Jewish," but in a different way.

These contrasting conceptualizations are so fundamental as to sharply diminish the possibility that an assessment of data alone can resolve the argument to the satisfaction of all sides. Members of both camps derive very different conclusions from the same facts. Thus, no body of evidence on the current state and directions of American Jewry can turn a convinced traditionalist into a confirmed transformationist, or the reverse. The most one can expect from a confrontation with the evidence is a moderation of the most extreme views.

#### **Four Sides to the Debate, Not Two**

The more extreme traditionalists tend to believe that American Jewry has sharply departed from any reasonable definition of authentic Judaism, and that large numbers of today's American Jews and their children will sever all meaningful ties with Jews and Jewishness. The more moderate version of traditionalism speaks of polarization.<sup>11</sup> According to this view, the more active segments of the Jewish population have been intensifying their

attachment to Judaism and elevating the quality of Jewish life. What may be called the least committed, meanwhile, are becoming more distant from Jewish community and involvement. As a result, the vast middle (those situated between the most and least involved and committed) is supposedly shrinking, losing people to the extremes, probably with more of them assimilating than intensifying their Jewish commitment.

Transformationists, by definition, believe that Jewish life has changed dramatically since premodern days, but also that the standards for judging Jewish life ought to be changed as well. The more extreme transformationists believe that Jewish identity and community are generally strong and growing stronger, that perhaps even a revival has been under way for some time now. In contrast with these "revivalists," the more moderate transformationists see several offsetting trends in Jewish life. While the ways in which Jews connect to one another and express their Jewishness may be changing, taken in their entirety the trends point predominantly neither in a more intensive nor in a more assimilated direction. This view may be termed the "change-and-stability" perspective, in that it sees change in the mixture of Jewish identity patterns but stability in the overall quantity of Jewish activity, sentiments, and interactions.

A debater would have an easier time defending the two moderate versions. The proponents of polarization have places reserved for all trends in Jewish life, positive or negative: up trends are part of the intensifying process, and down trends belong to the contrary assimilating tendencies. The proponents of change-and-stability also can discount trends in either direction. Negative trends can be portrayed as signs of the decay of outmoded forms of Jewish expression, and positive trends can be viewed as their emerging replacements.

Transformationists and traditionalists probably are responding to their different perceptions of the intellectual climate. It is the wont of intellectuals to "swim against the stream," to look for what they regard as mistaken currents of thinking and try to redirect them. Hence, it would come as no surprise that many who have been seen as advancing an upbeat view of the American Jewish future perceive the conventional wisdom as dominated by overly gloomy traditionalists. In like fashion, the perception that American Jewry has become too optimistic about its survival has

prompted not a few traditionalists to articulate their views as a warning against complacency.

## THE EVIDENCE

Most of the evidence reported below derives from recent surveys conducted nationally and in the greater New York area.<sup>12</sup> The reason I lean heavily on the New York survey is that I have just completed a monograph extensively analyzing those data. Before proceeding further, a few comments on the adequacy of generalizing from the New York region to the country are in order.

The Greater New York Jewish Population Study was conducted in 1981 on behalf of the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies of New York. It interviewed over 4,500 respondents, representing a Jewish population of 1.7 million. Thus not only does the data set permit unusually detailed analyses; the population it surveys represents nearly a third of American Jewry, and whatever happens in this region influences and, to some degree, reflects larger national trends.

The distributions of Jewish identity characteristics in the New York region largely approximate those found in other local and national studies, with some important exceptions. Compared to these other studies, a somewhat higher percentage of New York area Jews are: Orthodox; unaffiliated with any Jewish institution; married to other Jews; and embedded in exclusively Jewish friendship circles.

### Intermarriage: An Ambiguous Impact

Almost every expression of doubt about the quality of American Jewish life or about its future includes, or even begins with, a discussion of intermarriage. Thus to traditionalists, intermarriage both signifies and stimulates mounting assimilation. It is the culmination of years of mounting social integration as well as chronologically increasing remoteness of the bulk of the Jewish public from the intense Jewish life of the European past. Transformationists are far more sanguine about the meaning of intermarriage and its consequences for the Jewish future. It is clear, then, that

understanding the significance of intermarriage and its implications for the Jewish identity of the couples and their offspring is obviously of no little relevance to the controversy over the current and future condition of American Jewry.

There are no reliable and precise estimates of the extent of out-marriage (the marriage of a born Jew to a born non-Jew) in the United States. Responsible estimates range from more than a quarter to a little more than a third of Jews who marry. It appears that the rate of out-marriage spurted ahead quickly in the late 1960s, while the pace of increase has slowed since then.

Those who out-marry derive disproportionately from weaker Jewish backgrounds.<sup>13</sup> Thus to traditionalists rising intermarriage signifies mounting assimilation. To transformationists, the concentration of intermarriage among the Jewishly peripheral means it is less threatening to Jewish continuity. In fact, it may operate as a useful escape-and-entry vehicle, one that facilitates the departure of less Jewishly committed individuals and the acquisition of highly committed converts. At the same time, it allows for the retention of the children of mixed marriages.

Roughly one quarter of born-non-Jewish wives convert to Judaism, as do a very small proportion of non-Jewish husbands.<sup>14</sup> In all likelihood, these conversionary marriages are both quantitative and qualitative assets to the Jewish population.<sup>15</sup> Almost all conversionary marriages raise their children as Jews. Converts tend to equal or surpass born Jews in median ritual practice and synagogue attendance, but fewer such families belong to Jewish institutions or associate with Jewish friends. As several observers have concluded, converts are both more "religious" and less "ethnic" than born Jews. (Possible reasons for this discrepancy include: ethnic traits require a longer time to acquire than religious practices; converts are brought into Judaism under religious -- rabbinic and synagogue -- auspices; and born non-Jews conceive of Judaism more as a religious rather than an ethnic involvement.)

Clearly, the production of converts by out-marriage must be regarded as a positive outcome from the perspective of those concerned with Jewish continuity. What of the nonconversionary couples, the mixed marriages? Most of them, in fact, participate in some sort of ritual, most often the Passover seder and the lighting of Hanukkah candles. In the New York area, about half have mostly Jewish close friends and more than a quarter belong

to a Jewish institution.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, very few observe the Sabbath or kashrut in any apparent way. Most mixed-married Jewish women and some mixed-married Jewish men claim to be raising Jewish children.

There is no doubt that the mixed married are significantly less involved in traditional or conventional aspects of Jewish life than the in-married. However, at the same time, most mixed-married Jews report not one, but several sorts of attachment to Jewish people and Jewish ritual and, less frequently, to organized Jewry.

The net impact of out-marriage on Jewish continuity is different for individuals (or their families) and for the Jewish group as a whole. From the point of view of the individual, the marriages of Jews to born non-Jews vastly increase the chances that the partners will be less involved in various aspects of Jewish life. Put most graphically, the out-marriage of one's child dramatically improves the likelihood of having non-Jewish grandchildren.

However, the consequences from the entire group's point of view are far less severe, and are in some ways beneficial. The essential point to bear in mind is that, relative to in-marriage, out-marriage doubles the number of homes with at least one Jewish member. As a result, whatever the measure of Jewishness, out-married households (including both conversionary and mixed marriages) need to produce only half the number of Jewishly identified offspring as that produced by in-marriages for the Jewish group to "stay even."

For instance, if 50 percent of in-married Jews affiliate with synagogues and only 25 percent of out-marrieds affiliate, synagogue membership is unaffected by out-marriage. If only half the out-marrieds raise Jewish children (who remain Jewishly identified as adults -- a serious question), then out-marriage will have no effect on Jewish population size. In fact, the number of converts and born-Jewish partners in mixed marriages who claim to be raising their children as Jews suggests an increase in the next generation's Jewish population of as much as 40 percent of the number who out-marry (New York area data). Since the parents' reports cannot be taken at face value, such a rosy prediction is unwarranted. Many of the children of mixed marriages ostensibly being raised as Jews now will not function as Jewish adults later. Nevertheless, it is clear that, taken in its totality, out-marriage is not now seriously eroding the sheer number of Jews participating



in several aspects of Jewish life. (Interestingly, two other studies by other researchers on other data sets arrive at substantially similar conclusions.<sup>17)</sup>

All of which is not to say that intermarriage is "good for the Jews." It is to say that intermarriage is not all "bad for the Jews." Too many imponderables make the assessment of the overall impact of intermarriage on the quality of Jewish life and the quantity of Jews a very hazardous business. But several signs -- most notably the conversions, the rearing of Jewish children by mixed marriages, the participation of most intermarried Jews in many aspects of Jewish life -- all suggest that the impact of intermarriage is far from one-sided or disastrous.

With this said, my sense is that, overall, intermarriage holds out the prospect for more downside losses than upside gains. Intermarriage is at least a mechanism, if not an important impetus, to declines in Jewish involvement for a substantial minority of American Jews. It is true that out-marriers, even if they had not out-married, would have performed fewer rituals and less often affiliated with organized Jewry than Jews married to other Jews. Even so, their marriages to born non-Jews at least augment their tendency to lead less involved Jewish lives. Even from a group perspective, the counterbalancing elements of converts and of Jewishly identified offspring of mixed marriages probably do not compensate for the less quantifiable losses attributable to intermarriage. Among these must be counted not only the assimilation of some out-marriers and more of their children, but also the implications for Jews as a group. Most critically, intermarriage helps blur the social boundary separating Jews from non-Jews; and less critically, it has stimulated rabbinic conflicts over denominational definitions of Jewish identity.

In sum, were it not for intermarriage, some Jews would be more secure from outright assimilation, some would be more active in ritual and organizational life, there would be fewer reasons for internal Jewish conflict, and Jews as a group would be more socially segregated from others. In light of the converts and other compensating consequences discussed earlier, none of these deleterious consequences, as problematic as they might be, constitutes a grave threat to the Jewish continuity of large numbers of American Jews. Moreover, as we see in the next section, even factoring in the rising intermarriage rate, Jews in the aggregate do not appear

to be moving to lower levels of ritual practice, organizational affiliation, or other forms of Jewish involvement and commitment.

### **The Fallacy of Youthful Apostasy**

One element central to traditionalists' fears for the Jewish future is their impression of the Jewishness of today's young people. By any visible standard, younger adults are simply less involved in Jewish life than those just 20 or 30 years their senior. Most American Jews under 30 belong to no Jewish institution as compared to less than a third of the middle-aged.<sup>18</sup> Substantially fewer young people report high levels of interest and involvement with Israel than do their elders.<sup>19</sup> In the 1981 New York area survey, only half the young adults said all three of their closest friends were Jewish as opposed to 80 percent or more of those over 50.<sup>20</sup> And, as is well known, young people today intermarry more often than their elders did.

These are only some of the more measurable differences in Jewish identity patterns that divide today's younger adults from their parents' generation. Undoubtedly, they may be supplemented by other, more subtle, if equally significant differences. All of these have suggested to many parents of young adults (if not the young adults themselves) that today's young people just are not "as Jewish" as their parents, and that they lack and will continue to lack their parents' level of commitment to Jewish values. By extension, major declines in Jewish commitment are just around the actuarial corner.

In truth, the situation is more complicated. First, several other measures of Jewish involvement register just as high (or just as low) levels among young adults as among their parents. In recent studies, three dimensions of Jewishness were nearly identical across age groups. These were: distributions of ritual observance, a composite measure of faith in God, and an index measuring "Jewish familism" (feeling close to other Jews, viewing Jews as one's extended family).<sup>21</sup> Thus, if there are declines in Jewishness inherently linked to age cohorts, they are found in only certain specific dimensions of Jewish identity.

But, even here, we have reason to doubt the view that some measures of Jewishness are destined to decline. Part of the reason young adults seem so distant from Jewish life is that the measures

commonly employed are those most appropriate to the Jewishness of conventional families. Most rabbis, Jewish educators, communal professionals, and volunteer leaders think that Jewish commitment is best measured by affiliating with a synagogue, joining a Jewish organization or community center, and contributing to the centralized UJA/federation campaign. And, it turns out, young people undertake these activities far less than their elders, leading many observers to question the depth of their Jewish commitment. But communal affiliation in all its varieties is very much a function of several sociodemographic characteristics associated with age but unrelated to a psychic commitment to Jewish life. The highly affiliated share the following traits: they are married, they have school-age or older children, they are affluent, and they have been residentially stable for several years.

That these factors rather than an inherent shortcoming in young adults' Jewish motivation accounts for their lower affiliation was demonstrated in my analysis of the 1981 New York data when I controlled for just one such factor -- family life cycle. Looking only at those who were married and had school-age or older children, I found that as many young adults affiliated with Jewish institutions as those 30 and 40 years their senior in similar family circumstances.<sup>22</sup> This suggests no inherent propensity for younger adults to avoid institutional Judaism.

On the other hand, controlling for family life cycle did not completely explain why fewer young adults have predominantly Jewish intimate friendship networks. Although (in the New York area) vast majorities of both young and old reported that all their three closest friends were Jewish (and even vaster majorities said that at least two were Jewish), the proportion reporting only one or even no Jewish close friends, though small, was notably higher among the younger married parents.

Coupled with the growth in out-marriage and mixed marriage (observable both in the New York data and other studies), the friendship patterns seem to indicate a trend among young people toward greater social intimacy with non-Jews. At the same time, despite this integration, the age-cohort comparisons indicate no declines in ritual observance, communal affiliation, feelings of closeness to other Jews, or faith in God. Much as those more optimistic about the Jewish future would claim, for the most part younger adult Jews are not "less Jewish" than their elders.

Of course, some traditionalists would object to relying on survey data for drawing such an inference. Survey respondents prefer to give socially acceptable answers, which here are those that affirm participation in Jewish life. In fact, one piece of research documented that a large fraction of respondents who claimed to have contributed to the local federation campaign were absent from the federation's donor list.<sup>23</sup> Respondents also probably tend to exaggerate their participation in other types of affiliation. For example, more respondents claim to belong to a synagogue than report paying membership dues within the last twelve months.<sup>24</sup> And, not least, it is clear that survey questions mean different things to different respondents. What is one Jew's Passover seder is just a highly secularized family celebration to the traditionalist.

However, for these methodological objections to have any weight, the skeptics would need to demonstrate that they apply more to younger than to older adults. That is, if reports of seder attendance are flat across the age spectrum (in fact, more young adults report seder attendance than do their elders), then the doubters would need to argue that the seders attended by younger adults are somehow less traditional than those attended by their elders.

In fact, we know very little about the quality of what stands behind the answers to our survey questions. We have no evidence which either supports or refutes the notion that young people are more likely to provide socially acceptable answers than their elders or to report participation in practices that are qualitatively inferior (whatever that might mean). Absent a good reason to think otherwise, it seems reasonable to assume that qualitative or quantitative exaggeration is randomly distributed over the age spectrum. If so, then it does seem fair to conclude that the evidence points to no significant age-related declines or increases in several critical dimensions of Jewish involvement, despite and aside from some growth in marriage and friendship with non-Jews.

### **The Fallacy of Generational Decline**

Traditionalists have long held the view that each advance in generational distance from the traditional European wellspring of intense Jewishness results in a further watering down of Jewish intensiveness in the United States. In support of this imagery,

study after study has demonstrated that denominational traditionalism, ritual observance, intermarriage, intragroup friendship, and other measures of Jewish involvement decline with each advance in generational status in the United States.<sup>25</sup> By extension, some argue that as time passes, as generations advance, the American Jewish community will continue down the path to weaker and weaker forms of Jewish identity and community.

The Greater New York data, with its large number of cases, permitted a very detailed examination of the combined effects of generation and age cohort upon several measures of Jewish identification. The conclusions of that analysis included the following:

- The model of declining Jewish activity associated with generational transitions accurately describes generation-linked differences for older Jews. However,
- The generation-linked differences decline with age. That is, among younger respondents the gaps in religious observance between immigrants and the third generation (grandchildren of earlier immigrants) were far smaller than among older cohorts.
- The rate of ritual abandonment as measured by parent-child differences declined substantially with age. To be more explicit, children of immigrants born in the United States after the Second World War reported unusually high levels of ritual observance, both relative to their parents and relative to older second-generation Jews. Where the prewar second generation abandoned many of their immigrant parents' ritual practices, the postwar second generation largely retained their parents' level of observance.
- The fourth generation's patterns of Jewish involvement varied with age. The older fourth generation (whose great-grandparents immigrated to America, probably arriving from Germany before 1881) manifested two distinguishing characteristics: they scored somewhat lower on several Jewish-identification measures than the third generation of the same age; but they also exhibited the largest increases over their parents' levels of observance. The younger fourth-generation respondents (probably great-grandchildren of early Russian immigrants)

reported Jewish-identity scores on a par with those of third-generation age counterparts.

These findings suggest that the model of generational decline is obsolete. At one time, Jewish immigrants and their children believed that American integration demanded they forgo those Jewish traits which symbolized their foreignness. But America became more hospitable to such activities (largely for reasons unconnected with Jews specifically), and as Jews became more secure as Americans, Jews became more comfortable retaining traditional practices. Moreover, the declines that characterized the first three generations probably ceased with the fourth generation. If all this is so, then a central theoretical component of the traditionalist perspective would be severely undercut.

### WIDESPREAD IDENTIFICATION, AFFILIATION, AND DIFFERENTIATION

The traditionalist perspective presupposes that a significant amount of assimilation has already taken place. Assimilation ought to be reflected in a sizable number of Jews lacking any significant involvement in Jewish life. Yet in one survey after another, vast majorities of respondents report one or another sort of ritual activity, formal affiliation, or attachment to other Jews. The totally uninvolved, in fact, comprise a rather small segment of the population, one concentrated among younger adults (who have yet to marry) and among the mixed married (whose remoteness from Jewish life, we have seen, is partially compensated for by the positive consequences of intermarriage for Jewish continuity).

To elaborate, from several recently conducted surveys of American Jewry, we can identify some of the many expressions of Jewish identity, connection, and commitment that characterize not less than roughly two-thirds of American Jewry. Among the ritual activities, these include: attendance at a Passover seder (85-90 percent); lighting Hanukkah candles (about 75 percent, and more with children present); and attending High Holiday services or fasting on Yom Kippur (at least two-thirds).<sup>26</sup> Nearly 90 percent of boys' parents provide them with some sort of Jewish schooling,<sup>27</sup> and while reliable estimates of the proportion celebrating bar

mitzvah are unavailable, the number may approximate that acquiring any sort of formal Jewish education.

Many active in Jewish communal life presume that half of American Jews are "unaffiliated." In fact, roughly half the Jewish population are members of families which report belonging to synagogues (about 70 percent of all Americans say they belong to a church or synagogue). Beyond the synagogue members are those who formally affiliate with other Jewish institutions. The number who are attached to any major Jewish agency (synagogue, organization, or federation campaign) climbs to roughly two-thirds. Since affiliation with Jewish institutions rises and falls through the family life cycle, it seems that the proportion of married couples with school-age children who are in some way affiliated is not less than 80 percent, or even higher. In fact, in Queens and Long Island (in 1986), 90 percent of youngsters 10-12 years old belonged to families whose adult respondents said they were synagogue members.<sup>28</sup>

Psychic and interpersonal connections with Israel constitute yet another dimension of Jewish involvement characterizing large majorities of American Jews. Over a third of American Jews have been to Israel, over a third have family there, and as many claim to have personal friends there. Over three-fifths report a personal tie with someone living in Israel. And roughly three-quarters claim, in various ways, to care deeply for Israel. About 85 percent say they pay special attention to articles about Israel in newspapers and magazines. From two-thirds to three-quarters say that they would want their children to visit Israel, that Israel's destruction would be one of the greatest personal tragedies in their lives, that Israel is central to their Jewish identity.<sup>29</sup>

Last, we can examine how Jews feel about each other, non-Jews, and the place of Jews as a minority in American society. From the common responses of roughly three-quarters of respondents to a variety of questions on several national surveys, we can derive a synthetic portrait of the myths and images that inform Jews' understanding of themselves as a separate group.

For the most part, Jews think of each other as part of an extended family. They see themselves (or, more usually, their ancestors) as having suffered many years of persecution, an experience that gives them certain moral insights and a certain moral privilege. Although America has been extraordinarily hospitable to Jewish

achievement, anti-Semitism is still seen as a real and potentially serious problem. Jews generally feel somewhat excluded from certain positions of power and social status, and that sense of exclusion influences their political thinking.<sup>30</sup>

These several elements of what may be called an American Jewish social consciousness characterize the vast majority of Jews of all ages, with one critical exception: fewer younger Jews express anxiety over anti-Semitism than do middle-aged or elderly respondents.

On the political spectrum, the Jewish center remains about 20 percentage points to the left of the national center (the gap varies with different electoral and public-opinion measures). They continue to support liberal positions and Democratic candidates far more than any other ethnic group, and these political tendencies are all the more remarkable in light of Jews' relative affluence.<sup>31</sup> The enduring nature of these political leanings says something, if only indirectly, about the persistence of an aspect of American Jewish identity. It suggests that whatever factors underlie that liberalism -- that is, in whatever ways Jews have been structurally or culturally distinctive -- they have been sustaining that distinctiveness. For if not, the Jewish/non-Jewish political gap would have closed.

In sum, the vast majority of Jews perform some rituals, affiliate in some ways with organized Jewry, feel attached to Israel, and see each other as a distinctive family-like, partially excluded minority group in American society. Moreover, insofar as young people or later generations serve as useful indicators of the future, the comparisons with elders and with earlier generations fail to indicate impending across-the-board declines in several measures of Jewish commitment and involvement.

### WHY THE MISREADING?

The evidence presented thus far certainly refutes the most extreme versions of traditionalism or transformationism. Contrary to some traditionalists' views, massive assimilation (without a compensating influx) has not and is not occurring. At the same time, the cultural revival that some transformationist observers have claimed does not extend to most American Jews (and if it does, then it does not seem to affect levels of ritual observance,



affiliation, in-group marriage, in-group friendship, and various attitudes of attachment to Judaism and the Jewish people).

Thus, even if the American Jewish condition is not all that outstanding, it certainly is not entirely bad. If so, then we need to ask why so many share the pessimism and alarmism of those predicting a significant erosion in the number of Jews and the quality of Jewishness in the United States. Several reasons for the exaggerated pessimism come to mind.

First, observers tend to derive their images of the near future from their perceptions of the Jewish involvement of today's young adults. And, as I have shown, young adults do participate less frequently in conventional Jewish life, at least until the time they have children.

Second, some observers utilize an outmoded model of Jewish social change. From the Enlightenment in the late 18th century until just a generation (20 years) ago, the predominant anxieties of Western Jews lay in securing their acceptance and integration into the surrounding society.<sup>32</sup> During the first two-thirds of the 20th century much of American Jewry also seemed more interested in integrating as Americans rather than surviving as Jews. For several reasons, integrationist anxieties subsided substantially sometime during the late '60s and early '70s. But, as with many sorts of social change, it takes several years for observers to come to utilize a new paradigm by which to organize and understand several disparate observations. And the basic paradigm one uses, the prism through which one observes human behavior, deeply and tellingly influences one's perceptions.

One example may suffice. If one presumes that Jews are looking for ways to escape the stigma of connection with the Jewish community, then the movement of Jews to areas of low Jewish density appears to imply an intentional abandonment of Jewish life. Consequently, Jews settling in outlying suburbs or Sunbelt communities with small Jewish populations are seen as assimilationist-minded. But if one presumes that serious aversion to things Jewish is a historic phenomenon (at best), then movement to areas of low Jewish density takes on a new color. One interprets such movement as part of a market-determined response to employment and housing opportunities.<sup>33</sup> In short, I am suggesting that one reason for the generally downbeat images of American

Jewry is that observers tend to organize their perceptions along lines of a largely obsolete paradigm.

Third, many of the most widely publicized and influential assessments of American Jewry are formulated by those who are most involved in organized Jewish life -- rabbis, educators, communal professionals, and lay leaders. Such people have several reasons for constructing and publicizing pessimistic assessments. One is that they maintain fairly high standards of involvement against which they measure American Jewish life. Masses typically fall short of the standards of elites, and American Jews are no exception. Moreover, the comparisons are intensified by the involvement of communal leaders in efforts to prompt ordinary Jews to learn more, participate more actively, and express more commitment. Such situations are bound to generate frustration on the part of the leaders and feed the perception that the masses are ignorant, inactive, and apathetic. Last, and not least, institutional interests often impel leaders to paint pessimistic pictures, if only to demonstrate the seriousness of the problem they are addressing or to secure continued financial and political support for their institutions' activities.

Finally, and related to the processes outlined above, two very authoritative networks in organized Jewry -- Israeli officialdom and Orthodox rabbis -- maintain a strong ideological bent toward perceiving assimilation among non-Orthodox American Jews. In different ways, both Israeli Zionists and Orthodox Americans see themselves as making essential life-long contributions to Jewish survival that less committed Jews are unequipped or unmotivated to undertake. Part of the *raison d'être* of the State of Israel is that only in a sovereign country can Jews in the modern age expect to survive the onslaught of anti-Semitism (in nondemocratic societies) or the ravages of assimilation (in open, Western countries). In like fashion, Orthodox spokesmen lend legitimacy to their movement by calling attention to the perils to Jewish continuity found in Jewish life outside of Orthodoxy. In addition, the assertion that there is rampant assimilation among the non-Orthodox is a highly effective rhetorical instrument in Orthodoxy's conflicts with Conservative and Reform leadership. (None of this is meant to imply that the misreading is intentional and deceitful, nor is it to denigrate the Orthodox contribution to American Jewish vitality and continuity.)

In short, faulty generalization from young people, the persistence of an outmoded paradigm, the cultural elitism of communal leaders, institutional interests, and ideological commitments all operate to make the image of American Jewry perhaps somewhat gloomier and problem-ridden than it ought to be. The truth, it seems, lies somewhere between the extreme views of impending erosion and far-ranging cultural revival.

### CHOOSING BETWEEN THE POLARIZATION AND CHANGE-AND-STABILITY MODELS

Of the four broad perspectives on the quality of American Jewish life described earlier, the two more extreme may be rejected as viable summary models. This leaves the two moderate perspectives -- polarization and change-and-stability -- as candidates for further serious consideration.

These two models agree about what may be regarded as the "upper half" of American Jewry. Both suggest that life for the more involved Jews has certainly improved over the last 20 or 30 years. Earlier I cited such trends as increased day-school attendance, more Jewish commitment among the federations, a richer intellectual life, as well as a more sophisticated, assertive, and intensive style of political activity on behalf of Israel and other Jewish causes.

Where the two schools divide is over how to understand the "bottom half," the less Jewishly involved segment of American Jewry. Here the major question boils down to how one understands the unmistakable increase in out-marriage and a parallel trend to increasing numbers of non-Jewish intimate friends and neighbors.

The polarization model understands these trends as rather ominous developments. They are important in and of themselves; from a traditionalist perspective, advanced integration with non-Jews constitutes an intrinsic loss of core Jewish identity. And they also are important for what they imply. For some observers, increased integration is a symptom of advanced assimilation for many Jews, and it is an impetus for further assimilation in the years to come.

The change-and-stability model sees the rise in intermarriage and the other forms of social integration primarily as increasing

the velocity of Jewish/non-Jewish social, cultural, and biological interchange, but not as in any serious way threatening Jewish continuity. The model points to the overall stability in ritual observance, communal affiliation, and other measures as proof that the state of Jewish identity can withstand increased social integration. It claims that population losses are offset by population gains (converts, Jewish children of mixed marriages). And, last, that the widely conceded intensification of Jewish life among the more involved certainly compensates for whatever small losses have been experienced by the "bottom half" over the last few decades.

The big imponderable for the future concerns the Jewishness of the offspring of mixed marriages. The Jewish partners in those marriages largely claim to be raising their children as Jews. We have no idea of the extent to which these children will continue to identify as Jews, nor the extent to which they in turn will marry non-Jewish spouses, nor the nature of their Jewish identity when they mature.

In short, deciding between the two models may be a matter of objective uncertainty (e.g., we are ignorant of the long-term impact of intermarriage); but it also may be a matter of subjective valuation. Is intermarriage intrinsically "bad," even if it has few effects on population size or group-wide levels of observance and affiliation? Are the effects of rising integration among the "bottom half" such as to seriously outweigh the improvements in Jewish life among the "top half"?

My own inclinations lead me toward the change-and-stability model. However, I can readily understand how those with a more traditionalist orientation will be inclined to adopt the polarization model.

Whatever our doubts about the future, for those concerned with Jewish survival and creativity in the Untied States, two things are certain. The Jewish population is not shrinking dramatically due to assimilation (birthrates may be another matter). And the highly touted cultural revival of American Jews is very much an elite phenomenon. If so, then cultural and educational policy ought to be aimed at enhancing the quality of Jewish life for the larger Jewish public rather than averting an impending disaster of massive assimilation. Hope for a better future ought to replace fear of an imminent catastrophe as the motivating spirit and central ethos of Jewish communal life in the latter part of the 20th century.<sup>34</sup>

## NOTES

1. Arthur Hertzberg has written: "Wherever freedom has existed for several generations without a break, the Jews have never in the last two centuries settled down to be themselves. Even in Central and Western Europe in the nineteenth century . . . the rate of falling-away was disastrous. In the third and fourth generation it began to approach one-half. Today in America we are reaching the stage of the great-grandchildren of the Russian Jewish immigrants of . . . a century ago, and all the indices of disintegration are beginning to rise. Freedom . . . in America . . . is resulting in large-scale attrition . . . continuity is most severely endangered by the very plentitude of freedom which is its most devout wish" (*Being Jewish in America* [New York: Schocken, 1979], p. 208). See also Arthur Hertzberg, "Assimilation: Can Jews Survive Their Encounter with America?" *Hadassah Magazine* 65 (August-September 1983): 16; Herbert Gans, "Symbolic Ethnicity: The Future of Ethnic Groups and Cultures in America," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 2 (January 1979): 1-20; Nathan Glazer, "On Jewish Forebodings," *Commentary* 80 (August 1985): 32-36.
2. Charles Silberman, "The Jewish Community in Change: Challenge to Professional Practice," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service* 58 (Fall 1981): 4-11; "No More Mountain Overhead: Federations and the Voluntary Covenant," paper presented at the General Assembly, Council of Jewish Federations, 1983; *A Certain People: American Jews and Their Lives Today* (New York: Summit Books, 1985).
3. Calvin Goldscheider, *Jewish Continuity and Change: Emerging Patterns in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986); *The American Jewish Community: Social Science Research and Policy Implications* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986); Calvin Goldscheider and Alan Zuckerman, *The Transformation of the Jews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).
4. For development of this position, see Steven M. Cohen, *American Modernity and Jewish Identity* (New York: Tavistock, 1983) and *American Assimilation or Jewish Revival?* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).
5. See Hertzberg's review of Silberman's *A Certain People* in *New York Review of Books*, Nov. 21, 1985, pp. 18-21.

6. U.O. Schmelz and Sergio DellaPergola, "Some Basic Trends in the Demography of U.S. Jews: A Re-examination," unpublished manuscript, Institute of Contemporary Jewry, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1986.
7. Goldscheider, *Jewish Continuity and Change and American Jewish Community*.
8. Response to a question at a conference of American Jewish and Israeli leaders, Sodom, Israel, December 1985.
9. Cohen, *American Assimilation or Jewish Revival?*, ch. 5; see also Steven M. Cohen and Samuel Heilman, *Cosmopolitan Parochials: Orthodox Jews in Modern America*, forthcoming.
10. Charles Liebman, "Leadership and Decision-making in a Jewish Federation: The New York Federation of Jewish Philanthropies," *American Jewish Year Book 1979* (New York: American Jewish Committee, 1979), pp. 3-76; Jonathan Woocher, *Sacred Survival: The Civil Religion of American Jews* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).
11. Donald Feldstein, *The American Jewish Community in the 21st Century: A Projection* (New York: American Jewish Congress, 1984).
12. Cohen, *American Assimilation or Jewish Revival?*
13. Fred S. Sherrow, "Patterns of Religious Inter-marriage," Ph.D. diss., Department of Sociology, Columbia University, 1971; Fred Massarik and Alvin Chenkin, "United States National Jewish Population Study: A First Report," *American Jewish Year Book 1973* (New York: American Jewish Committee, 1973), pp. 264-306; Cohen, *American Assimilation or Jewish Revival?*, ch. 2. Goldscheider reports a narrowing in the Jewish identity patterns of mixed-married and in-married couples among younger age groups (*Jewish Continuity and Change*, pp. 24-28).
14. U.O. Schmelz and Sergio DellaPergola, "Population Trends in U.S. Jewry and Their Demographic Consequences," *American Jewish Year Book 1983* (New York: American Jewish Committee, 1983), pp. 141-187; Cohen, *American Assimilation or Jewish Revival?*
15. Steven Huberman, "Jews and Non-Jews: Falling in Love," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service* 55 (March 1979): 265-270; Bernard Lazerwitz, "Jewish-Christian Marriages and Conversions," *Jewish*

*Social Studies* 54 (Winter 1981): 31-46; Egon Mayer, "Jews by Choice: Some Reflections on Their Impact on the Contemporary American Jewish Community," paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Rabbinical Assembly, Dallas, 1983, Cohen, *American Assimilation or Jewish Revival?*, ch. 2.

16. Cohen, *American Assimilation or Jewish Revival?*, ch. 4.

17. Schmelz and DellaPergola, "Population Trends in U.S. Jewry"; Cohen, *American Assimilation or Jewish Revival?*, ch. 2.

18. Cohen, *American Assimilation or Jewish Revival?*, ch. 4.

19. Steven M. Cohen, *Ties and Tensions: The 1986 Survey of American Jewish Attitudes Toward Israel and Israelis* (New York: American Jewish Committee, 1987), pp. 8-17.

20. Cohen, *American Assimilation or Jewish Revival?*, ch. 4.

21. Cohen, *Ties and Tensions*, pp. 8-17.

22. Cohen, *American Assimilation or Jewish Revival?*, ch. 4.

23. Bruce A. Phillips, personal communication.

24. Steven M. Cohen and Paul Ritterband, "The 1986 Jewish Population Study of Queens and Long Island," unpublished manuscript, Federation of Jewish Philanthropies, New York, 1987.

25. Morris Axelrod et al., *A Community Survey for Long Range Planning: A Study of the Jewish Population of Greater Boston* (Boston: Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Greater Boston, 1967); Sidney Goldstein and Calvin Goldscheider, *Jewish Americans* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1968); Floyd J. Fowler, *1975 Community Survey: A Study of the Jewish Population of Greater Boston* (Boston: Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Greater Boston, 1977); Harold Himmelfarb, "The Study of American Jewish Identification: How It Is Defined, Measured, Obtained, Sustained, and Lost," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 19 (March 1980): 18-60; Harold Himmelfarb, "Research on American Jewish Identity and Identification," in Marshall Sklare, ed., *Understanding American Jewry* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1982); Steven M. Cohen, *Interethnic Marriage and Friendship* (New York: Arno, 1980); *American Modernity and Jewish Identity; American Assimilation or Jewish Revival?*

26. Gary Tobin and Julie Lipsman, "A Compendium of Jewish Demographic Studies," in S.M. Cohen et al., eds., *Perspectives in Jewish Population Research* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1984); Gary Tobin and Alvin Chenkin, "Recent Jewish Community Studies: A Roundup," *American Jewish Year Book 1985* (New York: American Jewish Committee, 1985), pp. 154-178.

27. Sergio DellaPergola and Nitza Genuth, *Jewish Education Attained in Diaspora Communities: Data for 1970s* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, Institute of Contemporary Jewry, 1984).

28. Cohen and Ritterband, "1986 Jewish Population Study of Queens and Long Island," separate computer tabulations.

29. Steven M. Cohen, *Attitudes of American Jews Toward Israel and Israelis* (New York: American Jewish Committee, 1983); "From Romantic Idealists to Loving Realists: The Changing Place of Israel in the Consciousness of American Jews," in W. Frankel, ed., *Survey of Jewish Affairs 1985* (Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1985); *Ties and Tensions*.

30. Steven M. Cohen, *The 1984 National Survey of American Jews: Political and Social Outlooks* (New York: American Jewish Committee, 1984).

31. Ibid.

32. Steven M. Cohen and Leonard J. Fein, "From Integration to Survival: American Jewish Anxieties in Transition" *Annals*, July 1985, pp. 75-88.

33. Goldscheider, *Jewish Continuity and Change*.

34. Steven M. Cohen, "Outreach to the Marginally Affiliated: Evidence and Implications for Policymakers in Jewish Education," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service* 62 (Winter 1986): 147-157; "The Self-Defeating Surplus," *Moment*, June 1987.



## A Grim Outlook

Charles S. Liebman

This article is a good deal more subjective than a "scholarly" article ought to be. A number of factors account for this. First, "quality" is a subjective term. There are no standards for assessing the quality of a people's religio-ethnic life. Second, even if we could agree on such standards, we have no criteria by which to measure them. For example, I believe that the quality of the Conservative and Reform rabbinates has declined. But it may be argued that the quality of the Conservative and Reform rabbinates is not a fair standard by which to assess the quality of American Jewish life. Perhaps the rabbis have been replaced by other types of spiritual leaders, so the decline in the quality of American rabbis is irrelevant to the quality of Jewish life or is balanced by other developments. But even if one were to agree that the quality of American rabbis is a fair standard by which to judge the quality of Jewish life, how could one demonstrate the decline in the quality of the American rabbinate?

Third, "quality" is not the only troublesome term. What is meant by "American Jewish life"? Is the reference to the manner in which American Jews conduct their Jewish life? Clearly, there are enormous differences among American Jews, ranging from those who have no Jewish life to the Hasidim of Williamsburg, whose entire lives are governed by Jewish imperatives. But perhaps the term "Jewish life" refers to the conduct and policies of the

organized Jewish community -- federations and their constituent agencies, the Jewish defense organizations and their chapters, the Zionist and fraternal Jewish organizations, etc. Here too the variation is enormous. This brief paper, which touches on both the private and communal aspects of Jewish life, pushes generalizations to the breaking point.

Fourth, the discussion in this paper is based on personal impressions derived from my own observation and reading. Such sources are inevitably biased toward the idiosyncratic. Our minds register the unusual, not the routine. So the analysis that follows, even if accurate in detail, may distort the total picture.

Finally, the brevity of the paper adds an additional constraint. Some of the points touched upon here deserve more elaborate explanations. At certain points the reader must rely upon the author's good faith and judgment, if only because constraints of space limit the possibility of fully demonstrating and justifying his impressions.

In conclusion, this paper's claim to validity is based in good measure on my own study of American Jewish life. To the best of my knowledge, I began with no preconceptions about what I would find. I have spent many years in Israel arguing against the view, prevalent there, that American Jewry is destined to assimilate. I still believe that there is nothing inevitable about Jewish assimilation in the United States. In one article I pointed to the complexity of the very terms "acculturation" and "assimilation" when applied to an analysis of the future of American Jewry.<sup>1</sup> In a second, I documented the growing strength of Jewish commitment among Jewish leaders.<sup>2</sup> My current, rather somber assessment of the quality of Jewish life in America does not even afford me the satisfaction of saying "I told you so." On the other hand, the paper can be understood only in a particular context. A few years ago I would not have written such a paper. It must be viewed as a response to some recently published and widely acclaimed books which have argued that American Jewish life is flourishing. I am convinced that such assessments are wrong. There are positive developments in American Jewish life, and some American Jews, leaders of Jewish communal organizations in particular, have been tempted to pat themselves on the back and glorify their achievements. I find a growing tendency to ignore and even deny the pathologies

of Jewish life. These pathologies raise serious questions about its quality and signal threats to its future.

## SIGNS OF EROSION

I begin by commenting upon four signs that point to the erosion of American Jewish life. I do not believe that all signs point in that direction. But those I have chosen relate to central rather than peripheral aspects of Jewish life. There is nothing original in my presentation. But, as I suggested, the recent celebratory mood of the American Jewish community invites reminders of some bitter truths.

The first sign of the erosion of American Jewish life is the incidence of mixed marriages. Mixed marriage is not the same as conversionary marriage. Mixed marriages are marriages between Jews and persons who do not consider themselves Jewish and who have not undergone conversion, in accordance with halakah or not.

Some American Jews, including communal leaders and sociologists, ask: What is the impact of mixed marriages on Jewish society? This is not an unreasonable question. It is certainly no less unreasonable than asking: What is the impact of wife abuse on society?<sup>3</sup> But I cannot help noting that a more commonsensical and I think healthier approach would be to begin by observing that there is something intrinsically wrong with wife abuse, regardless of whether or not it adversely affects society. Now some social scientist is going to argue that battered wives are women who really want to be battered, that if no permanent damage is done to the wife there is no justification for the community to interfere in a private family matter, that it is inappropriate for society in general and social scientists in particular to make value judgments, and finally that there is no way society can prevent wife abuse anyway so it might as well learn to live with it. Such an attitude reflects more than the professional detachment of a scholar. It tells us a great deal about his values.

All observers of Jewish life acknowledge that the incidence of mixed marriage is rising and has already reached high levels. In a forthcoming study on the Jews of the West Coast, Bruce Phillips finds, as do others in other parts of the United States,

that the proportion of mixed marriages is continually rising.<sup>4</sup> In Denver and Phoenix, 61 percent of married Jews under 30 are married to non-Jewish partners. In Los Angeles the figure is around 30 percent. Steven M. Cohen estimates the nationwide figure at about one-third. Phillips predicts that "the next generation of Jewish children [on the West Coast] will include at least as many children from mixed-marriage homes as from in-married homes." In comparing the Jewish behavior of mixed-married to in-married couples he finds exactly what we would expect: dramatic differences in their Jewish affiliations and identities.

A second sign of the erosion of American Jewish life is Jewish education. I am impressed by and welcome the growth of Jewish communal support (i.e., federation support) for Jewish education. But I have also observed that within federations the discussion of the importance of Jewish education revolves around its contribution to Jewish identity and survival. I would have thought that Jewish education -- that is, knowledge of one's past and traditions, knowledge of one's own culture -- would have been a self-legitimizing value.

Most of what passes for Jewish education, at least at the supplementary-school level, is not about the Jewish past, the Jewish tradition, or Jewish culture. Perhaps federation leaders are discussing the right questions after all -- except that I'm not certain they are familiar with what is being taught in Jewish schools.

Jewish education is preparation for bar or bat mitzvah. It is also about learning to be a proud Jew (as though this was something that one can learn in a school) and in involving the student in a Jewish experience. The substance and content of the Jewish educational experience that the majority of American Jews undergo is trivial, at best.

An estimated 41 percent of Jewish children between the ages of three and 17 are enrolled in some kind of Jewish school.<sup>5</sup> Seventy-two percent of them are in supplementary schools, where they attend class from two to eight hours a week. Whereas schools under Reform auspices have been increasing the number of school hours per week from two to four, the trend in Conservative-sponsored schools is to decrease the number of weekly school hours from eight to six and in many schools to four. In many supplementary schools, the principal is the only person with formal training in Jewish education. In some schools even the principal may have

little or no formal training. Supplementary-school principals in one of the largest Jewish communities in the United States just completed a 14-week course on educational supervision. The course instructor informed me that "the principals are afraid to walk into the classroom out of fear of what they will confront."

The proportion of all Jewish youth receiving any Jewish education drops from 69 percent of those in grades five to seven (the bar and bat mitzvah age) to 35 percent of those in grades eight to ten. It falls to 12 percent of those in grades 11-12. In the day-school system, where Jewish children receive the most intensive form of Jewish education available, only 8 percent of those eligible are in grades eight to ten and 6 percent in grades 11-12.

It has been suggested that Judaica courses at the college level can fill the gap left by inadequate Jewish schooling at the elementary- and high-school levels. But we have no data on the number of Jewish college students enrolled in courses in Judaica, much less assessments as to whether college courses are better or poorer alternatives to traditional forms of Jewish education. Furthermore, it seems probable, though we lack data on this point as well, that those who do avail themselves of college courses are those who come with a better and more intensive Jewish educational background. I have asked chairmen of Judaica programs to estimate the proportion of Jewish students at their colleges or universities who enroll in at least one course in Jewish studies during their college attendance. Such a figure would at least measure the interest of college students in learning about their own past. My informants stressed that such estimates were difficult to arrive at. When asked to make a liberal judgment, they offered percentages ranging from under 5 to up to 20. In no case was my informant impressed by the interest of Jewish college students in Judaica courses.

The third sign of the erosion of American Jewish life relates to Jewish denominationalism and synagogue life. I attribute enormous importance to synagogues. They are the core institutions for the majority of American Jews who are affiliated in one way or another with the Jewish community. Fewer than half of all adult American Jews are affiliated with a synagogue; I suspect the figure hovers around 40 percent. Jews unaffiliated with a synagogue are unlikely

to be affiliated with any other Jewish organization and thus unlikely to identify as Jews on any credible measure of Jewish identity.

Conservative Judaism has been the numerically largest of the Jewish denominations. The affiliation levels of younger Jews and of third- and fourth-generation American Jews indicate that Reform may have replaced Conservatism as the largest denomination in Jewish life. But the Conservative movement remains of central importance not only because of its size but by virtue of its centrist position between Orthodoxy and Reform. This has helped prevent Reform from veering too far to the left. Conservative Judaism has served as a moderating or deradicalizing influence on Reform. Hence, one has to be concerned about the sorry state of the Conservative movement.

The growth of Reform at the expense of Conservative Judaism is the first point that deserves comment. We have many surveys that compare American Jews with one another on various measures of Jewish commitment. Best known are the national surveys conducted by Steven M. Cohen for the American Jewish Committee, but there are a number of local studies as well. To the best of my knowledge, every study provides the same results. Orthodox Jews score higher than Conservative Jews and Conservative Jews higher than Reform Jews, who in turn score higher than unaffiliated Jews. Synagogue affiliation by denomination and denominational identification (the two are not quite the same, since some Jews identify with one denomination and belong to the synagogue of another or identify with a denomination without affiliating with any synagogue) are the best indices we have as shorthand measures of Jewish commitment.<sup>6</sup> So the growth of Reform Judaism at the expense of Conservative Judaism suggests a decline in commitment among American Jews, although theoretically it may also indicate a rise in the Jewish commitment of Reform. My own suspicion is that the relative growth of Reform has a great deal to do with its more permissive attitude toward mixed marriage and its accommodating attitude toward non-Jews in its synagogues.

Lay leaders in Conservative synagogues report increasing difficulty in recruiting other leaders. There are synagogues that rotate their presidents every three months because they can't find anyone to take the job for a longer period. Terms of office of one year are not uncommon, and two years is the norm. My informants stress that this is not a result of the democratization

of synagogue life but of the absence of commitment on the part of the membership.

Moreover, members of Conservative synagogues in different parts of the country complain about the difficulty of finding suitable rabbis to fill their pulpits. It is their impression that the Jewish knowledge, human skills, general competence, and even Jewish commitment (not to mention morale) of the younger generation of Conservative rabbis is below that of previous generations of rabbis. I want to emphasize that I discussed this matter with only a handful of people. They may have been unrepresentative. Perhaps their own standards have risen and that is why they judge the rabbinate so harshly. Of all the observations I make in this paper, this, in my opinion, is the most problematic. But it merits inclusion as reflecting at least the perception of Conservative leaders with whom I spoke.

The fourth and final sign of erosion of American Jewish life has to do with Jewish culture. There are positive developments in Jewish cultural life to which I will return in a later section. The point I make here is that the organized Jewish community celebrates as Jewish culture anything written by or about Jews or of interest to Jews without regard to its Judaic content. In other words, Jewish culture is perceived as worthy of recognition and celebration even when that culture bears no link to Judaism or the Jewish tradition, however broadly those terms may be defined. I am not, in other words, protesting the level of Jewish culture. In my opinion, "high Jewish culture" is prospering in the United States relative to any other period in American Jewish history and I welcome this development. My reference here is to the organized Jewish community's conception of Jewish culture.

For example, November is "Jewish Book Fair" month, and Jewish Community Centers all over the United States in cooperation with other local agencies sponsor events connected with Jewish books, including visits and lectures by authors. In Houston, this has meant that, whereas one year a speaker was Elie Wiesel, in another year it was Erica Jong. Jewish Book Month in New Haven, the "cultural event of the winter season," was sponsored last year by the Jewish Community Center, the Department of Jewish Education of the New Haven Jewish Federation, the Jewish Book Shop, and the sisterhood of the largest congregation in the area. According

to the local Jewish weekly, the "main attraction [included] humorist Moshe Waldoks, co-editor of the *Big Book of Jewish Humor*, whose topic [was] 'Messiahs, Medicine Men and Moveable Furniture.'"<sup>8</sup> I found the *Big Book of Jewish Humor* very entertaining. I am grateful to its editors. The book is distinctively Jewish. My concern, however, is with an organized community that highlights that book, or others with less Jewish content, as centerpieces of Jewish culture.

## A SECOND LOOK AT THE CONCEPT OF ASSIMILATION

Some American Jewish sociologists dismiss the possibility of American Jewish assimilation. I think the problem deserves renewed attention. Granted, those who invoked the term in the past were far too glib in predicting the rapid assimilation of American Jews or the irreversibility of the process. They were misled by mistaken sociological theory about secularization and modernization just as Israelis were misled by Zionist ideology in predicting inevitable assimilation. Furthermore, the term was and is bandied about without sufficient rigor. The implicit model of assimilation was someone born and raised a Jew who, at a certain point in his life, ceased to think of himself as a Jew. This is not a major problem of the American Jewish community today. Those raised as Jews continue to think of themselves as Jews regardless of how they behave. The acceptance of Jews in American society, the absence of prejudice and discrimination against them, and the high status that Jews currently enjoy probably mean that fewer Jews today than in the past consciously deny their Jewish identity or consciously seek to escape the stigma of being born a Jew. But this does not mean that assimilation at the individual level is not taking place. It is, through mixed marriages in which the children are not raised to identify themselves as Jews or are raised to think of themselves as only partly Jewish, a form of identity that is more readily discarded. We do not know how widespread a phenomenon this is or how it will work itself out in one or two generations, but we know that it is taking place.

I am concerned, however, with a more complex model of assimilation, one that may affect substantial numbers of mixed-marriage households and substantial numbers of in-married Jews



as well. This is a form of collective assimilation that takes place in stages.<sup>9</sup> The end of such a process may not be the disappearance of American Jews as an identifiable entity. The process is rather one of attenuation of ties between American Jews and the Jewish tradition and/or between American Jews as a collective body and the collective body of Jews outside the United States. In this model, which I believe merits more careful attention, Jews don't exchange their identity for some other religion or ethnic group. They do not become non-Jews; rather, they evolve an identity and a sense of self that blurs their distinctiveness from other Americans while emphasizing their distinctiveness from traditional Judaism or from non-American Jews. Thus a Jewish-American identity emerges that, like Italian-Americanism or Irish-Americanism, is integrated into an American ethnic mosaic but is sharply differentiated in belief and behavior from the Jewish past or the rest of the Jewish world.

This form of assimilation is more appropriately labeled "transformation"; but it is a particular form of transformation, since not all forms of transformation have the assimilatory consequences suggested here. The process does not take place in one generation, nor is it irreversible. In addition, it needn't involve every American Jew. At present, it clearly does not, a point to which I will return. Finally, it is a process that is difficult to document because of the difficulty of defining those essential characteristics of the Jewish tradition or of the Jewish people from which American Jews deviate. Measuring this deviation is also difficult, particularly when the deviationists themselves claim that their behavior is consistent with tradition or necessary to preserve other, more essential aspects of the tradition.

For example, I believe that the decision of American Reform Judaism to recognize children of Jewish fathers and non-Jewish mothers as Jewish is a major deviation from the essence of the Jewish tradition and Jewish norms throughout the world. But Alexander Schindler, leader of American Reform Judaism, argues that it is both consistent with the tradition and necessary to preserve Judaism.<sup>10</sup> One's evaluation, therefore, depends on one's own conception of Judaism, on the credibility of Schindler's statement,<sup>11</sup> and, of course, on the consequences of the Reform decision. Nevertheless, I believe that such assessments must be made unless one is prepared to deny that there is any essence to Judaism or

that Jewish life has meaning without regard to Judaism. Some social scientists have asserted this proposition.<sup>12</sup> To the extent that Jewish policymakers accept this proposition, they seem to me to be furthering the erosion of Jewish life.

To state my position in historical perspective: Had late-nineteenth-century American Reform Judaism, the Judaism embodied in the Pittsburgh Platform of 1885, triumphed, its legacy would have been an American Judaism devoid of significant distinguishing characteristics, well integrated into upper-middle-class American cultural life but retaining only nominal or symbolic Jewish forms. Nineteenth-century American Reform was overwhelmed by the migration to the United States of Eastern European Jews, who traditionalized the form and content of American Reform and reintegrated it into the Jewish world and the Judaic past. Therefore, the reemergence or continued vitality of nineteenth-century Reform not only among Reform Jews but among Conservative Jews as well must give one pause.

The following are some illustrations. In an article, "Thoughts on *Golus*," an American Conservative rabbi says:

While *Golus* is a Jewish word it is not only a Jewish issue. It is a human issue as well. *Golus* in 1986 is children going to sleep hungry night after night. It is approximately 30 armed conflicts raging around the globe. It is the continuing deterioration of our habitat and ecosystem ... And most alarmingly, it is thousands of nuclear warheads ready at this moment to annihilate us all.<sup>13</sup>

All the Conservative and Reform synagogues in the New Haven area cooperate in sponsoring a Tisha B'Av service. According to the chairman of the evening, "originally the observance of Tisha B'Av recalled only the destruction of the Holy Temple." However, he went on to say, it now includes commemoration of other calamities. Finally, he concluded:

This year, in honor of the 100th anniversary of Miss Liberty, special recognition will be included of our great debt to the United States of America for the opportunity that this country has given our people.<sup>14</sup>

At the Pacific Southwest Convention of the United Synagogue of America held in November 1986, a *Supplementary Prayer Book* in English was prepared for the Friday evening and Sabbath services. It contained five selections that were to be recited aloud at various points in the service. Each merits separate discussion, but I refer to only two of them here. One, recited after the "Amidah" prayer, was a statement by Jihan Sadat on peace. The final selection was adopted from the new Conservative prayer book, *Sim Shalom*. It is a translation of "Why I Am a Jew" by Edmund Fleg, and the theme of the author's creed becomes clear in the following concluding lines:

I am a Jew because the promise of Judaism is a universal promise.

I am a Jew because, for the Jew, the world is not finished: men will complete it.

I am a Jew because, for the Jew man is not fully created: men are creating him.

I am a Jew because Judaism places man above nations and above Judaism itself.

I am a Jew because, above man, Judaism places the oneness of God.

Lest my point here be misunderstood, I don't believe Judaism can survive, much less flourish, unless it evolves. I would be happy to see Judaism evolve in a more open, universalistic, liberal direction. So, in some respects, I welcome many currents in American Jewish life. I believe that, under the proper circumstances, they are especially helpful as an antidote to developments I fear are taking place in Israeli Judaism. But I also believe that one can distinguish between a coherent Judaism that is anchored in a Jewish past even as it redefines that past and, with it, the imperatives of the present and what I sense is an increasingly incoherent pattern of symbols and a random structure of responses that constitute much of American Jewish life. There is no imminent danger that American Jews will abandon their concern with Israel or with Soviet Jewry. On the contrary, much of organized Jewish life today is built around support for Israel and world Jewry. But there is a danger that a conception of American Judaism will develop that will make such support increasingly meaningless and

eventually lead to its diminution. Such a process may, in fact, already be taking place.

## THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE OPTIMIST PERSPECTIVE

If my observations are correct, how does one account for the very different assessment by other students of American Jewry? The obvious answer is that our measures of Jewish life and our definition of what constitutes a healthy or flourishing or vigorous Jewish community are subjective. The biographies of the scholars, their experiences, their ideologies, the environments in which they work, and even the literature to which they respond all influence their appraisals. This applies to the present paper as well.

Four factors have led other observers to assess Jewish life differently than I do. I am not concerned here with questions of ideology or environment, which I have described in a separate article.<sup>15</sup>

First, American Jewish life is far more public and communal than it was a few decades ago. Anti-Semitism in American public life has declined. American Jews feel more secure today than they did in the past. Furthermore, ethnicity is not only legitimate but is valued in American culture. Charles Silberman's *A Certain People*,<sup>16</sup> in reminding us how far Jews have come in American society, also reminds us how burdensome Judaism was just one generation ago for those who sought prestige, status, and acceptance among Gentiles. Furthermore, the anti-Semitism from which the aspiring Jew suffered distinguished between the Jew who subdued his Jewishness and the Jew who consciously or unconsciously displayed it. Dan Oren's study of the history of Jews at Yale documents this point nicely.<sup>17</sup> One result was a sacrifice of one's Judaism as the price of acceptance, but another result was the concealment of one's Jewish identity -- its privatization, its removal from the public realm. Acceptance of Jews and ethnic legitimacy have reduced the pressures to sacrifice one's Jewish identity and have rendered its privatization unnecessary. In addition, privatization itself has lost a great deal of meaning in a culture that increasingly blurs lines between public and private life. A middle-aged academic from an

English university, contrasting his generation, and culture with young American college students in the late '60s and early '70s, observes:

We're private people, aren't we, our generation? We make a clear distinction between private and public life; and the important things, the things that make us happy or unhappy are private.<sup>18</sup>

Increasingly, and this remains a legacy of the rebellious counterculture student movement of that period, our dress, our speech, our behavior that was once private has now become public. This is particularly true of Jewish life for an additional reason. Increasing numbers of Jews don't know how to act out their Jewishness in the private domain and depend upon the public domain to express their Jewish identity. This is reflected in two interrelated developments. First, the kinds of ritual and symbolic behavior which were once practiced privately but not publicly are now practiced publicly but not privately. Wearing a yarmulke, reciting a blessing before or grace after meals are commonplace at public Jewish functions even when none of the participants might do so in the privacy of their homes. References to the Jewish New Year, or Hanukkah, or Passover are increasingly heard in the mass media and evoke associations for Jews to whom the Jewish New Year is not a new year in any meaningful sense, for whom Hanukkah is at most a surrogate Christmas and Passover the occasion for an extended family to eat together. Jews who are increasingly uncomfortable or ignorant of their religio-cultural tradition, a tradition whose primary locus is the home, now favor public, communal, and political activities with which they feel more comfortable or in which they can engage as spectators.

This public activity, intensified since 1967, can easily deceive us. It renders Jewish life far more visible than in the past and projects a false image of Jewish vitality. Obviously, I welcome such activity. I hope it will strengthen Jewish life, but I am inclined to evaluate it as a form of residual Jewishness rather than an alternative expression of Jewishness, as I seek to demonstrate below.

The second factor that has led some observers to a benign

assessment of American Jewish life is the view that there are alternative modes by which Jews may express their Jewishness. Whereas, it is argued, American Jews may have abandoned some forms of expression (e.g., religious belief and ritual behavior), they have adopted others.

These new forms provide a wide range of options for expressing Jewishness [and include] the combination of family, friends, community activities, organizations, and reading about and visiting Israel.<sup>19</sup>

I have reservations about this argument. As I have already suggested, I don't believe Jewish life can be assessed independently of its relationship to Judaism. But there are strong empirical grounds for rejecting the argument that there are alternative expressions of Judaism in the United States and that one is strengthened as the other weakens.

The strongest case that can be made for such a proposition is American Jewish support for Israel. There is no question that the American Jewish community in general and American Jews in particular have become more interested in and supportive of Israel since 1967. Is this not evidence of a resurgent Judaism? Can it not be argued that Jews are substituting one form of Jewish expression for another? Steven Cohen puts the matter as follows:

In light of the secular roots of Zionism and its broad appeal to the modernizing masses, one might speculate that support for Israel today would be strongest among the ritually non-observant American Jews, who in effect may supplant God with country.<sup>20</sup>

Cohen measures support for Israel through use of three indices: concern for Israel, support for its policies, and travel to Israel. He found that younger people were less pro-Israel than their elders, and that the more ritually observant were more pro-Israel than the unobservant. His 1986 national survey of American Jews reinforces this observation.<sup>21</sup> Paul Ritterband, in his forthcoming study of New York City Jews, arrives at similar conclusions with respect to other forms of Jewish expression, including the proportion of one's friends who are Jewish and the number of Jewish organiza-

tions to which one belongs. The more ritually observant and synagogue attending the Jew is, the more likely he is to score high on any credible measure of Jewish identity. There surely are a variety of forms of Jewish expression, but the Jew who scores high on one measure is likely to score high on all of them, and the Jew who scores low on one measure is likely to score low on all of them. This wasn't true in the past and it needn't necessarily be true in the future, but it is true today.

With respect to American support for Israel, I would argue that it is the lowest common denominator of Jewish life. It receives so much attention because it is public and secular. But it is not an alternative form of Jewish expression. This does not mean that it has not or cannot serve as a vehicle to reintegrate an otherwise assimilating Jew into Jewish life. But this is true of only a small minority of Jews. I am more impressed by signs of erosion in support for Israel, which bode poorly for the future.<sup>22</sup>

The third factor that helps to account for the favorable assessment many make of American Jewish life is the misguided confidence they place in survey research on American Jews. Survey research is an important instrument to assist our understanding of American Jewish life. But it is subject to certain inherent limitations and, of course, biases in interpretation of which, because of its scientific aura, the reader may not be aware. Those who design questionnaires must choose a few questions from among a great number of possibilities. Furthermore, there is an advantage in repeating the same questions year after year in the same or different communities to facilitate comparisons. Unfortunately, the same question can be interpreted differently at different times, thereby providing misleading results.

A good example is questions concerning the Passover seder. Many questionnaires ask respondents whether they attended a Passover seder at home or elsewhere during the past year. Around 85 percent of American Jews respond that they did. This, and answers to similar questions, has led Steven M. Cohen, the best known and one of the most thoughtful of the survey researchers, to locate "the large majority of Jews ... along the middle ranges of Jewish involvement."<sup>23</sup> In all fairness to Cohen, he does observe that "the quality of their Jewishness, the depth, and significance of their affiliation, may leave much to be desired."<sup>24</sup> Furthermore,

"middle range of Jewish involvement" is a relative term, although a reader may be tempted to forget this, particularly when he reads figures to demonstrate the continuity of Jewish loyalty to at least some ritual observance. The problem is that to many American Jews the term "Passover seder" can mean little more than a family meal. The anecdotal evidence suggests that, when many American Jews report they attended a seder, they don't mean they attended a ceremonial meal in which foods were prepared in accordance with Passover injunctions and the Passover Haggadah, the heart of the traditional seder, was recited. We don't know how many American Jews celebrate the Passover seder in accordance with the Jewish tradition, however liberally one wishes to interpret that tradition, because survey researchers don't ask that question. The same is true for lighting Hanukkah or Sabbath candles. It is not inconceivable that the number of respondents who report that they engage in any of these activities may even be higher than the number who would have reported that they did so 50 years ago. But it is also likely that 50 years ago those who celebrated the Passover by sitting down to a family meal and nothing more would have realized that they weren't in fact celebrating a seder.

Another problem with survey research is interpretation. Is the glass half full or half empty? The answer depends in part on one's expectations. Lowered levels of expectation among observers of contemporary Jewish life is further evidence, to me, of the erosion of Jewish life, not its vigor. Cohen notes that 60 percent of Jewish couples with school-age children are affiliated with a synagogue.<sup>25</sup> Cohen finds comfort in this figure, though as he himself indicates -- and as every other survey of American Jews that asks the same question confirms -- the majority of Jews who affiliate with a synagogue do so when their children are of school age and may disaffiliate after their youngest child reaches 13. Rather than interpret this affiliation as a sign of continued Jewish commitment, I regard it as residual commitment. Jews still want a bar or bat mitzvah for their children,<sup>26</sup> and most of them probably want more than that. They want their children to feel Jewish, and since they are insecure about their ability to provide that feeling in the home they turn to synagogue-sponsored schools to provide it.

Two additional problems with survey research of American Jews are the representativeness of the samples and the credibility



of the responses. A Jew who explicitly denies his or her Jewishness will avoid the researcher's net; the most traditional are lost as well. In addition, even someone who doesn't deny his past but who lives in a non-Jewish neighborhood, with no Jewish affiliations at all, is unlikely to fall into a sample. Survey researchers are aware of these problems and have been rather inventive in trying to overcome them, but the fact remains that the assimilated Jew is least likely to be tapped through survey research.

Furthermore, respondents may exaggerate the degree of their Jewish behavior. This too, one might argue, is a positive sign. If respondents bother to lie about the intensity of their Jewish commitment, that may suggest that they still care about demonstrating their Jewishness. But I am not arguing that the vast majority of American Jews are seeking to conceal their Jewish identity. That would be the final and not even necessary step in assimilating. The argument centers on the quality of their Jewishness and whether or not it is eroding. Hence the accuracy of the figures is significant. Steven Cohen's 1986 national survey of American Jews finds that 61 percent of respondents report they fasted on Yom Kippur during the past year and 25 percent report they attended Sabbath services once a month or more during 1986. Neither figure is credible. The figure of 61 percent suggests that respondents are either exaggerating their ritual performance or are defining a "fast" as fasting part of the day. The Sabbath-attendance figure of 25 percent is no less incredible. It would mean that synagogues are filled to capacity Sabbath after Sabbath.

Survey research is useful, but it has its limits. It is unfortunate that Jewish sociologists have engaged in so little anthropological or ethnological research, which could speak to many of the questions raised here. Chaim Waxman has observed that most social scientists of American Jewry rely on demographic data and "have little grounding in either the sociology of religion or traditional Judaism, and they, therefore, are oblivious to them."<sup>27</sup> I'm not sure that the matter stems from the lack of grounding in traditional Judaism, but the absence of sensitivity to the sociology of religion is certainly true. I suspect the problem stems from a reluctance or inability of social scientists to provide a model of a community or a conception of Judaism against which they can assess American Jewish life. This may stem from a fear of the kinds of conclusions and policy implications such a model would offer.

The fourth factor contributing to misconceptions about the success of American Jewish life is the attributing to all American Jews of the positive developments in one segment of the community. An estimated 12 percent of Jewish children between the ages of three and 17 are enrolled in Jewish day schools. They constitute 28 percent of all Jewish children receiving some form of Jewish education. Although the figure drops to 6 percent by the final two years of high school, it is a fact that a minority, however small, of Jewish children receive a very intensive form of Jewish education. This is a hopeful sign. The figures today are higher than they were in the past. But they hardly suggest that American Jews are becoming more intensively Jewish. Taken in conjunction with other developments, they indicate only that a minority of American Jews is seeking a more intensive form of Jewish life.

Decisions by some Jews to dramatically alter their lives in a Jewish direction at the private level and/or the communal and organizational level are not unknown. Although most widely advertised as an Orthodox phenomenon, such decision making is not confined to the Orthodox. Deborah Lipstadt writes about young Jewish communal leaders who search for the meaning of their own Jewish sentiments:

They are convinced that the nature of the communal work which they do has not only human but transcendental significance ... they exemplify the romantic strain which has emerged in American Jewish life<sup>28</sup> and which seeks more than just a memory of Jewish life.

There is a revival of Jewish life on college campuses. Some students with little background or interest in Judaism suddenly find themselves interested and involved in Jewish activities and in discovering the meaning of being Jews. Some academicians, previously indifferent and even contemptuous of Judaism, are now engaged in a search to learn more about their own tradition. This search has become increasingly respectable as Judaism has gained in stature and importance in American culture. But it also reflects a sense of despair with the inchoate and rootless nature of modern culture, which threatens one's sense of order in general and family stability in particular. This same phenomenon is found among young professionals who previously sought to

ground their lives in their vocations and their professional associations but now find they require a more transcendent anchor for their sense of morality or their system of values.

The revival of Jewish life is reflected in the personal lives of many Jews as well as in the communal policies of Jewish organizations.<sup>29</sup> The American Jewish community is no longer led by those who seek to demonstrate that Jews are entitled to equal rights because Judaism is really not different from Christianity and is entirely compatible with the values of middle-class America. Instead, Jewish leaders today are more concerned with the welfare of Jews in the United States, in Israel and elsewhere and in ensuring the survival of American Judaism.

Jewish books of a serious nature, the translation of and commentary upon traditional texts, new interpretations of Jewish history, modern Jewish scholarship and belles lettres are all flourishing as never before in America. The list of books available from the *Jewish Book-shelf* published by B'nai B'rith is evidence of that.

These and other positive signs point to the possibility of an American Jewish revival. They demonstrate that Jewish life can flourish amid material prosperity and political freedom and that anti-Semitism and suffering are not preconditions for Jewish loyalty. But they are not evidence of the positive identity and commitment of the vast majority of American Jews. Rather, they point to a polarization among American Jews and to the capacity of a minority to sustain and even strengthen their Jewish commitments despite the tendencies of the majority.

The phenomenon requires careful study. If we are to draw the appropriate policy implications, we need to better understand those who affirm their Jewishness as well as those who seek to escape.

I think that observers of American Jewish life, social scientists in particular, have fallen into a trap innocently laid by an earlier generation of rabbis, educators, and some social scientists as well. When those Jews talked about Jewish survival, it wasn't the threat of biological disappearance that troubled them. After all, the key term in their vocabulary was "assimilation," not "extinction." The demographers may have been troubled by birthrate projections, but the discussion of Jewish survival was conducted in the context of whether substantial numbers of Jews would remain committed

to Judaism -- that is, to a Jewish tradition however one defined it, to a set of conceptions, beliefs, and practices that were meaningfully related to the conceptions, beliefs, and practices associated with the Jewish past. Those who ruminated about Jewish survival were concerned with whether American Jews would find images of themselves reproduced in the future, not whether there would be a biological or genetic link between Jews of the present and those of the future. The language in which these concerns were expressed was the language of survival. That was a big mistake. When intermarriage and birthrate figures suggested the risk of biological attrition, Jewish spokesmen seized upon these data. I suppose they hoped that the data would alarm the vast majority of Jews. American Jews had accepted with equanimity the decline in the quality of Jewish life, the attenuation of the ties between the lives Jews lead and the lives Jews led in the past, the lowered intensity of Jewish commitment. I suppose Jewish spokesmen hoped that the fear of having no grandchildren or of having grandchildren who weren't Jewish would arouse American Jews from their lethargy.

Those who raise the alarm about biological extinction are factually incorrect. The data on mixed marriages are alarming. But there is a segment of the Jewish community, certainly the Orthodox but others as well, who are concerned with and committed to Judaism, and they show no signs of disappearing. Much of what I read by the optimists of Jewish life is not about these Jews. Much of the literature addresses the alarmist or biological argument, which is not or ought not to be the core concern of Jewish communal leaders. These concerns, as I have already suggested, are not readily addressed by quantitative data. At the very least they require a more careful structuring of questionnaires, more personal interviews, more participant observation, greater attentiveness to cultural artifacts -- in short, more anthropological studies of greater historical sensitivity.

The recent message of American Jewish sociologists has been: Don't worry, alarmist projections are wrong, Jews aren't disappearing. This message, I fear, is then decoded to mean that American Judaism is prospering. If that is what American Jewish sociologists really mean, I can only say "God protects the foolish." But if what American Jewish sociologists mean (and this is what some of them tell me) is that the quality of Jewish life is terrible but Jews will

survive biologically, then they ought to formulate their message more carefully or they deserve the charge of irresponsibility.

## NOTES

1. Charles Liebman, "Jewish Accommodation to America: A Re-appraisal," *Commentary* 64 (August 1977): 57-60.
2. Charles Liebman, "Leadership and Decision Making in a Jewish Community: The New York Federation of Jewish Philanthropies," *American Jewish Year Book, 1979* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1979), pp. 3-76.
3. I don't mean to suggest that wife abuse is the moral equivalent of mixed marriage. I would rather that my son marry a non-Jew than batter his wife. But given current standards of morality I had some difficulty in identifying a form of behavior that is almost universally condemned in American society.
4. Bruce Phillips, *Border Cities: Three Jewish Communities in the American West* (forthcoming).
5. *Trends* 11 (Spring 1986). *Trends* is a newsletter published by the Jewish Education Service of North America (JESNA) for federation leaders.
6. See Charles Liebman, "The Sociology of Religion and the Study of American Jews," *Conservative Judaism* 34 (May/June 1981): 17-33 and the literature cited therein (pp. 18-19) for the development of this point. See also Steven M. Cohen, *American Modernity and Jewish Identity* (New York: Tavistock, 1983).
7. Rosalyn Bell, "Houston," *Hadassah Magazine*, October 1986, p. 30.
8. *Connecticut Jewish Ledger*, November 6 and 13, 1986.
9. A very helpful discussion of this phenomenon is found in Milton Gordon's chapter "The Nature of Assimilation" in his book *Assimilation in American Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), pp. 60-83. I am not suggesting that American Jews have followed the pattern of assimilation that Gordon suggests. They have not.
10. See, for example, his statement in "Will There Be One Jewish

People By the Year 2000?" in *Perspectives* (National Jewish Resource Center), June 1985.

11. Schindler's explanation of the Reform movement's decision begins with the statement that "Reform is unalterably opposed to intermarriage, even as are the Orthodox and Conservative religious communities ... we resist intermarriage with every resource at our command" (ibid., pp. 47-48). Someone like myself, who questions the accuracy of that statement, is led to believe that it was offered to convince non-Reform representatives of Reform's noble intentions. Thus it seems reasonable to me to conclude that when Schindler formulates his defense of the patrilineal-descent decision in terms of the Jewish tradition or the requirements of Jewish survival he is offering this defense as an apology rather than as a sincerely held conviction.

12. Calvin Goldscheider and Alan Zuckerman, *The Transformation of the Jews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

13. *Connecticut Jewish Ledger*, July 31, 1986, p. 2.

14. Ibid., Aug. 7, 1986, p. 2.

15. Charles Liebman, "The Debate on American Jewish Life: A 'Survivalist' Response to Some Recent 'Revisionist' Works," *Studies in Contemporary Jewry, IV* (forthcoming).

16. New York: Summit Books, 1985.

17. Dan Oren, *Joining the Club: A History of Jews and Yale* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

18. David Lodge, *Changing Places* (London: Martin Secker & Warburg, 1975).

19. Calvin Goldscheider, *Jewish Continuity and Change* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 152.

20. Cohen, *American Modernity*, p. 156.

21. See, for example, Steven M. Cohen, *Ties and Tensions: The 1986 Survey of American Jewish Attitudes Toward Israel and Israelis* (New York: Institute on American Jewish-Israeli Relations, The American Jewish Committee, 1987). The results were presented to the Association of Jewish Studies meetings in Boston, Dec. 14-16, 1986. In the discussion that followed Cohen's presentation, some

members of the audience noted that these findings confirmed their own observations.

22. Ibid.

23. Steven M. Cohen, "Outreach to the Marginally Affiliated: Evidence and Implication for Policymakers in Jewish Education," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service* 62 (Winter 1985): 149.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid., p. 148.

26. The widespread celebration of the bat mitzvah service (the equivalent for girls of the bar mitzvah service for boys) in Conservative as well as Reform synagogues has probably resulted in lengthening the period during which parents remain affiliated with a synagogue.

27. Chaim Waxman, "The Limits of Futurology: Conflicting Perspectives on the American Jewish Community," in William Frankel, ed., *Survey of Jewish Affairs, 1986* (forthcoming).

28. Deborah Lipstadt, "From Noblesse Oblige to Personal Redemption: The Changing Profile and Agenda of American Jewish Leaders," *Modern Judaism* 4 (October 1984): 304-305.

29. Liebman, "Leadership and Decision Making," describes the impact of these changes on the policies of the New York Federation of Jewish Philanthropies.



**The American Jewish Committee**

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