

# TWENTYSOMETHING AND JEWISH

Personal Reflections on Jewish Identity

Edited by

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ספרית הר הצופים  
למדעי הרוח והחברה

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## FOREWORD

**I**N THE CONVENTIONAL WISDOM OF TODAY, the American Jewish community is in crisis. The rate of intermarriage has passed 50 percent. Nearly three-quarters of mixed-married couples are raising their children outside the Jewish faith. But we know that intermarriage is a symptom of a far deeper crisis – the crisis of meaning, the meaning of Jewish existence. Perhaps for the first time in Jewish history, a generation of Jews is asking several unprecedented questions: Why be Jewish? What does being Jewish mean to me? What are the compelling reasons for leading a Jewish life?

The response to these questions must come from the entire organized Jewish community, from all its agencies, religious, educational, and communal. The American Jewish Committee is committed to being in the forefront of efforts to strengthen Jewish life and thus to insure the continuity of our people for generations to come. Beginning back in the 1970s with the establishment of the Department of Jewish Communal Affairs, and later with the founding of the William Petschek National Jewish Family Center, the AJC has been the only human relations agency to make Jewish continuity a programming priority.

For nearly thirty years, the AJC has monitored trends in the Jewish community, helped guide policy discussions on major issues, and brought to bear the perspectives of the Jewish tradition on contemporary concerns. AJC leadership understands that all our efforts to protect and defend Jews are meaningless without a critical mass of Jews committed to living creative Jewish lives.

Each generation of American Jews has faced unique tasks in living in this country. For us and for our children the task is to live fully as Jews **and** as Americans. To quote Senator Joseph Lieberman from an AJC ad in the *New York Times* on “What Being Jewish Means to Me”: “My parents raised me to believe that I did not have to mute my religious faith or ethnic identity to be a good American, that, on the

contrary, America invites all its people to be what they are and believe what they wish." Our young people must know that they need not opt out of Jewish life to be fully American.

This is both the promise and the challenge of America. Here we have the freedom "to be or not to be" Jewish – to develop Jewish life to its fullest and most creative or to drift away from Judaism and assimilate. These are the two realities of American Jewish life: pockets of creative energy and Judaic expression on the one hand, assimilation and communal erosion on the other.

In 1992, in response to this crisis, the AJC launched a new program initiative titled "Why Be Jewish?" Its goal: to make a compelling case for leading a Jewish life in contemporary America. Through a wide range of programmatic tools – publications, national and local seminars and symposia, and a national media campaign – we are reaching out to Jews, young and old, with a message of the salience and the joy of Jewish living. We are creating opportunities for Jews, especially young people, to ask "Why Be Jewish?" and then to hear a broad range of approaches to "making the case" for opting-in to Jewish life.

This publication focuses on a generation whose voices are seldom heard in the Jewish community – the "twentysomething" generation. It is a collection of personal essays, written by young people who share with us both their frustrations and disappointments and their excitement and sense of fulfillment with Jewish life and the Jewish community. They represent the tremendous reservoir of talent and energy of their generation. All are engaged in a twofold search: first, for meaningful ways of identifying as Jews, and second, for a sense of place – for community and roots.

Some have found answers, whether in the rich Jewish spiritual tradition, in Jewish communal life, or through an experience in Israel. Others have not yet arrived but are actively engaged in a process of discovery. What they share is the individual decision to seek to be serious Jews. For each of them, something intervened in their life experience to shape their decision to make their Jewish identity central to their being.

We hope that this publication will encourage many young (and not so young) Jews to explore their Jewishness and to deepen both their understanding of Judaism and their involvement in Jewish life.

David A. Harris,  
*Executive Director*



STEPHANIE BASH

**FOR SOME PEOPLE**, Ben-Gurion Airport is simply a port of entry into, or departure out of, Israel. But recently, on my eighth trip to Israel, I realized that, for me, it means much more. Something happens to me when I first see the coastline from the airplane window and join with the other passengers in clapping as we land. Then, as I board the bus to the terminal, together with Jews from all over the world traveling to the Jewish homeland, I feel awe. As I hear Israelis speaking around me, I am invigorated by the sound of Hebrew. After passport control, I make my way through the familiar long corridor, pushing my baggage cart and fishing in my pocket for shekalim from previous trips. I emerge into the warm, humid coastal air outside transformed.

That airport is the bridge between my two Jewish worlds. As an American Jew and a future Jewish communal professional, I know that Israel provides me with an essential part of my Jewish identity.

I grew up in small Jewish communities in western Massachusetts and suburban Connecticut. My parents, members of Conservative synagogues and active in Jewish life, sent me to afternoon Hebrew school, and I was one of the children who really enjoyed learning about Judaism. My mother, the Jewish history teacher, was a role model embodying the importance of Jewish education. As a child, I always felt a warm sense of belonging, as a Jew, to something larger than myself. Many of my closest friends were boys and girls I knew from synagogue and Hebrew school. I have special memories



of childhood visits each winter to my observant grandparents in Miami Beach. I would get to sit with my grandfather in the men's section of his shul, and from my grandmother I would hear about the activities of Hadassah and the sisterhood.

My bat mitzvah was an affirmation of Jewish identity. I loved learning the *haftarah* (selection from the Prophets), the musical notes to which it is chanted, and preparing a speech. Through the process of study I developed warm relationships with the rabbi and cantor. And when the big day came, it was a thrill to see family and friends gathered to share in my entry into Jewish adulthood.

At the same time, this happy Jewish child knew that being Jewish made me different. By the sixth grade, I was the only Jew in my class. One day, I sat in shock as the teacher said that the Jews killed Christ. I tried to argue, but the issue was never resolved, and I felt humiliated. I learned that being Jewish often means explaining and justifying your religion to others: on Hanukkah, my mother was invited to prepare latkes for the class.

My Jewish identity took on a new richness when my parents sent me to Camp Young Judaea – Sprout Lake, sponsored by Hadassah. This camp, and later Camp Tel Yehuda, for teens, provided me with powerful Jewish experiences and introduced me, in an intensive way, to Zionism, Hebrew, and Israeli culture. Today, I look back and marvel at the creativity of Young Judaea's programming. I especially loved the Hebrew songs and the Israeli dancing after dinner, as different groups of campers competed fiercely to see who had the most *ruach* (spirit). I remember, as a young camper, building topographical maps of Israel out of ice cream in the lounge. And there was one evening when the dining room became Israel after supper. We were given "tickets" for our trip to the Jewish state, and were then treated to a wonderful night of Israeli slides, food, music, and other activities by our Israeli *shaliach* (representative) and *madrichim* (counselors). The Zionism we imbibed at camp gave us tremendous pride in being Jewish.

The camping experience had other benefits too. I met children my age from all over the East Coast, and formed lasting friendships as part of a larger Jewish community. As a result, I no longer felt so isolated in my Jewishness. I also gained substantive Jewish knowledge to take home. As a teenager at Tel Yehudah, I participated in intensive Ulpan (Hebrew language) and leadership training programs that made a deep impact. I will never forget an educational activity we had on the subject of Jesus, where we learned an affirmative Jewish response to the Christian charge of deicide. Now, I could respond confidently to people like my sixth-grade teacher.

Camp also emphasized social justice and social action. We

learned songs like “*Ani v’atah*” (You and I will change the world) and “*Lo alecha hamelacha ligmor*” (It is not our duty to complete the work, but we are not free to desist from it). I found out about the Jewish obligation of *tikkun olam*, repair of the world. My parents exemplified these values. At home, I saw my mother working at the Jewish community center on Jewish cultural arts programs, and organizing volunteers for the community-wide celebration of Israeli Independence Day. And my father served as a volunteer leader for the Young Leadership Division of the federation, and also gave of his time to help Russian immigrants write resumes and find jobs through the Jewish family service. I too felt a responsibility to help make the world a better place, though I was unsure just how I would do this.

Traveling to Israel in the summer of 1984 was the fulfillment of a long-awaited dream. I went on a six-week trip with Young Judaea called Hashachar Israel Experience. We toured the entire country, spent two weeks on a kibbutz, and then a weekend with a family on a moshav. *I loved Israel!* The people were warm and hospitable, and the land beautiful. It was amazing to be in a country where Jews were the majority. The ideology and lifestyle of the kibbutz were fascinating. I marveled at the men wearing kippot in the streets. Finally, it dawned on me why the Jewish holidays occur when they do in the Jewish calendar: they are based on the Israeli seasons. Being in Israel was another way to express Judaism. But this was only a taste, and I wanted more. Intending to go back for my junior year of college, I was determined to learn to speak Hebrew fluently first.

Back home in Connecticut, I became involved with United Synagogue Youth, worked as a bar/bat mitzvah instructor, and attended Hebrew high school, where I especially enjoyed courses on the literature of the Holocaust. Eager to master Hebrew, I was disappointed that the only class offered was in beginning conversation, so I registered for it several times and convinced the teachers to give me extra assignments. In this way I became friends with a number of Israeli Hebrew teachers over the years. I also volunteered as a companion to some of the frail residents at the Jewish home for the elderly, and I was deeply moved by their stories of American Jewish life.

I wanted to go to a college with a substantial Jewish population, a good Hebrew program, and a liberal philosophy of education, so I chose Brown University. Soon after arriving on campus, I discovered that though the student body was about 25 percent Jewish, attendance at Jewish activities on campus was sparse. While High Holiday services and some lectures attracted substantial numbers, the regular Friday evening dinner and services drew fewer than forty. Politically, Brown was a very liberal place, and religious involvement of any kind was considered conservative, and therefore unpopular. In addi-

tion, Brown had an active Arab student group that disseminated anti-Israel propaganda. There was also an anti-apartheid movement that exaggerated and strongly condemned Israeli-South African ties, furthering the ambivalence that many Jewish students felt about being Jewish.

At Brown, I became involved in Hillel, joined an Israeli dance group, and took two years of Hebrew courses. As social events coordinator on the Hillel board, I sought to change Hillel's image as a place only for religious Jews and to create opportunities for all kinds of Jewish students to meet each other in a nonthreatening atmosphere.

As planned, I left to study at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem in my junior year. The summer Ulpan there provided rigorous Hebrew training, and the Overseas Program in which I was enrolled offered a wonderful opportunity to learn about Israeli society, politics, culture, and literature. It also took us on hiking trips up and down the country. Living in a student apartment on Mt. Scopus, I learned my way around Jerusalem and grew to love the city. I came to understand how to negotiate the banking, medical, transportation, and university systems, as well as how to go to the grocery store.

At the end of the program I not only felt the need to return for a longer period, but I also wanted to make a contribution of my time and energy to Israel. So after graduation from Brown I participated in Project Otzma, a ten-month volunteer program sponsored by the Council of Jewish Federations that helps build ties between Diaspora and Israeli Jews by providing young American Jews the chance to do volunteer work in Israel.

Project Otzma gave me an insider's perspective on Israeli society. At a large industrial kibbutz in the center of Israel, I was exposed to the many branches of kibbutz work – the fields, the factory, the kitchen. Then, as a counselor for children from dysfunctional families at a Youth Aliyah village, I taught English and conducted recreational activities. Here I began to confront the serious social problems that challenge Israel. On a struggling kibbutz near Eilat, I came to understand the dilemmas that can bedevil a pioneering community: Should Arab workers be hired? Was it possible to develop any industry that could help the kibbutz stay afloat? Could the members themselves come to any agreement about what they wanted?

I also spent four months in the development town of Bet Shean, near the Jordanian border, populated primarily by Jews of North African descent. Only two hours from Jerusalem yet on the geographic and social periphery of the country, Bet Shean felt like another world, plagued by poverty, unemployment, and hopelessness. Living in a high-rise apartment building with three other volunteers, I taught English at a high school and was a counselor at an "afternoon home

environment center” for children. I became acutely aware that such communities need resources and investments.

Project Otzma created grassroots connections between the American participants and Israelis by matching us with adoptive families whom we visited periodically throughout our stay, and lived with on holidays. We also got to know Israeli university students who were doing similar community work; they became our mentors, imparting useful insights into Israeli culture. There were, in addition, numerous group discussions about the relationship between Israeli and American Jews.

Deeply influenced by my experience in Israel, I returned home determined to combine a career in social work with involvement in the Jewish community. I spoke of my experience in Israel to various groups, and I wrote a series of articles on the subject for the local Jewish newspaper.

I moved to Boston, where I found a job in social work. It was not easy to find a group of committed young Jews with whom I would feel comfortable; the Federation’s Young Leadership Division did not cater to people in their twenties starting their first jobs, the Jewish community center offered only swimming, lectures, and singles activities, and at Hillel events everyone was younger than I.

I considered moving to Israel. That would be an authentic way to express my Judaism: By living and working in the Jewish state, I would make a contribution to the Jewish people, and I would belong. To explore this idea, I attended lectures at Boston Hebrew College about life in Israel, and even spoke to an Israeli emissary about aliyah. The idea of aliyah posed a major dilemma for me. I felt caught between two worlds that I loved. I would imagine that many American Jews who have had intensive and meaningful experiences in Israel share this deep ambivalence.

It gradually occurred to me that the answer to my search for significant Jewish involvement was to pursue a career in Jewish communal service. In that way I could merge my personal desire for meaning with my professional aspirations. I entered a joint master’s program in social work and Jewish studies at the Columbia University School of Social Work and the Jewish Theological Seminary. As I learned social work skills, I also enhanced my Jewish knowledge. For fieldwork experience, I worked at Jewish communal agencies, where I learned about the rich and complex network of organizations that serves New York Jewry.

Clearly, Israel had a major positive impact on my Jewish consciousness.

Oh yes, one more thing. On August 22, 1993, I married Michael, an Israeli I met on Project Otzma.



KEITH CHERTOK

I WAS BORN in a little town in southern New York State called Brooklyn, where I grew up harboring the false assumption that most people were either Jewish or Italian. The self-segregation of the Jewish ghetto resulted in a prescient distinction of one's friends. You were either Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, or perhaps a secular Jew. There were the Hasidim as well, though we got the impression they didn't associate the rest of us with any Judaism that they recognized, and "we" cast a somewhat amused but jaundiced eye upon them as well.

"We" were Orthodox/Conservative. This meant that we were not a very observant household (my mother kept a kosher home but we would eat out at nonkosher restaurants; we observed High Holidays in the Orthodox tradition but not Shabbat, etc.) but when we did observe we did it in the tradition of the Orthodox style of my Eastern European immigrant grandparents. Even our synagogue was a hybrid. It was one of those shtetl-like shuls built into an existing two-family house. The rabbi tried to conduct services in an Orthodox style. There was no *mechitzah* (partition separating the sexes) but men did sit on one side of the shul and the women on the other. During the chaotic High Holiday services even that semblance of tradition quickly degenerated into frequent cross-communication and infiltration across the aisle.

As a dutiful Jewish child, I was remanded into the custody of my

rabbi for three days a week of Hebrew school over a span of five years. The purpose of this experience was to provide the Jewish education that the public schools did not and my parents could not. It also served as an extended etiquette class for a big coming-out party at age thirteen, and provided my mother the opportunity to prepare dinner in peace three nights a week.

But something happened on the way to the synagogue. I actually enjoyed it. The music moved me, and the history connected me to a people I could feel across the millennia. This God thing was something I related to quite well. Although I still do not have a clear concept of God's role in the course of human events and how a loving God could create evil or allow horrific things to happen, I have felt from a very young age that there is something in me greater than myself. Positive reinforcement from the rabbi and cantor and recognition that I had mastered the subjects they taught to a greater degree than the other students didn't hurt either.

This created a problem for my parents. While they expected me to learn all that was taught, they didn't want me to become "too religious." They didn't know what to do with this little kid who was teaching them Jewish customs they were unaware of, or demanding to practice customs they were aware of but didn't enjoy. At Hanukkah I had to be home by a certain hour to light the menorah. I recall the time I made my parents dust around the house with a feather to symbolically rid the house of leavened food products the night before Passover. And I insisted that we read the whole Passover Haggadah and not just up to the part where you get to eat.

My father got me tickets to the High Holiday services, but was not interested in coming with me. My seat had to be up front, in direct view of the rabbi and the cantor, so I wouldn't have to deal with the obstruction of an adult's head blocking my view or the good-natured but distracting conversations of the gossips who sat out of view of the *bimah*. The men in this mostly geriatric Orthodox-like congregation would inquire if I was an orphan. After all, what was this kid doing here alone all day? The rabbi of the shul once approached me during a Yom Kippur service and told me that it was a sin for a nine-year-old to fast all day, and that if I didn't leave the shul and get something to eat he would get my mother and make me go home. I ignored him because he had told us just the opposite a few weeks before in Hebrew school. I arrived home after attending the entire day-long Yom Kippur services to the pregnant question of my family (around the dinner table), "So, can we eat now, Rabbi?" I always suspected that the question was meant sarcastically and they had been snacking while I was at shul.

I recall being sent to an Orthodox day camp during one summer

of my childhood. It was a great ego boost. I was the only kid who had spent most of his childhood playing ball instead of studying Jewish liturgy. That, combined with the fact that the wearing of *tzitzit* (ritual fringes) slowed the other kids down, made me the star athlete. It was to be the only time in my life when I would be considered a ringer in the art of punchball and basketball.

My immigrant grandparents lived less than a mile from my house; there were brief times when, for various reasons, one or another grandparent lived in my home. When I speak with my contemporaries who didn't have the good fortune to enjoy significant interaction with their grandparents I realize how blessed I was. These elders were repositories of Jewish culture, humor, and pathos. It is their stories of czars and Cossacks, pogroms and pilgrimage, that connect me with my heritage and link me by a golden bond across time and place with a wandering exiled people.

It always amazed me that these seemingly ordinary people had the gumption, in their youth, to leave behind all they knew and travel through many countries to an uncertain destination where everything would have to begin from scratch, to strike out in a new direction with limited resources and without the ability to communicate. OK, so they didn't leave paradise, and the natives weren't that friendly, but think of the others who were afraid to change the status quo. How many of those family members who I will never know were more frightened of the devil they didn't know than the devil they did, and perished in the Holocaust? I often wonder what I would have done as a young man in Eastern Europe before there was the Israel that we know today. Would I have had the strength to do what my grandparents did? Would my parents have had that foresight if they were there?

My parents were certainly good Jewish parents, yet, when I compare the emotional connection to Judaism (cultural, religious or otherwise) of my grandparents, parents, and my siblings, it is the relative silence of that middle generation that is apparent. It is as if my parents' generation, in its attempt to make it into American society, got lost along the way. Today, as a young adult attending various Jewish communal and religious activities, I see a good number of participants of my generation and an even larger number of Jews of the old guard, but there appears to be a missing generation.

In the years between late adolescence and my early twenties, I became lax about Judaism. The events surrounding the death of my mother made me rethink my relationship to the rabbi I had respected. He was unavailable to officiate at the funeral, so we wound up hiring a "rental rabbi." The *shiva* (seven-day mourning period) brought crowds to my home, but not my rabbi, who lived down the

block. So he was just human after all.

There were the pressing demands of college, graduate school, residencies, and postgraduate school. My level of Jewish complacency while a student in New York was similar to the level of complacency among some Israeli Jews: one doesn't feel the need to expend much effort to be Jewish when immersed in such a Jewish environment. The schools basically shut down for the High Holidays. Most of the teachers were Jewish and did not work. The gentile students knew there was no point coming to school, so they stayed home as well. If I felt overburdened with academic responsibilities and didn't feel like going to synagogue on holidays, I could merely look out my window and observe the crowds making their way to services in their holiday finest. Even the cab drivers, with names that had ten consonants and no vowels, would wish you *shana tovah* (happy New Year) in the appropriate season. The Chinese restaurants in my neighborhood provided matzoh on each table at Passover. I didn't realize that I was living in the closest thing to Tel Aviv in the world until I left. God was in this place but I did not know.

Over the last five years I have thought about my grandparents' experience more and more. It is in these years that I moved from New York and all the family and culture to which I had been accustomed to accept a position as a postdoctoral resident at the University of California at San Francisco. This voyage did not rival that of my grandparents, but the cultural differences between East and West Coasts and the isolation from family makes for some interesting Jewish issues.

The Jewish population of San Francisco is much smaller than New York's – that is, when you can actually find the Jewish population. And the Jewish community in San Francisco is one of the most assimilated in the country. As an emigre from the East, I made all the rookie mistakes. I tried to find an apartment in a Jewish neighborhood by driving around until I spotted a number of kosher butcher stores. This proved futile. There were no Jewish neighborhoods, no good delis, and the bagels were sold by Koreans, quite a shock for a Jewish boy from Brooklyn, where there were so many kosher butchers that they would have price wars right before the Jewish holidays.

The Jews I did meet were unlike those I had known on the East Coast. Their connection to Judaism did not seem as strong or as central. A number of them were children of parents who had moved away from their multigenerational families in the East and did not grow up with what my grandparents would call *yiddishkeit*. They recognized some of the holidays and rituals I spoke of as vestiges of their grandparents' practices.

I began to date non-Jewish women and found that no lightning



bolts struck. It was easy to find gentile women to whom I was attracted physically and intellectually, but there was something missing. There was an invisible wall between us that kept me from going further, a wall these women could neither see nor comprehend. After all, we liked each other and enjoyed each other's company; these women saw the beauty in my religion – why couldn't we celebrate both? How could they know that the thought of my children celebrating Christmas with their mother's family would have been a betrayal of myself and thousands of years of Jewish history.

In San Francisco, for the first time in my life, most of my acquaintances were not Jewish. For the first time, I felt like the fractional minority that Jews are in this country. Here, I had to choose to be Jewish or choose to let it go; there was no Judaism by diffusion. I found myself responding to the questions and, sometimes, anti-Semitic stereotypes of my gentile coresidents, attending faculty, students, and later, employees. For a good number of them I was the first Jew they had really got close enough to ask a question, and for some I was the first Jew they had met. A number of them had some interesting preconceptions about Jews that they felt obligated to clear up with me. I was seen as the source of Judaic knowledge and that forced me to study just to answer some of their questions. I have one very innocent twenty-one-year-old assistant who asks me questions like: Why do some people think Jews are cheap? Why did Hitler want to kill the Jews? If the Jews didn't do anything bad to anyone, why did so many groups persecute them? Why did Shakespeare create the character Shylock?

I am sure that part of the reason I chose health care as a profession is my Jewish background. Jewish culture bestows admiration on healers. Beyond that, there is probably the lurking remnants of my parents' and grandparents' fears that if anti-Semitism became a problem, at least someone who is self-employed will have some protection against employment discrimination. The history of the Jews in exile validates the importance of having a skill of universal worth. Jewish angst aside, each day I rise and have the privilege of performing mitzvahs for frightened, diseased people. What could be better than to repair the world a little bit each day?

The benefit of moving to a place where Jewish culture is not ubiquitous is the seeking-out process it engenders. There is a Jewish community in the San Francisco Bay area, but you have to work hard to find it. And once you find it, you have to work even harder to make for yourself a community in which you are comfortable. In New York I never considered joining any Jewish organizations because there was Jewish culture all around me. In San Francisco, it requires careful scheduling of an already overloaded agenda to do something Jew-

ish. Yet this struggle to hold on to my identity makes the expression of it that much sweeter.

I have become involved in the American Jewish Committee, the Young Adults Division of the Jewish Community Federation, the Jewish Community Relations Council, and various synagogue-related groups. In all of these, I have come to know other young adults, some, like me, living far from the large Jewish population centers where their families are, others from places that make San Francisco Jewry seem large and affiliated, and who are, for the first time, searching for their Jewish roots. No matter what the background, they hunger for a Jewish community that speaks to their needs. Few are active only because someone else wants them to be; most are far enough away from their families, either physically or spiritually, to make Jewishness a personal choice.

There are problems. For many, participation in Jewish communal organizations has taken the place of Jewish spiritual connection or religious observance. But there are those who feel uncomfortable in a synagogue, and for them Jewish communal organizations must assume some leadership. At a Young Adults Federation meeting not long ago the issue of whether or not the food served at Federation events should be kosher was put to a vote. If not here, where? All of the various Jewish communal organizations have laudable goals. However, how do we use humanitarian liberal political activism in a Jewish forum to transmit Jewish identity to our children? If all we have in common is the desire to promote human rights, pluralism, and an egalitarian system of social justice then we lose the spiritual bond that defines us as a people and we more closely resemble a minor wing of the Democratic party than a religious civilization. At times it feels as if our Jewish communal organizations are afraid to be too Jewish.

Moreover, the Jewish community can sometimes feel claustrophobic. The organized Jewish community in the San Francisco area is so small that it does not take long before we all know one another. Moreover, to an unmarried person the community can seem somewhat incestuous. Many of my single friends feel that the day is coming when we will realize that we have all dated each other and that the only way to meet someone new is to move. On a recent American Jewish Committee-sponsored seminar in Israel, I had the opportunity to interact with nine other young Jews from across the nation. It was interesting to hear that the difficulties that young Jewish adults have in meeting each other are similar in other cities as well.

There is a high price to living Jewishly. The steep costs associated with synagogue and community center membership, Federation pledges, various membership dues, Jewish education and so forth can

be prohibitive for many young people. Jewish programming that serves as a thin veneer for fund-raising can be a turnoff. Young adults who are not in highly paid professions can be made to feel unwanted in organizations where the price for acceptance is the potential for a large donation. The inner circle of lay leadership can come to resemble an exclusive club reserved for wealthy patrons. While I realize that the Jewish community cannot provide all of its wonderful services without resources, there must be a healthy balance between fund raising and outreach. An overly aggressive focus on the former can extend only a cold, weak handshake to those reaching out.

The Jewish communal organizations have had an agenda focused on making America a place where Jews can participate at every level. Our success in achieving that goal means that we can now reorder our priorities toward the dissemination of the message of Judaism as a life-long discipline in the pursuit of a sanctified existence.

As I have explored much of the spectrum of Jewish-American spiritual involvement – from Reform to Conservative to Orthodox – communal involvement and cultural involvement – New York, San Francisco, Israel – I find that there are no black-and-white answers, just many shades of gray. As my horizons broaden, I have more questions than answers. Yet I am convinced that there are certain factors that encourage Jewish continuity. Adults I know who have stopped blaming their parents for a negative Jewish upbringing or a horrible Hebrew school experience, and have moved forward to reclaim for themselves a Jewish spiritual identity, are quite alive Jewishly. Those who have been involved in a fun Jewish institution (camp, trips to Israel, family Shabbat dinners) or who have been blessed by the motivation of a positive Jewish mentor, cling to their Jewish identity. Those who see Judaism as an opportunity to sanctify and celebrate each aspect of life do not compartmentalize their Jewish existence; they have a framework for developing a sustainable relationship with God and community.

If I choose to remain in the Bay Area and raise a family, how – in the absence of a multigenerational family support system, strong Jewish institutions, and the East Coast sense of ethnicity — will I impart to my children the sense of Jewish identity that I experienced? Can I make Judaism such a constant part of my life that it will influence those who surround me? Will I be able to explain to those children a pattern of Jewishness that is not Orthodox yet has an inner logic and meaning?

How this work in progress will end is uncertain. Right now, it is the process that is most relevant.



DEBRA NUSSBAUM COHEN

**I DID SOMETHING LAST WEEK** that I never imagined I'd do. I spoke out loudly about the joy of being Jewish and living Jewishly to a group of people who felt differently.

It was the last meeting of our childbirth education class, and circumcision was on the agenda. The class was led by an educator who was born a Jew but is intermarried, and whose home was lushly decorated for Christmas. She had a Hanukkah menorah on her mantle, accompanied by a Hanukkah card made by one of her kids, but the menorah went unused for the entire holiday and lay there as nothing more than an artifact.

The educator, fair as she was on almost every topic we covered, was clearly against circumcision. She distributed photocopies of articles making a case against the custom for any but the most religious of reasons and erroneously informed the class that mohalim (those who perform ritual circumcision) are prohibited from using any kind of anaesthetic. She also commended one of the Jewish women in our class who stood up" against her more traditional father when she decided that she "couldn't do it to her son."

In this class full of religiously ambivalent Jews, the topic generated lots of tension. During our snack break, a couple of classmates, both Jews, began discussing what they considered the barbarity of the ritual and that they thought that the pain the surgery inflicts must last much longer than the baby boy's crying. No one mentioned

any reasons to do it. And all the other references any of our classmates had made to Jewish customs during the course, like not getting the baby's room ready until he or she is born, were about doing it because it's the traditional thing to do, not because there were any other reasons.

For most of the class, as for me and most of my friends, tradition alone isn't a sufficiently compelling reason to do something or not to do it. We are, after all, literally children of the 1960s and the products of educational and social systems that have taught us to question everything.

So in the class, I had to speak up.

I said that I love being Jewish, why I think it's wonderful to be a part of the Jewish community, and that I believe it's important not to deprive a Jewish child of a *brit milah* – an elemental, fundamental connection to his faith. There are good, real, and rational reasons to be connected to Judaism that are much more than just tradition, I said, as everyone listened attentively. I felt like “Ms. Super-Jew,” and it was not entirely comfortable, though two of my classmates thanked me later for articulating what they, too, felt needed to be said.

I never dreamed I'd be standing up for Judaism. It wasn't long ago that I despised all things religious, especially my own. But here I sit, hugely pregnant with our first child, living joyously in a New York borough, married to a man raised in the Hasidic world, and deeply involved in my synagogue community.

I adore my job in journalism, which is to write about issues important to the Jewish community, particularly in the religious and spiritual realms. I have the good fortune to be able to write about everyone from the messianically maniacal Lubavitchers to those who call themselves Jewish secular humanists, from those who meditate on mountaintops to those who live in rigorously Orthodox communities, from those who follow New Age rebbes to those who work with Jewish addicts and convicts, and to get to know each of the brilliant threads in between that make up the rich weave of Jewish life in America today.

Through my job I've learned that there are innumerable paths – and countless side streets – that lead to a life rich with Jewish joy. The experience has immeasurably deepened my own Jewish life and appreciation of the tribe into which I was born, and has led me to much more of a personal commitment to living Jewishly than I ever fathomed I would want. Many of our friends are from our shul, and these days our best dinner parties take place on Friday nights, replete with *zemirot*, *hamotzi*, and *birkat hamazon*.

Me, of all people! Going to shul most Shabbat mornings, keep-

ing a kosher home and wondering how we're going to pay for Jewish day school for our impending arrival.

Until just a few short years ago, the religious expression of Judaism meant two things to me: the fashion show that took place on the High Holy Days in the Reform temple that we attended regularly, if infrequently, while I was growing up, and the rigid, foreign Orthodoxy of my father's family. Neither was very meaningful for me, and I grew to disdain both. Success, for my immigrant father, meant "making it" out of the German-Jewish ghetto of Washington Heights to the comfort of suburban America, and make it he did. Along the way he went from being Orthodox to Conservative to Reform to, most recently, no observance whatsoever.

He devoted his life to providing a secure middle-class existence for his family. We didn't breathe a rich Jewish life in our home. The few rituals my mother observed, like lighting Shabbat candles on occasional Friday nights, were without much joy. My father's attachment to the synagogue was entirely social. The emotional landscape of our family's life had nothing to do with Judaism. Religion, for my parents, was about compromise.

The Conservative synagogue we went to until I was twelve seemed to me huge, dark, and forbidding. Services were boring. I didn't understand any of it. And despite several years of after-school Hebrew classes, the language only frustrated me and left me with little to read during services but the introduction to the prayer book. We kept kosher for some time. But when I was about ten and my sister seven, we clamored for the McDonald's that all of our school friends ate. So my parents gave up on kashrut and to McDonald's we went.

A couple of years later, we moved to the Reform temple in town, where they had special family services once a month at which the rabbi related the Torah portion of the week in kid-friendly story form as he strummed on his guitar. Most of the services were in English. At least I could understand what was going on.

At my bat mitzvah I struggled to memorize a transliteration of the Torah blessings and my *haftorah*. I felt ashamed, like a faker and fraud, as I recited the speech the rabbi had essentially written for me about the responsibilities I was taking on as a Jewish adult. I hadn't known what to write in my speech. All I knew was that I didn't know anything much about Judaism. So the focus of my attention, as we prepared for the big day, was that I was wearing my first pair of high heels (I tripped while parading the Torah around the room) and the party afterward (we had platters of pink-and white-frosted petit fours with little green flowers). The color scheme was yellow and orange, accented with silver. (What a relief that the late

seventies are over.)

I continued on for a couple of years in Hebrew school, taking classes like “Jewish Ethics and Modern Medical Dilemmas,” where we studied from photocopied handouts of Jewish sources and discussed the Jewish view of brain death. I couldn’t relate. None of it made much sense to me. And whatever I did learn in class I left at the temple door. We certainly didn’t discuss these things at home. Only later did I realize that I didn’t know anything about Jewish ethics to begin with, so it was no wonder that I felt inept and ill equipped to talk about Jewish medical ethics. I quit Hebrew school soon after, and for many years Judaism wasn’t a very important part of my life.

I went to a WASPy boarding school for my last two years of high school, which was supposedly nonsectarian but where we had decidedly Protestant vespers every Wednesday and attendance at chapel services was required on Sunday mornings. Part of our high school graduation ceremony was held in a church downtown, and though I had successfully integrated the chinos-and-shetland preppy look and outlook into my life, it still made me feel uncomfortable.

I was one of only four Jews in our class of over 100 and, during our junior year, we were routinely tormented by a mean Irish red-headed senior who loved making jokes about Jews burning in ovens while we were within earshot and he was surrounded by an impenetrable circle of the “coolest” seniors. They all chuckled as he made joke after joke about Jews. I felt humiliated by him, and by my own powerlessness to stop him.

Another Jewish girl, Michelle, had an Israeli flag pinned to the inside of her closet door. She told me about a trip she had taken the summer between our junior and senior years to the Sinai, when it was Israeli territory. She told me about the fun she had on a kibbutz on the Red Sea and how she loved Israel. She was expelled during our senior year for visiting her boyfriend in his dorm after hours. After Michelle had packed up all her things and left school, her roommate found that she’d forgotten to take her Israeli flag. So she gave it to me.

A few months later I was trying to figure out what I would do during a year-long break I wanted to take between high school and college. The Peace Corps wouldn’t take anyone without a college degree, so I decided to go to kibbutz. When I went to talk to the Israeli shaliach stationed in my New Jersey hometown federation about which kibbutz ulpan to sign up for, I opted for Kibbutz Degania Bet on the Kinneret because, he said, they grew oranges and cotton. What did I know? Nothing at all about Israel, and no Hebrew beyond *shalom*. He just pointed to a map and it looked like a nice

place, so to Degania I went. After the ulpan ended I went on to another kibbutz, this one near Netanya, to volunteer for several months.

I had promised my parents I'd return in July, and Skidmore College was expecting me soon after. But just before my departure from Israel, I realized that I was in love. I had fallen in love with the country, with my friends, with the feeling of being a Jew in a Jewish land, of walking down the street in an aquamarine town like Netanya and knowing that all around me were Jews. I didn't want to leave. I was in love with being a Jew, and it was as powerful as any passion that I'd ever had for a man.

I spent a heartbroken year at college and ran back to Israel as soon as I could, to spend my sophomore year at Tel Aviv University. There I hung out with two different crowds – the progressive political activists who traveled to Peace Now rallies and all knew each other from their Habonim youth group, and with some *ba'alei teshuvah* (newly observant) friends I'd made in Jerusalem.

People from each group would ask me what I saw in the other. The passion for Judaism that the *ba'alei teshuvah* had was enticing. And I loved the classes, the learning. I didn't become observant myself, but I figured I should know what it was that I was rejecting. In the end, though, the right-wing political views that most of my Jerusalem friends adopted as they became more religious turned me off. So did the very circumscribed roles the women adopted – they were allowed to express themselves only in certain ways and eagerly molded their behavior to fit into the rigid forms mandated by the rabbis and customs of their community.

Most of these women had grown up as I did – in the spiritual wasteland of suburbia, but where a great gift was the lesson that we could achieve as much as our talent and drive permitted, that our lives as women were going to be utterly different than the lives our mothers were taught to lead in the 1950s and early '60s. I was ready to discover, and to be, who I was as a woman and unwilling to stuff myself into the confines of the "woman's role" as a particular group of men designed it, even if they were rabbis.

After that year I went back to the States to finish my college education at New York University. In search of a job, I serendipitously stumbled into one as the office manager of a Zionist aliyah movement based at the World Zionist Organization offices in Manhattan. Those who participated in our activities, all of them determined to make aliyah, became my friends. Together we learned of and debated Israeli politics and Zionism.

Immediately after graduating from New York University with a degree in the religion, sociology, and economics of the Middle East, I returned to Israel to begin a career in journalism. It took about five



minutes to discover that at least half of those who made aliyah from English-speaking countries were writers, and that there are precious few jobs in the English-language press in Israel.

I knew I'd have to establish a reputation in the States and go to Israel with salable experience if I expected to support myself as a reporter. So after a few months working in the Government Press Office I returned to New York and found a position as an editor at a magazine about the fine jewelry industry. After about three years at the magazine, I ran into an old acquaintance from Tel Aviv University who worked as a reporter for the Jewish Telegraphic Agency, and urged me to apply for an opening there. I did, and got the job.

In the meantime, I had become engaged to my husband and moved to the neighborhood where we continue to live, but wasn't connected Jewishly any more than I had been before.

On holidays, I went with my husband to the moribund Orthodox synagogue he would attend a few times a year. But I couldn't follow the service, which made no difference to the twelve or fifteen men praying downstairs. They clearly considered extraneous my presence and that of one or two other women relegated to a drafty balcony.

This was not for me. I couldn't check my voice at the door. But I didn't feel compelled to search for anything else until after I began writing for JTA about all of the studies reflecting the effects of disaffiliation from Jewish communal life. I had decided to marry this man who had no interest in living in Israel, and knew that if we wanted our children to grow up in the Diaspora and want to be Jews, we were going to have to be proactive about it. In Israel, the very air you breathe is Jewish. But in America in the 1990s, being Jewish requires much more than buying bagels and going to synagogue a few times a year.

I was also beginning to hunger for a sense of community.

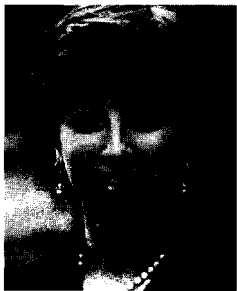
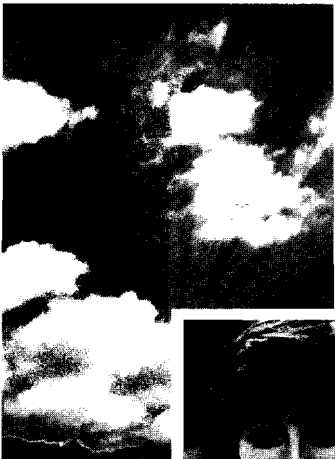
We started our research into a Jewish community by spending Purim at the Conservative synagogue in the neighborhood, and I knew, as we sat anonymously in the middle of a crowd of grown-ups and little kids celebrating redemption from the edge of disaster with silly costumes and wildly joyful grogger-ing and foot-stomping, that I had found a home.

We are a diverse and vibrant congregation. Our members come with all levels of Jewish education, experience, and enthusiasm, and we are largely lay-led. People we have met there have become our close friends – together we have celebrated births, Shabbat and other holy days, and supported each other in death and other tragedies. And though we are a wonderfully heterogeneous group, of young and old, straight and gay, knowledgeable and not, we are a

community, brought together by our shared interest in growing Jewishly.

For me, being deeply involved in Judaism is not as much about God as it is other things. Even as I pray and address God, I must admit I question the very existence of this creator. My skepticism has not dimmed as my involvement has grown, though feeling a life move inside of me has given my cynicism pause. I long for the feeling of intimate closeness to God I know many people have. I even envy it a bit, because even in my moments of deepest connection, I feel more connected to the power of my community, to a sense of oneness and unity with the Jews around me and even with my role in the world as a Jew, than with God. I long to see God in the leaves of a tree, as Abraham Joshua Heschel said he did.

But the sharp darts of doubt feel less painful when I am sitting in shul as the Shabbat morning sun streams through the stained glass windows and I feel a sense of peace I have not known all week. My questions about the existence and presence of God have become secondary to what I know is the truth – that I love being a Jew and that as a Jew I have a special role to play in the world. I know that being Jewish is a precious gift. And that even if I am not sure of what I believe, *my actions are creating a home where Judaism is a living, vital celebration*. And that, more than anything, I want the child who now moves inside of me and will soon be born to cherish the richness of Jewish life, and have the opportunity to weave together the threads of Jewish experience into a garment which will always keep him or her warm.



ELISE EPLAN

**MY IDENTITY AS a Jew is deeply intertwined with the legacies of those who preceded me. The decisions that I make reflect the values and ideals instilled in me by my parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents, which, in turn, reflect the values and ideals inherent in Judaism.**

I am a rarity – a fifth generation (on my father’s side) Jewish Atlantan. Since southerners are not known for their tolerance of differences, the characteristics that define southern Jews reflect their status as outsiders in southern culture. My experience growing up in Atlanta in the 1960s and 1970s was similar to the experiences of my father and grandfather in this city many years before. My grandfather was a lawyer, one of the first graduates of the Emory Law School. He never made a great deal of money in law because he spent much of his time representing those who could not pay. He led many of the Jewish organizations in Atlanta, as had his father. My great-grandfather was a founder and president of Ahavath Achim, one of the largest Conservative synagogues in the Southeast. My father, a city planner, has a strong sense of responsibility to the city of Atlanta and all of its inhabitants.

My mother is a first generation American who grew up in Mobile, Alabama. Her parents (along with their sisters and brothers) came there from Russia. She grew up in that exceedingly southern city with parents who cooked foods differently and talked dif-

ferently from her friends' parents. I have vivid memories of visiting Mobile as a child and feeling proud that I had so many aunts and uncles and cousins there. I seemed to be related to the whole city. And I thought everyone in Mobile spoke with a Russian accent.

We did not live in a "Jewish neighborhood." In fact, we lived in an older, racially mixed (at least for Atlanta in the 1960s), in-town neighborhood. Starting in kindergarten, I attended a Jewish day school, not because my parents felt that strongly about my religious education, but because my mother taught there. It was a pragmatic decision that my father opposed – an advocate of public school education, he was uncomfortable with the notion that I would be around only Jewish children.

He lost, and I began the Hebrew Academy in 1965. The eight years I spent there were crucial in the development of my Jewish identity. Not only was it an intimate, nurturing environment (when we graduated in seventh grade, there were just seventeen students in my class), but it allowed me to become familiar and comfortable with Judaism at an early age, before I could develop insecurities about being different. Among my neighborhood friends, as among the population of the city as a whole, I was, as a Jew, a decided minority. But in the largest part of my everyday life – at school – I wasn't different. And I brought home what I learned there. I questioned why we did not keep kosher and did not light Shabbat candles. My parents did not change the level of their observance, but they did begin to think about it differently. It was not till years later that I realized that, just as they influenced me and my decisions, my knowledge about and comfort with Judaism influenced them.

High school was very different. Because the public school that served our neighborhood in the 1970s was not very good, I ended up in a private Episcopalian prep school. The school, however, only served as the place for "book learning." Far more meaningful for my development was my participation in B'nai B'rith Youth, which not only offered a social alternative to high school football games and non-Jewish dating but, more significantly, taught me to be a leader. I rose through the levels of leadership, learning how to run meetings, how to speak to large groups, and how to motivate my peers to service. I went to dances in cities like Charleston, Savannah, and Augusta, and I began to understand Jewish life in these cities. We were all connected by being Jewish and being southern. Some of the people I met were as rooted in their communities as I was in Atlanta, and many of their parents had known my father when he was a leader in B'nai B'rith thirty years before. I met people from around the country, experienced leadership training camp, and saw how meaningful Jewish rituals like Shabbat could be shared with my

peers. It was a wonderful time in my life.

After one year at a southern university, I realized that I needed to leave the south in order to expand my horizons. I transferred to Brandeis University. For the first time I became aware of the cultural differences between my Judaism and that of my contemporaries who grew up in the East. My friends at Brandeis, many of whom had never met a southern Jew before, were amazed that I seemed to know “every Jew in the South.” The Jews in urban areas of the East are so surrounded by Jews that they do not need to extend their networks beyond their own city. Yet their attitudes towards the city or town in which they grew up were very different from mine.

I grew up not only in the same city, but not more than four or five miles from where my grandfather and father grew up. Never did I realize how deep my community roots were until I began to meet people whose grandparents had lived on the Lower East Side, whose parents had grown up in Brooklyn, and who themselves had grown up on Long Island. I did not pass judgment, but I did become aware of the differences.

I loved being in a Jewish place, where the names on the buildings were Jewish and I did not have to feel anxiety about missing school on Jewish holidays. I loved being near a large city full of culture and history. And I developed an enthusiasm for political activity. My parents had been (and still are) liberals, involved in the civil rights movement and in Democratic Party politics. Our home has always been meeting place for politicians, writers, and social activists, both white and African-American. My own politics, however, had not yet matured. It was in college that I began to think seriously about my view of the world. Brandeis was not the hotbed of liberalism in 1980 that it had been in 1968; in fact, most of my peers were more interested in getting into medical school or law school than they were in the fact that Ronald Reagan had been elected president. But I began to understand the significance of elections like that one, and decided to go to Washington after graduation.

Washington was the ideal place for a college graduate in 1982. I worked for a congressman from Atlanta. Being on Capitol Hill was exhilarating. My prior political experience had been working on campaigns with my parents; I remember, at age twelve, selling lemonade in front of our house to raise money for George McGovern. Now I became a political junkie and even started a young professionals' PAC with a dozen of my friends.

Equally significant was my embarkation on a “Jewish journey.” Most of my friends in Washington were Jewish, but after I had been there a year I heard about a group of young people who met on Saturday mornings in the basement of the large Conservative shul in

D.C. It was called the “Minyan” and I began to attend. It was an eclectic, bright, and very welcoming group of people, and I went regularly. Shabbat became a new and enlightening experience for me. The participants were lawyers, congressional staffers, doctors, who came together to share in the beauty of the day. I began to have Friday night dinner with them, or Saturday afternoon lunch at someone’s house. Everyone lived within walking distance of the shul, so that we formed a little community. I learned (or relearned) how to pray, and I came to know some of the brightest and most interesting Jews I had ever known. One of the members taught a Talmud lesson at the end of Shabbat, and I took part in that as well. I experienced Shabbat during that two-year period in a special way that I have never duplicated, either before or since.

Like so many other people who descend on Washington after college, I eventually began to yearn for life “outside the beltway.” After a brief return to Atlanta, I entered the Yale School of Organization and Management (SOM) in August 1986. For the first time since high school, I was in an environment that was not very Jewish. I have never made a better decision (except, perhaps, to get married) than to go to SOM. It exposed me to people, thinking, and possibilities that changed my life. I met people who had lived in parts of the world I could not even find on a map. I was clearly and strongly identified as a Jew, and yet, for the first time in my life, most of my closest friends were not Jewish. Most important, I began to understand the need for involvement in the larger community as well as the Jewish community. I worked in a soup kitchen in New Haven and participated, with a group from Yale Law School in an attempt to form a nonprofit affordable housing organization to stem the tide of gentrification in the city. At the same time, I was learning in the classroom about the root causes of poverty, as well as the limits of policy responses. Because SOM is a management program, I began to appreciate the skills involved in running profit-making ventures and to realize that many of those same skills are needed to solve the immense problems facing our society today.

As graduation loomed, I had to make a decision about my next step. Most of my friends were going to New York, Boston or Washington. I had a very good job offer in New York. I knew that I wanted to find someone with whom I could have a serious relationship and perhaps even marry. I also knew that person would have to be Jewish. Atlanta was tugging at me, but so were a number of questions. What would my social life be like there? After an experience like SOM, would Atlanta be a letdown? Would I constantly be in the shadow of my family?

Despite the ambivalence and against the advice of most of my

SOM friends, I decided to try Atlanta. Socially, it was a difficult adjustment. I had to work hard to seek out people with whom I shared common interests. And I was disappointed with my options in the Jewish community. The mission of most of the Jewish organizations seemed quite parochial, and I knew that I would not be satisfied simply with involvement in the Jewish Federation, where most of the young people were.

My own Judaic understanding pushed me toward a wider reach. The words *tikkun olam* (repair of the world) have great meaning to me. I also harked back to my experience in that soup kitchen in New Haven; perhaps I could make an impact on the immense problems associated with poverty here. I needed to try. A friend of mine had started an organization in New York called New York Cares that allowed young, working, busy people to volunteer in their free time. It seemed the perfect model for Atlanta, a city that attracts people from all over. Many of the young people who come here do not necessarily affiliate with a church or synagogue. They wanted to be involved in the community, but needed a vehicle. Hands On Atlanta was born.

I pulled together a group of people to discuss the idea of a community service organization geared to our peers – people in their twenties and thirties who have demanding work and/or family lives, but who want to feel that they are making a difference

in the lives of those less fortunate. In assembling this group, I sought a mix in terms of race, religion, gender, and professional background. The group was disproportionately Jewish, reflecting my contacts, but we managed to strike a balance. We met weekly in my living room at the beginning, just talking about the needs in the community and ways that we might be able to address them. We began to volunteer in different places, to try and get a sense of the opportunities that existed. The idea behind the organization was to provide a flexible way to volunteer on diverse types of projects.

It was an exhilarating period. The response to Hands On Atlanta has been tremendous. In our first four years we have grown from the original twelve people to over 4,000 volunteers, serving 150 community projects from house building for the homeless to tutoring low-income children to providing labor to shelters and soup kitchens. We have become a major force in community service in Atlanta and have been able to apply an entrepreneurial approach to getting young people involved.

At the same time, I met a very special person who became my husband in late 1991. Though he had grown up in Boston and gone to law school there, he was willing to come to Atlanta. He saw my attachment here and the importance of my roots. We are building a wonderful life together. We have a kosher home, go to my parents'

house for Shabbat, and are fortunate to have a group of friends who get together once a month, usually on Shabbat. This group, which has met for eight years, has become a “family.” We celebrate each other’s happy occasions and share each other’s grief when losses occur. I also have a special attachment to a synagogue here – the one my great-grandfather helped found. We are fortunate to have exceptional rabbis who make Saturday morning services warm and welcoming. Though I don’t go as often as I’d like, I know that it will play a major role in my life as I begin my own family.

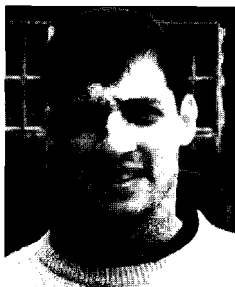
In addition, I was fortunate to be involved starting an organization called Access, the young adult division of the American Jewish Committee. In Access and AJC I found the right kind of Jewish organization, one that provides an exciting, vibrant, and stimulating outlet for young Jews in Atlanta. The emphasis is on programming, so it can be described as the “thinking person’s” organization. The appeal for me has been the broad focus beyond just “Jewish” issues to intergroup and interreligious issues and Black-Jewish concerns, without neglecting Jewish spiritual needs. It has attracted hundreds of young people who, like me, want to explore the depth that American Judaism has to offer. It is providing an ideal training ground for future leaders in the community. The chapter leadership has embraced Access wholeheartedly, and that adds another appealing dimension.

My professional life has begun to mirror my “extracurricular” life. Though I spent some time in the private and finance sectors, I am now working at the Atlanta Project, an antipoverty community building initiative that was started by former president Jimmy Carter. He is an inspirational person, and though our spiritual ties are different, I sense in him a view of the world not so different from my own. The problems of poverty are immense. But I bring to this challenge the same optimism and energy that has helped me in my other endeavors.

I am driven in my life not only by a sense of obligation but also by spirituality. I have been blessed with love of family, educational opportunities, and material resources. My role is to make use of those blessings. It is my responsibility to give back, as part of the legacy handed down by both my ancestors. I can make a difference — I’ve seen it happen.

Making a difference is also about having children and infusing the next generation with the same values of *tzedakah* and appreciation for the beauty and wisdom of Judaism that were imparted to me. I have created a life for myself, and now, with my husband, in Atlanta, a life separate from my parents’ but very much connected to and influenced by them. I now enter the next stage of life, in which I will try to do for my children what my parents did for me.





AARON FREIWALD

I VIVIDLY REMEMBER THE YEAR I spent in seventh grade preparing for my bar mitzvah – even though, for reasons I’ll explain, I never did get to celebrate that ritual. It was during the course of that year that I started to explore and understand the meaning of being Jewish. If I didn’t recite the *haftorah*, I did learn other important lessons.

First, there was my Latin teacher, Kingsley “Mo” Moore. My family had moved around a lot, from California to the midwest and back to San Francisco again. I started seventh grade in another new school, for the first time a private school, and there I met Mo, whose singular passion was teaching young men to think. Mo drilled me on my second declension nouns and the irregular forms of first conjugation verbs. In his class I learned stories of ancient Gaul and of the Ceasars, and when he’d digress he would enthrall us with his own war stories.

Once, interrupting an especially rousing story of some courageous charge he remembered as if it were yesterday, I made the mistake of asking Mo which war he was talking about. He laughed deeply and heartily. Without saying a word, he put my name up at the corner of the blackboard. With that, the class knew that I would be sniffing chalk dust after school as I became intimately familiar, ad nauseam one might say, with one of Mo’s favorite lines from Latin verse.

Another memory I have from that year is a conversation with my mother.

“What am I?” I asked.

She looked up from the pile of papers she had been grading. “Excuse me?” she said, playing it safe.

“You know, what am I? What are we?”

“Aaron, you’ll have to be a bit more specific. What do you mean, ‘What are we?’”

“Well, some of the guys at school were talking and Bobby says his family comes from France and Scott was saying how his family comes from Germany, and so I was wondering, you know, what we are.”

“Ah, now I see.”

“Are we German, too?”

“No. We are certainly not, We’re American.”

“I know *that*. Come on, ma, we’re all American.” I was getting frustrated.

“You’re Jewish.”

“Yeah, I know that, too, but where do we come from?”

“That’s really the important thing, that you’re Jewish. If it comes up, that’s what you can tell your friends.”

“Mom, I know we’re Jewish. But I want to know where our family comes from.”

“Okay, let’s see, your grandmother was born in Poland, and your grandfather’s family came to this country from Russia and from England, and your father’s family originally lived in northern Czechoslovakia, and no one knows where Grandma Edna came from, and your great-grandmother’s family was from Lithuania and...”

I was sorry I’d asked. But I was also relieved to know that I had roots. It was strangely comforting, even life-affirming in some way, to know that I had not sprung spontaneously from the earth. There was a part of me in history, in the past, and that gave me a vague feeling of hope about the future.

I have one other distinct memory from the year I was twelve years old, and it smarts to this day. I was standing around with some friends in front of school and several of the guys were talking about their upcoming bar mitzvahs, the parties they were having, the presents they expected to receive. One boy motioned us in close, as if he had vital intelligence to share, and reported that his older brother had received several thousand dollars in cash. Actually, I think the expression my friend used was “raked it in.”

For their part, my friends looked at me like I was an alien because I was not planning my bar mitzvah, because I had never gone to Hebrew school, because my parents had never joined a syna-

gogue, and because I did not evidence any signs of envy over their impending financial rewards. One of my cohorts told me I was a “bad Jew.” I’ll never forget that as long as I live.

My eyes were opened in so many ways during that impressionable year. From Mo I learned that knowledge was an endless feast. From my mother I learned that my many questions about my identity as a Jew, as a citizen, as a member of a family, as a member, however disconnected, of a larger community, were not easily answerable.

And from my name-calling classmate I learned that identity has limits, that there are some people who are Jewish and with whom I share an unmistakable bond, and there are some about whom I cannot say the same. Jewishness may seat you next to another at services, but is not an automatic pass to mutual love and respect. Jews are human, and they can be as fallible and small-minded as anyone.

Looking back, a part of me feels sorry that I did not have a “proper” Jewish education when I was young. My parents simply could not, in good conscience, overcome their atheism to put me and my sister through the paces. Many other parents did what they did for their children because they were supposed to, or because their parents had, or because it was simply easier not to think about why one was following the crowd. This wasn’t true of everyone we knew, of course, but this attitude was certainly widespread. I am sure, if we were all honest, many would acknowledge that apathy, an apathy that fails to shake conformity, is a condition that routinely afflicts every community, all religions.

I regret not having had a Jewish education especially now that I have become more intimately involved in my Jewishness. The prayers, the melodies, the rituals are not instinctively a part of me the way they would have been had I gone to High Holiday services, however little I might have paid attention at the time. So I have had to learn Hebrew as an adult, on my own, because I realized that without the language the service is foreign and uninviting. In college I taught myself the meaning of Passover seder. My friends and I held one every year. We invited Jews and non-Jews. We read the Haggadah and debated the significance of the Passover. We all wanted to know. We all wanted to understand.

After six years as a journalist, I began work on a book about a former SS commandant who had escaped postwar Germany to Argentina, where he hid until his arrest in 1987. His trial in Germany several years later was called the “last major Nazi war crimes trial ever.” Josef Schwammberger had been a forced labor camp and ghetto camp taskmaster in Galicia, in southern Poland.

While researching the book, I traveled to Poland with my wife.

We crossed the Czech-Polish border at night aboard a rickety train. The moon was out and shining brightly upon the cow pasture where the train paused just past the international line. The train hissed and groaned as I stared out the window and wondered about my grandmother, who had escaped the horrors that were to come. I wondered about those who remained, those who died, those who survived. I wondered about my connection to them.

Before my wife and I married, we met with the rabbi to discuss the ceremony. He explained the components of the service, the symbols of the wine and rings, the meaning of the vows, the order of events. We talked about the eight Hebrew words for love the cantor would sing in the seventh blessing. We told the rabbi how much we liked that idea.

One of the most troubling questions to me is the meaning of God. In a recent letter to my father, I tried to explain my faith:

I happen to believe in God and I do believe in faith. There is so much in life that is rational, sensible, practical, logical. And there are other things that are not. Love, space, passion, and life itself – these are not things that can be fully understood by any formula. My sense of God is not of a bearded man or of a bald-headed buddha or of anything personified. I don't think God is watching me or gets angry at me. I don't feel I need God in order to understand the inexplicable, or bring comfort to me in times of need. Love, the vastness of the heavens, the wonder of silence – these things fulfill those needs for me.

So God, to me, is a spirit, a vague sense of something I can't put my finger on, something indescribable that stands for the irrational forces in life. I "worship" God when I think, even for an instant, about the wonder of what is so good and beautiful. When I write a great sentence, I don't thank God. I thank myself. I pat myself on the back. But the Rabbi at our wedding said we would thank God for one another. And, you know, I really think there is something to that. Not literally. I don't think God "delivered" us to one another. But I am so happy and I am filled with amazement that on this vast planet, out of the enormity of time and the universe, that out of the infinite space of what might be, that we are together and with such high hopes and good feeling and boundless love – and I think of that and I say, "Wow! How did this happen?"

That's how I see God. It's the wonder, the awe, the love, the dream, the ecstasy.

Now I guess that's a more ebullient view of God than

most. But I recognize a more sober side, as well. There is a sense of morality, of fundamental values, a way of being a good person that I think is definitely a part of the essence of God.

You wrote of the illogic of faith. I guess I can't disagree with that. Faith is, by definition illogical. And that's exactly what appeals to me.

I have thought a great deal about the meaning of being Jewish since I was in the seventh grade. I thought about the meaning of being Jewish the afternoon I stumbled into the former Jewish ghetto in Venice. I was eighteen and at the tail end of a seven-month tour of Europe, which was how I had decided to spend the year between high school and college (after working two jobs to save money for the trip). Before I left, my grandmother had asked why, if I was so interested in traveling about the world, I was not including Israel on my itinerary. I laughed at the time. I wanted to see the great cathedrals and walk the corridors of the world's great museums and stroll the banks of the Seine and the Thames and the Arno. And then, there I found myself, standing in the middle of a quiet courtyard, reading the plaque on the tree in front of which scores of Venetian Jews had waited their turn to be shot in the head. I thought then about how far I had come and yet how little I knew about myself.

I moved about a good bit more in the years that followed. During the nearly four years after college that I worked in Washington, D.C., I drove my friends slightly mad with having to cross out my address once for every year I was there. (The wiser of my acquaintances learned to "pencil me in.") In my several jobs in the media, I wrote about politics and law, attended conventions, went on assignment, interviewed senators, wrote news-breaking stories. I learned a great deal about a great many people, about a great many issues. I actually got paid to ask questions of the attorney general, Supreme Court nominees, and congressional staffers. I thought I had a pretty nice arrangement.

Once, driving home late on a Friday afternoon from work to my apartment in suburban Washington, I passed a synagogue. Actually, at the moment I passed by, I'm not sure I realized it was a synagogue. There were many people waiting to get inside. Another half-mile or so down the road it dawned on me that it was Yom Kippur eve, the night of Kol Nidre. I was compelled, drawn back. So I turned the car around and went back to attend the service. I didn't know anyone there. I didn't recognize the prayers. I couldn't even read the prayer book. I didn't understand. I realized, once again, how little I knew

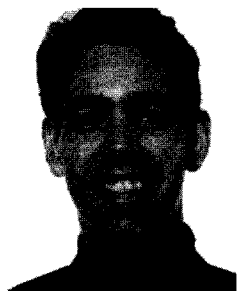
about Judaism and my relationship to it.

I moved to a new place, the city where I now live, and I knew I wanted to stay, I wanted to belong. I have already had what one friend calls “my brooding years,” my early twenties, a time to run from here to there and back again, to contemplate the meaning of existence over dark coffee in the brilliant darkness of some wood-paneled cafe’. Now I want to be a part of some place, part of a community, part of a people.

I look around now, and I imagine here, in this place, my own children running and playing. I want something deeper than simply a permanent address. I want a sense of place within the overwhelming vastness of this world. I feel now like Wally from the movie *My Dinner with Andre*. Like the flamboyant title character, I have been, so to speak, to the Sahara to experience the taste of sand between my teeth. I have been to the forests of Poland to dance blindfolded with a group of perfect strangers in the middle of the night. I have been to the top of Mount Everest to feel against my cheeks the same biting wind that nips at the toes of God. After my adventures in the world, I want to know the beauty of the park outside my window, the infinite complexity and diversity of my neighborhood, the sense of timelessness, of eternity that comes from children (when I have them), the serenity and contentment that comes during the quiet hour of an early Sunday morning.

I have a lot to learn about myself right here, right where I am, right now. Our parents give us their sense of the world, their moral code, their values, religious, ethical, political. As children, when we vote in class during election years to see what would happen if the fifth grade determined the outcome, we vote Republican or Democrat based on our parents’ leanings. As young adults, we face a wrenching choice. We may continue to abide by our parents’ teachings wholesale. Or we can reject everything. Or we accept some, reject other parts, and generally shape our own lives out of what our parents gave us. As we go through this process of becoming ourselves, we also struggle to become ourselves as Jews.

Like many of my generation, I am not exactly sure just what my parents taught me, just why I “believe” what I believe, just what does make me a “good” Jew. Many of us wonder why, wonder how, wonder what. As I learned in seventh grade, asking questions can land you in detention writing Latin sentences on the chalk board after school. (And even then it’s not so bad.) Sometimes asking questions binds you more profoundly than you could have imagined with your family, with your faith, and with yourself.



CHARLES GLICK

**“DESCRIBE YOUR ETHNIC IDENTITY.”** The question was posed to me during an undergraduate conference on the topic of diversity. At the multiethnic university I attended, this subject was a frequent topic of discussion. I did not need to think very long about my response. Being an American Jew was and is at the very core of my identity, and that is how I answered the question. A little surprised at how quickly I had answered, I realized that not only could I not remember a time when I would have answered any differently, but that I never anticipated ever doing so. Many of the student leaders present, whose ethnic identity was more visible than mine, took even less time to come up with their responses. Many identified as Latinos, others as African- Americans, some as Asians. But when the time came for the representative of the Inter-Sorority Council to answer the question, she was at a loss. “Why, I am an American,” she said. “Yes,” someone interjected, “but what type of American? What is your ethnic identity?” She explained that she was part German and part Irish, but could not recall ever discussing her ethnicity or celebrating it. She always considered herself just an American.

I could almost hear her ask herself, “Isn’t being an American enough?” That question has little relevance to me. While I still struggle to synthesize my American and Jewish identities in some coherent way, I have long since abandoned the belief that, for me, being an American is enough.

Why did I choose to remain identifiably Jewish in a generation

that has the freedom to choose not to be Jewish at all? As I get older and begin to think about raising children in the not-too-distant future, I ponder that question. I expect that my children will, like me, go through different stages of Jewish identification over their lifetimes. I would no more expect them to be satisfied with one expression of Jewish identity than I would expect them to maintain one style of dress over a lifetime. Nevertheless, I expect to teach my children, as I was taught, that their Jewishness is as much a part of them as any other part of their personal identity.

I learned early on that being American and being Jewish were not mutually exclusive. I recall one lesson in particular. My father, who was instrumental in establishing the only Orthodox Jewish Cub Scout troop in California, wanted the troop to undergo the complete "scout experience," and scheduled our participation in a state-wide scouting weekend. Arriving at the campsite, we immediately built an *eruv*, the traditional demarcation allowing a Jew to carry objects within its perimeter on Shabbat. That night we had a traditional Shabbat dinner at our site, and the next day, following Shabbat services, we set about participating, with other troops, in the scout program. We went on a hike and watched a demonstration on first aid. At one event, however, we were supposed to use a pencil and paper, a violation of the laws of Shabbat. My father asked if we could participate without writing. As it turned out, the organizer of the event appreciated our religious commitment and was only too happy to accommodate us. That weekend I learned that Judaism need not be sacrificed in order to participate in the secular.

For me the operative word is "learned." I think that my personal experiences underscore the recent findings showing education to be one of the most important factors influencing Jewish identity and continuity. To borrow a simile from the story of Aladdin, Jewish education is like the written instructions on the magic lamp in which the genie resides. Without the instruction "Rub three times," someone who possesses the magic lamp has no idea that he holds a treasure in his hands. Jewish education is paramount because those who understand Jewish sources and the Jewish past can shape a pattern of Judaism that is relevant to their own needs. The magic lamp contains a "wish" for each possessor. For me, Judaism provides a sense of community and belonging. For others, it may resonate with a desire for spirituality, or function as the means of expressing feminism or a concern for social justice.

A Jewish education can take many forms. Perhaps the most important is the informal education that comes from growing up in a Jewish home. Much of my love for Judaism and the Jewish community comes from my parents who have lived Jewishly in a country that



has allowed them to. When I was growing up, the Jewish National Fund blue box in our home was never empty. New cars and exotic vacations were sacrificed in order to pay the cost of a Jewish day school education. Time revolved around Jewish life-cycle celebrations, holiday festivities, and current events that affected world Jewry. Whenever I went to a movie with my parents, they commented at the end about how many of the names in the credits were Jewish. There was a genuine sense of pride in the accomplishments of these "strangers" whom my parents regarded almost as close relatives.

As immigrants to this country, my parents never took for granted the freedom to live a Jewish life. I was taught at an early age, by example, the importance of civic responsibility. It seems like only yesterday that I was holding my father's hand as we walked door to door campaigning for neighborhood Jewish candidates. These were formative experiences for me, even though I was too young at the time to distinguish between the Democratic Party and a birthday party. Nevertheless, I was taught that a good Jew must be a good American, and that only through the political process could the Jewish community protect its interests. Campaigning for candidates who supported Israel was just as much a Jewish responsibility as giving *tzedakah* or attending synagogue.

To be sure, I sometimes applied this process of American-Jewish synthesis with less than satisfying results. As the organizer of a weekend retreat for the Jewish student community at UCLA, I was faced with the challenge of creating a meaningful Shabbat service for a diverse student population. I wanted to accommodate the needs of all the students. The major problem was how to deal with the controversial issue of the *mehitzah*, the traditional separation between men and women during worship. I suggested a partition at the front of the room, so that men and women could sit separately, but providing mixed seating in the back of the room. I naively thought that this compromise would solve the immediate problem, revolutionize the Jewish community, and win me a Nobel Peace Prize. Needless to say, I upset all parties, and came to the conclusion that there are good reasons for the existence of four major Jewish denominations. There are some things that do not lend themselves to compromise.

I had actually learned years before that Americanism and Judaism did not always fit neatly together. Although my parents believed that America had many wonderful things to offer, public education was not one of them. They knew instinctively - and studies are now proving them correct - that day-school Jewish education is essential to insure Jewish continuity. My parents, neither of them college educated or independently wealthy, sacrificed to send my sister and me to Jewish grade schools and high schools.

There are other tensions between what is American and what is Jewish. Judaism emphasizes community and belonging; America extols individuality. From a young age, American children are taught to be nonconformists. While individuality does have roots within Judaism, in America the freedom to choose often operates to the detriment of the Jewish community.

I learned this lesson firsthand. In college, I was very keen to take advantage of all that the secular campus world had to offer. In my desire to “go it alone” – and with the concern of my parents still ringing in my ears – I joined every group but the Jewish one. But I quickly found the campus a very lonely place. I began to think of myself as just another number in a university filled with other numbers. Only when I started associating with other Jewish students did I feel a sense of togetherness deriving from a shared history and identity that could never be matched elsewhere. Whether on the pages of the Jewish newspaper, in the halls of student government, or at a Shabbat table at Hillel, the Jewish community on campus provided an avenue for Jewish expression.

When I was at UCLA, Jews on campus began to feel concern for their safety. Anti-Semitic incidents were not uncommon, and anti-Israel rhetoric was the norm. In March 1988 simmering tension between the Black Student Union and the Jewish Student Union came to a boil with the visit of Minister Louis Farrakhan, leader of the Nation of Islam. I quickly found myself at the center of the effort to respond to the visit. A group of us formed a Student Coalition Against Racism (SCAR), which, in just two weeks, organized an 800-person candlelight vigil the night of Farrakhan’s speech, and collected 1,500 signatures on a petition denouncing Farrakhan’s racist message. This incident galvanized the Jewish community and raised my level of involvement in Jewish issues.

Unfortunately, there are many Jews who identify with their people only in response to anti-Semitism or anti-Zionism. Burn a Jewish newspaper, write an anti-Semitic comment, and people you never even knew were Jewish will come out of the woodwork to announce that “as Jews” they are appalled by the attack on their identity. I even recall reading a newspaper account by the president of a Jewish student group at an East Coast university who went so far as to secretly daub his own office with anti-Semitic graffiti in order to mobilize the Jewish population on his campus. Perhaps this explains why the largest class in most universities’ Jewish studies departments is the course on the Holocaust.

The campus fosters this negative type of Jewishness. The assault on their identity forces many Jewish students to circle the wagons. On the college campus today, whichever group is considered

most victimized receives greatest legitimacy and the most campus resources. Thus "comparative victimization" pits groups against one another as each tries to portray itself the greater victim. For example, in order for the Jewish Student Union to receive funding for Jewish programming, it had to respond to this request: "Document the historical oppression of your group." Although loath to derive my own identity in this perverse manner, I derived a sense of triumph by answering the question with a five-page paper documenting anti-Semitism from Abraham to the present.

A recent incident showed me just how accustomed I have become to thinking about Jewish identity in terms of persecution. I went to lunch with Fred, the chairman of the Black Student Caucus in my graduate program. I assumed that the discussion would be about racism and anti-Semitism; after all, what do Blacks and Jews have in common but a shared history of victimization? Instead, Fred noticed that I was eating a salad, and asked if I was a vegetarian. "No," I said, "I keep kosher." The conversation shifted to the similarities between keeping kosher and keeping Lent (Fred is a Catholic), and we realized that what we most had in common was devotion to our religious convictions and our respective communities. I confided that during weekly Sabbath services I enjoy searching the Bible for lessons pertaining to public policy issues. "For example," I said, "I recently learned that commentators on the Bible explain that the generation of Jews liberated from Egypt did not merit entry into the promised land because of the slave mentality they still harbored after the exodus." Fred's eyes lit up when I explained that "it wasn't until the second generation, born into the physical freedom of the desert, that the Jewish people merited entry into the promised land." Fred smiled and explained the theory proposed by African-American scholars that the slave mentality still present in their community more than a century after slavery was a major problem. Who would have thought that the issue of identity was something that could bring blacks and Jews together?

My attempt to combine my American and my Jewish identities now takes the form of graduate study in a secular university along with preparation for a career in Jewish communal service. The challenge to relate secular course work in economics, statistics, and accounting to issues that affect the Jewish community is daunting but exhilarating.

Sometimes I fear that perhaps the pendulum of my studies has swung too far to the secular. But the fact that I am concerned enough to question my actions suggests that the pendulum has already begun to swing back.



CRAIG LEVINE

I AM A TWENTY-EIGHT-YEAR-OLD AMERICAN JEW, but I claim no particular expertise on the role of Judaism in the lives of American Jews in their twenties, nor do I consider myself representative of my generation of Jews. But I am grateful for this opportunity to share some of my thoughts on Judaism, Israel, and the present and future of American Jewry.

I grew up in the New York suburb of Glen Cove, where I attended public schools. Until my bar mitzvah, I went to Hebrew school three days — for a total of five hours — each week at my family's Conservative synagogue. I went to Camp Ramah in the Berkshires one summer during junior high school, and though I enjoyed it I did not return. From eighth to tenth grade I went to “confirmation” classes one hour each Sunday morning. As that was all my synagogue offered, my formal Jewish education then ended, at age sixteen.

My family was culturally Jewish, but not particularly observant. We lit candles and said blessings for Shabbat, had Passover seders, and attended Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services. We did not keep kosher. Despite the lack of observance, there was a strong sense of Jewishness in our home; we clearly were part of the Jewish people.

I went to college, law school, and graduate school in public affairs, during all of which I took exactly one course on any subject related to my religious heritage — a Jewish history course in my sophomore year. At none of the three universities I attended was I

actively involved with the campus Jewish communities. I attended a handful of services at Hillel, usually on holidays with a friend who was more observant. I had no antipathy toward Judaism, but it wasn't a priority. I was a student and a musician (an amateur jazz drummer), and there never seemed to be time – or a compelling reason to make time – for much else, including Judaism. The Jews were my “home team,” in Lis Harris's metaphor from *Holy Days*, but I was a fair-weather fan.

In recent years, though, I have begun taking my heritage more seriously, exploring what Judaism means to me and what role I want it to play in my life. Several factors sparked this inquiry. First, my initial job upon leaving school was in the coalfields of southern West Virginia, near Kentucky, where I worked for two years providing a variety of free legal services to the indigent population. (I have since returned to New York City, where I live and work today.) To state the obvious, West Virginia is not an area with a large Jewish population. When the people there realized I was Jewish – which, despite my family name, did not occur frequently – they sometimes asked me to explain what Judaism is about, and I wanted to answer responsibly. (I hasten to add that the queries were always curious, never hostile.)

Second, the urge to explore my Judaism more fully had something to do with my departure from academia. In school, one's role as a student is clearly defined. The first foray into the so-called “real world” often leads to reflection on one's goals and identity, and it did for me. Finally, as I approached my late twenties, I began to consider the question of marriage in concrete rather than theoretical terms, which of course raises issues of children, heritage, and continuity.

And so I set out to continue the education I had abandoned as a teenager. Informally and intermittently, I began reading books, attending services, and discussing religion with knowledgeable friends and my local rabbi. I admit that I began this project with an uncomfortable combination of attraction and antipathy towards Judaism. I was attracted because so many of the rhythms of my life – the songs, the holidays, the family celebrations – revolved around Judaism; it is clearly a part of me, and a part that has brought me much joy. The antipathy was largely political. I am a liberal who came to political consciousness during the 1980s, when Judaism's public face was dominated by an expansionist Likud government in Israel and neoconservative intellectuals and policy makers in the United States. Many positions of both Likud and the neoconservatives left me with little desire to affiliate with the organized Jewish community.

While I remain uncomfortable with some strands of Judaism – the treatment of women and homosexuals, the notion of “chosenness”, the “Israel right or wrong” ideology of some organizations (a principle honored mainly in the breach since Labor took over) – my initial studies have taught me how foolish it was to ignore my rich, diverse tradition largely because of political disagreement with some aspects of contemporary Jewish and Israeli life. Politically, I now realize that in spite of 1980s conservatism there is a strong, noble tradition of Jewish activism on the political left, from trade unionism to the war on poverty and the civil rights movement.

In matters of doctrine, too, my study has brought much delight. Though my education has only just begun, and I suspect it will be a life-long endeavor, I have learned that Judaism introduced to the world the notion of a God who cares about interpersonal, human behavior – a God who wants, not appeasing sacrifices, but that you treat your fellow human beings with dignity and respect. Judaism asks us constantly to reflect on, and give thanks for, our many gifts, and to infuse the seemingly mundane with an element of the sacred. And Judaism gave us the wonderful, radical (and more than slightly immodest) notion that each individual is created in God’s image, imbued with a spark of divinity. Considered in the context of the rigidly hierarchical, class-based societies of the time, the development of this idea is remarkable. It is a source of great pride to be a product of a tradition that developed these ideas and continues to espouse them as central tenets.

So for me, one of the primary routes to Judaism has been study – not surprising, I suppose, since we are the people of the book and I am somewhat bookish by nature. Many of Judaism’s ideas excite me, and as one who constantly questions most things, I am glad to be part of a tradition that welcomes questions and allows for – even seems to encourage – analysis, dialogue, and reinterpretation.

Another part of my exploration of Judaism relates to Israel. Last summer, I was extremely fortunate to be selected to participate in the American Jewish Committee’s Alfred and Carol Moses People to People Mission. In August – just before the historic Gaza and Jericho breakthrough and “the handshake” on the White House lawn – I spent two weeks in Israel, exploring for the first time the country that is inextricably linked to contemporary American Judaism. The trip was led by an AJC professional and an Israeli guide, both of whom were extremely knowledgeable, open-minded, and interested in discussing the myriad ideas and feelings a first trip to the Holy Land raises. And my nine fellow travelers were a thoughtful, interesting, and diverse group. Although the trip was short, we were able to see much of the country and meet people from many sides of

Israeli life, including politicians from a variety of parties, kibbutz movement members, feminists, Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform rabbis, a novelist, Israeli Defense Force officers and soldiers, Palestinians, journalists, the human rights officer from the American embassy, academics, and a leader of the military government of the West Bank.

It is difficult to summarize my reactions to such a multi-faceted, wonderful (which I mean literally; it is a land full of wonders) country. I was struck first by the contrasts – arid deserts and lush green valleys, ancient biblical sites with F-16s maneuvering overhead, Arabs and Jews, the religious and the secular. It's hard to believe that so much exists in so small a place. And the sense of the past was overpowering. I was awed and fascinated to see so many places of such historical significance. But, strangely, I never felt I was treading on holy ground, even at the Western Wall. I realized that my sense of the spiritual is based not on places – even places of biblical significance for which Jews have yearned for centuries – but on ideas and traditions, people and communities.

My most jarring reaction to Israel was how different it is from the United States, how unfamiliar it is to me. In spite of all the rhetoric about one Jewish people, I felt a large gulf between myself and most Jewish Israelis (not to speak of – and they're not often spoken of – the country's non-Jewish citizens). And I felt this in spite of having numerous relatives there, to whom I am joined by blood, some of whom I met for the first time during my trip. I don't mean that the Israelis I met were cold; they were not. Nor do I mean that the nationalist definition of a Jewish people is totally foreign to me. Walking along the Tel Aviv beach during a street festival, I was struck by an utterly unfamiliar, tribal sense of belonging; I didn't know anyone around me, but felt we were somehow linked to each other in a way I rarely feel in an American crowd.

But on a more fundamental level, I felt a gap. Israelis all share the unifying, formative experience of the military; for American Jews – especially younger ones – the closest analogue is the university. Israelis live a tense life, surrounded by enemies. Americans are safe and largely complacent. The young Israelis I met are products of a culture vastly different from mine. I didn't know their books, movies or music, and they didn't know mine. In short, Israel felt very much like a foreign country – one I care about and to which I feel vaguely attached, but fundamentally foreign.

I was surprised that some of my fellow travelers wanted nothing more than to move to Israel immediately, and were willing – even eager – to give up everything American in order to do so. If anything, the trip made me realize how American I am – how jazz, baseball,

the Constitution, Appalachian lawyering, U.S. popular culture, and other things American have made me who I am. And though being Jewish is also part of my identity, Israel plays only a relatively small role.

This is why I think the organized American Jewish community makes a mistake when it assumes that Israel will continue to be a source of purpose and dynamism for the next generation of American Jews. The Jews I know care about Israel, some deeply. But Israel is not the driving force behind their religious identity. And I believe it is wrong to think that a connection to Israel will bring many unaffiliated American Jews back into the fold. The notion of unity and identity through nationalism and Israel worked better, I suspect, before there was an Israel, when a Jewish state was merely an abstraction for Jews to hope and strive for together. But now it is a reality. And while American Jews send money and say "Next year in Jerusalem," few avail themselves of the opportunity even to visit. And it is clear that there will be no ingathering of the American Jewish "exiles" on Israeli shores. While I celebrate the prospect of Arab-Israeli peace, even if it comes it will not transform Israel into American Jewry's ongoing *raison d'être*.

Israeli survival is not a credible cause to rally the unaffiliated, either. Again, this may have been true and useful some years ago. But today Israel is by far the strongest military power in the Mideast, the region's only nuclear power, and is backed by the world's sole superpower. In short, there is no danger that Israel will ever be pushed into the sea, and those who invoke this possibility as a way of mobilizing Jews are wrong and possibly disingenuous.

Nor is American Jewish survival a realistic rallying cry. While one often reads about threats to the American Jewish community, I have never been victimized by one anti-Semitic incident. I am not naive enough to think the inexplicable, dogged reality of anti-Semitism is behind us. But it seems to me that American Jews are today among the most economically and politically successful groups in the wealthiest, most powerful nation in the history of the world, and to focus so much attention on the purported threats to our existence is both unrealistic and unwise. David Duke, Leonard Jeffries and other populist demagogues may receive alarming support, but they do not pose a fundamental threat to American Jewish existence.

I do not mean to deny or disrespect the history of anti-Jewish persecution. As a child of the twentieth century, I am keenly aware of humanity's tragic, persistent capacity for hatred, which all too often has been directed at the Jews. Millions of my people paid the ultimate price simply because they were Jews, and I owe them a debt beyond words for sustaining a faith that has given me so much. But



this has no relevance to the future of Jewish life. The Jewish people must survive, we are told, because so many martyrs gave their lives in the name of Judaism. This begs the question of *why* they gave their lives. I believe we honor the memory of the martyrs of our past best when we look both backward with respect and humility, and – more importantly – forward toward what Judaism has to offer Jews and the world today and tomorrow. This message is too often lost in the clamor of rhetoric regarding Israel, anti-semitism, and survival.

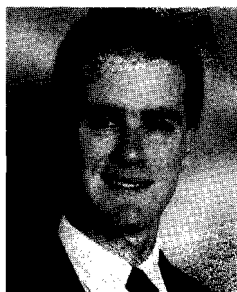
With this I have arrived at the central question of my spiritual inquiry, a question I believe many young American Jews are asking themselves in various ways: What does Judaism have to offer America and American Jews, not in Israel or in the past but here and now? I do not pose the question cynically, for my initial explorations of the Jewish tradition lead me to believe that there are very substantial, important answers – answers that would both enrich American and American-Jewish life and animate many young American Jews. But the question, in its most basic form, is rarely articulated. As young, single Jews, we are often told not to intermarry. But we are rarely told why not, in any detailed, thoughtful way.

How does the goal of ongoing Jewish particularity – and the concept of a “chosen” people – comport with the American ideals of equality, universalism, and melting-pot assimilation? (After all, far from being inherently dirty words, a strong case can be made that intermarriage and assimilation are examples of the American dream at work.) Can – and should – we celebrate our Jewish heritage as Americans? What does each half of “American-Jew” contribute to the other? Does Judaism offer anything to the ongoing American story, and vice versa?

Many young Jews, myself included, struggle with these questions, and strive to learn, explore, and invent what it means to be Jewish in this place at this time. The Jewish community could be a bit more helpful. Since Judaism is a family-oriented religion, young Jewish adults who are out of school and single often have difficulty finding institutional frameworks in which to learn more and ask critical questions in the company of their peers. Too many “young singles” events lack substance, and are thinly veiled vehicles to help young Jews find Jewish spouses.

In typically Jewish fashion, I have ended up with questions for which I have no answers. Perhaps there are no answers. But the more I learn about Judaism, the more I am convinced that it is something to be treasured and preserved; that it does indeed have much to contribute to America and the world; that those who carried it through the centuries – and those who died to preserve it – have passed along a truly precious legacy for which I am deeply grateful;

and that the project of living up to the responsibilities – and partaking of the joys – of Judaism will, at least to me, ever be essential.



MARK M. ROBBINS

**I LEFT THE WEDDING AMAZED.** In the course of a few hours at one joyous Jewish wedding, much of my Jewish life flashed before my eyes: Providence Hebrew Day School, Camp Yavneh in New Hampshire, Camp Ramah, Hebrew University, Shabbat eve potlucks in Washington, D.C. There were people at the wedding from everywhere, people with whom I had shared and shaped my Jewish identity. At that moment I knew exactly who I was and whence I came. I fully apprehended my Jewishness. And I recognized that had it not been for my strong Jewish upbringing, I might never have been able to feel this way now.

I treasure the memory of my years at the Providence Hebrew Day School not just for the solid Jewish and secular education, but also for the way the school shaped how I think. I learned to live by both the secular and the Jewish calendars. School would end early on Friday afternoons to give us time to help our families prepare for Shabbat. Our winter vacation was called just that – “winter vacation” – not “Christmas break.” Our spring vacation always coincided with Passover. Purim was not just another day: We spent the early morning in school listening to the *megillah* (Scroll of Esther) reading, and then went home to deliver *mishloah manot* (traditional gifts of food) to relatives and friends. Hebrew conversation, the prayers, large sections of the Bible, became familiar to me right from the beginning, thanks to Hebrew Day.

Moreover, I wore a *kippah* in school. Every day, passing the local public junior high school on my way home, I considered taking it off and stuffing it into my pocket. At the very least, I knew I was different from *them*.

Home and school reinforced each other. Soon after I came home from school on Friday, my mother would light the Sabbath candles and we would sit down to our Shabbat meal. It was a time of particular affection between family members. I particularly enjoyed the beautiful melodies of the *zemirot* (Shabbat songs) and the grace after meals. And the next day – difficult as it was for me, at times – I knew that I could not go to the mall. I would have to be content playing in our backyard.

Jewish holidays were special. My maternal grandparents came up from Washington and my paternal grandmother came over to prepare the gefilte fish. Other relatives came from far and wide, inevitably displacing me to a cot in my parents' room. I didn't mind. I loved the holidays, the precious atmosphere they created, the opportunity to be with family.

Summer camp added another dimension to my Jewish identity, creating for me a sense of community that I would encounter again only in Israel. Camp had a kibbutz feeling to it; Hebrew was spoken, campers and staff were always busy and everyone fulfilled some level of responsibility.

Even when I attended public high school, my Jewish identity was rarely challenged because I remained in a primarily Jewish social circle. The only conflicts that arose were the occasional urge to go to a party on Friday night or the periodic internal inquiry into why I couldn't date non-Jewish girls. During my high school years I intensified my Jewish connection by spending several months at an Israeli school where I studied Jewish history and visited the historical sites we learned about in class.

College presented a much greater challenge. Living with non-Jews was not something I was used to: My freshman roommates at Harvard were a Lebanese and a Christian fundamentalist from Texas. The choice to affiliate was now mine, and, at first, I opted out, preferring to explore the "scene" and experience the "diversity" of college rather than getting involved in Jewish life. But a few alienating experiences and a desire to escape from campus anonymity drew me into Hillel, which provided a sense of Jewish warmth and comfort. I spent my junior year at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

I was certainly not ready, Jewishly, for life after college. Seeking a temporary break from the cosmopolitan Northeast and the traditional influences on my life, I escaped to Austin, Texas, where I

worked as the lone Jew on a gubernatorial campaign staff. The life was very enjoyable: “Shabbat” afternoon football games, evenings at country music bars, dinners of Tex-Mex burritos and margaritas. I was thrilled to be living like a *real* American, experiencing true Americana, dating non-Jewish women (I couldn’t believe that I had ruled them out before), fantasizing about life on a ranch with dozens of horses and Sunday barbecues, enjoying the easy life. The easy *assimilated* American life.

But after a year – and despite good employment prospects there – I left Texas and came back East, to a world I had thought I had tired of. I wasn’t quite sure why I came back till my grandfather died just weeks after my return. Yes, my grandfather – a retired rabbi – was gone, but his presence was alive in the surviving family members. At the grave there were six children and children-in-law who, I knew, threw themselves daily and selflessly into Jewish communal work and other civic endeavors. There were numerous grandchildren in college or launching careers. There was an entire family mourning the loss of its head, yet at the same time celebrating the continuity of his values and spirit in their own lives.

The more I thought about it I realized that those values and that spirit emanated not just from my grandfather’s soul, but ultimately from the chain of generations preceding him – back to the alleyways of Meah Shearim in Jerusalem and the narrow streets of Eastern European towns where his ancestors had walked for centuries. I saw the hand of God in this transmission of the Divine Presence through the generations.

And as I observed the well-crafted, sensitive, and humane rituals that surround death and mourning in Jewish law, I reconnected with my religious tradition and understood its continuing relevance in our modern world. A simple burial in a wooden casket, back into the earth from where man and woman first came. A mandated period of *shiva* – seven days focused on helping the mourners get on with the business of living. Then the thirty-day *shloshim*, and the year-long recital of the *kaddish*, all of this conceived with such insight into the dual need to mourn and readjust.

It was at this time that I made the choice to become a better, more involved, and educated Jew. I decided to work professionally in the Jewish community, an experience that has given me pride in the accomplishments of American Jewry and a clear understanding of the challenges we face. I made the conscious choice to strengthen my bond with the State of Israel, where I am now studying classic Jewish texts in an egalitarian yeshiva.

My experiences in Israel – as a starry-eyed child, a high-school student learning some Jewish history, a college student spending a

year at the Hebrew University, and now an adult poring over the Talmud at the Pardes Institute for Jewish Studies – have enhanced my ability to lead a richer Jewish life in the United States. In Israel, the different aspects of Jewish civilization – religion, people, land, language – come together as a functioning whole. Just days after praying for rain on Shmini Atzeret, I have seen the rains come. I have gone out to view the fields where King David led his sheep, as recounted in the Book of Samuel. And I have seen what is perhaps the most beautiful aspect of life in the Jewish State, a society running by the Jewish calendar.

Judaism gives me soul and gives me spirit. It provides the connection to a rich national tradition whose primary values – community, family, education, lovingkindness – should be *everyone's* primary values. It gives me an unmatched moral framework on which to build my life as well as practical constructs to make it meaningful – the details of Jewish law. Each time I enter a synagogue, each time I see youngsters learning their *aleph-bet*, each time I arrive in Israel and see the Hebrew signs welcoming me, each time I see Jews scraping coins together to pay their tithe to charity, I feel deep pride in being part of the Jewish people.

Paradoxically, my exposure to other cultures and to secular society reinforces my Jewishness. Self-confident about my Jewish lifestyle and convinced of its profound meaning in my life, I feel no need to shield myself from other influences in order to protect my Jewish identity. Interaction with other Americans allows me to understand both them and myself better.

To be sure, I still struggle almost daily with the particularities of Jewish observance as they relate to my day-to-day life. With Judaism, the struggle is never over; that is both its beauty and its difficulty. There are always questions to be asked and some to be left unanswered, laws that seem to make little sense and laws that seem to make none at all. Nevertheless, I am happy with my choice.

However, I am deeply troubled that so many Jews my age are opting out of Jewish life. Yet I am so convinced that Judaism has something vital to say to my generation that I remain optimistic that our community can reconnect Jews in their twenties with Judaism. I have some ideas on how to accomplish this:

1. *Education is the first priority.* My experience at the Pardes Institute in Jerusalem, an institution geared for young adults, reinforces my conviction that Jewish education is the primary means to reach Jews in their twenties. Although blessed with a day-school education and other Jewish-study experiences, it took me until the age of twenty-five to understand the essential role of Jewish learning in a fulfilled Jewish life.

Most twentysomething Jews do not have fond memories of their childhood Jewish education. Alienated by religious-school teachers who stressed the Holocaust and anti-Semitism, they know little that is positive about being Jewish, and, as a result, are lost to the Jewish community. Jews in their twenties have the time and the intellectual energy to engage in serious text study – be it in English or Hebrew – and thus to rectify their many misconceptions about Judaism. Our community must take on the responsibility to provide the appropriate settings for this process to take place.

2. *Twentysomething Jews are deeply rooted in their American identities.* My generation is the first in this country to enjoy complete freedom of choice about whether and how to be Jewish. We do not face the barriers our parents and grandparents encountered that made them feel they had to shed their Jewishness in order to participate fully in American society. The battles for acceptance have been fought and won, and Jews my age do not want to give up the spoils.

Most American Jews in their twenties are committed to liberal notions of pluralism and intergroup relations, and they are repelled by negative models of religiosity – fundamentalism and the cults – which are so prominent a part of the American religious landscape. If young Jewish adults are not better equipped to face the challenges to Jewish identity that inevitably come to Jews who are full partners in American society, the erosion of Jewish identity will continue.

3. *Twentysomething Jews are searching for spiritual substance.* Despite a bias against organized religion, young Jews – just like gentiles their age – yearn for spiritual, personal, and communal meaning. It is not enough for them to get into the best law school, make more money, and have a nice car. There is a growing recognition that much of American culture is morally bankrupt. Judaism can both catalyze and channel such spiritual strivings.

Moreover, the appeal of joining the vanguard of the forces for *tikkun olam* (repair of the world) – an important element of Jewish tradition – is compelling for Jews in their twenties. This generation has had few causes to rally for, other than personal and material fulfillment. There has been no civil rights movement, no Vietnam. Young people may be ready for something more. Jewish community relations councils (CRC) and local chapters of the Jewish defense agencies are ideal vehicles to channel social-action energies, learn about Jewish institutional life, and satisfy longings for community and for spiritual fulfillment.

4. *Be creative in reaching out to Jews in their twenties.* There may be innovative ways to reach them, such as study/brunch series and young leadership programs, free synagogue memberships and

scholarships to national conferences. These approaches and others like them provide meaningful but non-demanding ways for young people to explore Judaism. We have to offer something for everyone if we are to bring in “disaffected” young adults.

5. *Do not overemphasize Israel.* While we must surely continue to develop the relationship between the world’s two largest Jewish communities, Israel-centered activism alone will not sustain the Jewishness of American Jews in their twenties. If the interest in Israel is isolated from the reality of American Jewish life, it will afford no antidote to assimilation.

6. *Demonstrate that it is a privilege to be Jewish, not a burden.* Show young Jewish adults that they are heirs not just to a faith but to a multifaceted way of life that has been tested over millenia. Though we are few, our culture is incredibly rich and diverse. We must emphasize that being Jewish is special and that those who dropout of Jewish life will be missing so much – the inspiration of communal prayer, the magic of the Shabbat dinner table, the peacefulness of a night stroll through Jerusalem, the sense of united purpose with a people strewn far and wide across the globe.



## AFTERWORD

**W**hat characterizes the group of young adults represented by these eight essays? These are young people whose lives were shaped by the fundamental changes transforming American society and by the outburst of Jewish and Israel consciousness that emerged in the aftermath of the Six-day War of 1967 and as a result of a new awareness of oppressed Soviet Jewry. They grew up in a post-Christian America in which Jews were achieving the twin dreams of equality and influence. Furthermore, in the 1970s and 1980s American Jewry began to uncover the memories of the Holocaust that it had been avoiding since 1945.

Thus, in those years, two sets of forces were at work upon the Jews of America. On the one side, the powerful assimilatory forces of American society, which accepted Jews on condition that they be as American as the next person. On the other side was the rise of a newfound Jewish ethnic/religious consciousness, based on deep emotional ties to Israel, guilt feelings related to the Holocaust, and a desire to help the threatened Jews of Soviet Russia. Moreover, the '70s also saw the growth of the new Jewish counterculture, a multifaceted movement of young Jews striving for new forms of Jewish expression and a new politics of Jewish life.

It was in such a cultural climate that the eight essayists in this collection grew up. They are, for the most part, third and fourth gen-

eration Americans who feel very much at home in this country yet who are very much identified with issues relating to Jewish survival. The questions they are asking as adults living in the 1990s are questions about the meaning of Jewishness and the relevance of Jewish existence. Writing about the future of American Jewry, the historian Arthur Hertzberg concluded: "a community cannot survive on what it remembers; it will persist only because of what it affirms and believes." Jewish ethnicity may have shaped the identities of our "twentysomething" Jews, but ethnicity alone is not a sufficient basis for their Jewishness. They believe that they need to look into the religious/spiritual teachings of the Jewish tradition to find answers to fundamental questions.

While these eight essays represent different paths to Jewish identity, several conclusions can be drawn. First, in a variety of ways, they speak of a Jewishness that is the result of conscious choice. They believe that they could have just as easily made very different choices – to lose their distinctive Jewishness by blending into the larger American society. In the words of Keith Chertok: "In San Francisco I had to choose to be Jewish or choose to let it go: there was no Judaism by diffusion." This generation is fully American, psychologically and culturally. Even those who were brought up in highly identified Jewish homes see themselves a fully American. They are full participants in this society and do not describe themselves as hyphenated Americans. They view their Jewishness as a fulfillment of their Americanness rather than as a source of conflicted identity.

While recognizing the existence of some anti-Semitism in American society, they agree that it has not been a significant factor in the shaping of their Jewishness. In that sense, they view their Jewishness as a very positive and enhancing factor in their lives rather than as a wall of protection against a hostile environment.

In most cases, they have not adopted their parents' brand of Jewish identification and lifestyle. Indeed, the path of Jewishness they have chosen is quite different from that of their parents: many are *more* Jewish than their parents- more religious, more deeply Zionist, more involved in the Jewish community, more committed to serious Jewish study and prayer. They have decided that if they are going to be Jewish, they are going to be serious Jews, conscious Jews, to whom Judaism is a primary focus and a primary commitment.

Furthermore, one is impressed with their attachment to the spiritual/religious aspects of Judaism. This is, after all, a generation

that, in the words of Deborah Nussbaum Cohen, are “the products of educational and social systems that have taught us to question everything.” In this process of questioning, many have found answers to some of the deeper issues of identity and meaning: Do I have a tradition? What are my roots? Does the fact that I was born into a Jewish family have any bearing on how I should live? Does Judaism have anything significant to contribute to the society in which I live? They have taken these questions seriously, searched for and begun to find answers within their own cultural/religious heritage.

As a group they share a strongly felt need for community, for a sense of belonging to something larger than the nuclear family. This is a generation that has, for the most part, seen the demise of the closely knit extended family. Most of them live away from parents and siblings. Even before the tasks of education and establishing a livelihood are completed, they sense a need for a community of people with whom they can share values, commitments, and a way of life.

They have a pluralistic approach to Judaism. They believe that there are many ways to be authentically Jewish. This is a lesson learned through experimentation with various forms of Jewish commitment available in contemporary American Judaism and in Israel. Many were first exposed to the multiplicity of forms of Jewish expression at college and later as young adults seeking to find an entry point into the Jewish community.

Moreover, this is a generation that came of age during the 1980s, the decade of the “me generation.” While many of their peers devoted those years to material and career success, the people in this group were motivated by other values: *tikkun olam*, the repair of society and the world; family and community; *hesed*, acts of kindness and love; and a growing commitment to the Jewish people and to Israel.

Their primary identity is Jewish by virtue of a series of personal choices. A few were given positive Jewish educational opportunities, formal and informal. Others bemoan the poor quality of their formal education and the lack of a positive Jewish environment in their homes. But for all, there was some Jewish person or experience along the way that made the critical difference in their lives: Jewish summer camp; a grandparent or other relative; an experience in Israel; a mentoring relationship with a significant adult.

For many, the college years were a critical time during which

Jewishness was felt in novel ways. Charles Glick experimented with everything but his Jewishness, only to discover how important it was to him to experience “a shared history and identity” with fellow Jewish students. Mark Robbins wanted “to explore the scene and experience the diversity of college rather than getting involved in Jewish life.”

The college years also provided the first experience with bigotry and prejudice directed against Jews. To our authors, the negative type of Jewishness formed in response to anti-Semitism is not a firm basis for a lifetime of Jewish involvement. Jewish commitment needs to be based on something positive, something that brings joy and affirms life.

Those who had an experience in Israel believe that it had a powerful impact on their lives. Debra Nussbaum Cohen writes about “the feeling of being a Jew in a Jewish country” and “of being in love with being a Jew.” For Mark Robbins, the experience of Israel strengthened his identity as an American Jew and his ability to lead a richer Jewish life here. Others are more conflicted regarding Israel – Stephanie Bash, for whom Israel was a major influence, has decided to remain in the United States and work in the Jewish community. A powerful Israel experience often translates into a deeper commitment to the American Jewish community and its future.

Another theme emerges: The distancing from Judaism and Jewish involvement during college and postgraduate education and then the turning back to the Jewish community as they begin to contemplate their next life tasks – marriage and family.

And they have serious concerns and complaints regarding the Jewish community: the high costs involved in being an active member of the Jewish community; the strong emphasis on fund raising; the treatment of women and homosexuals in some streams of Judaism; and knee-jerk support for Israel by some Jewish organizations.

What is most interesting about this collection is the wide variety of paths to Jewish commitment taken by these young adults. Some come to it through politics; others through culture; and others through history, spirituality and community. While we know that assimilation and intermarriage are posing serious threats to the continuity of the American Jewish community, these essays point to another reality- that we *are* succeeding in transmitting Jewish commitment and responsibility to many of our young people.

Certainly we need to provide a quality Jewish education to all

of our children: better Jewish schools and camps at affordable prices; exciting youth programs that speak to the needs of young people; an experience in Israel for all; higher quality programming for our college students; and programs that reach out to our young adult population and welcome them into the Jewish community.

As we have seen from these essays, the years between college and marriage are years of decision- not only about where to live and where to work, but about whom to marry and the kind of life to lead. The eight young people represented here have made their choice *for* identification with the Jewish heritage and people. In the words of Keith Chertok, “they have moved forward to reclaim for themselves a Jewish spiritual identity. Those who see Judaism as an opportunity to sanctify and celebrate each aspect of life do not compartmentalize their Jewish existence; they have a framework for developing a relationship with God and community.”

Sociologists tell us that large numbers of our young people are choosing to opt out of Jewish life and are drifting away from the Jewish community. In response we must make our communal institutions ever more relevant and meaningful to the needs of this generation of Jews. Our message to them must be: You are welcome here. The Jewish community and Judaism have a great deal to offer you and we want you to become involved.

If these eight essays teach us anything, it is that we are doing some things right – we are transmitting to many of our young people the beauty and the joy of being Jewish and we are seeing that they find it personally meaningful to take their place in the chain of the generations. Seeing the fruits of our labors, we should feel confident that we can fulfill our historic responsibility as a creative and vibrant Jewish community that can play a significant role in shaping Jewish life in the twenty-first century.

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