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Changes in American Jewish Identities: From Normative Constructions to Aesthetic Understandings

Interview with Steven M. Cohen

- Over the past several decades, Jews in the United States have been reshaping their Jewish identities in line with geographic dispersion, cultural changes, and generational shifts. Of special note is that Jews have fewer Jewish spouses, friends, neighbors, coworkers, and formal ties to other Jews. They feel less attached to both Jewish peoplehood and Israel, amounting to a decline in Jewish collective identity.
- At least through the 1960s, a near-consensus viewed being Jewish as entailing a set of obligations, even if widely honored in the breach. Today, for most American Jews, Judaism is conceived of as an aesthetic understanding; being Jewish is a matter of beauty and culture. While often very rich and rewarding, being Jewish is far more a matter of individual choice.
- The major ways in which Jews characterize themselves in the United States remain Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform, even as other denominations and postdenominational trends take hold as well.
- Policies need to be developed on how to support the varied new, self-organized communities and endeavors of young people, how to combine welcoming the intermarried while teaching the value of conversion and in-marriage, how to sustain Jewish collective identity, and, in general, how to bridge the gap between Judaic mission and the Jewish marketplace.

Steven M. Cohen, a leading sociologist of American Jewry, has for thirty-eight years undertaken studies of Jewish identity and community and how they are shaped. Although most of his work has focused on Jews in the United States, his research has also ventured occasionally into other countries such as Israel, the former Soviet Union, Canada, and the United Kingdom. He is now a professor at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in New York.

He observes: "When discussing 'identity' of Jews, we are trapped by the limitations of our terms and language, in that the term 'identity' is misleading. When applied to Jews, its connotations are too individual, too static, and too attitudinal. 'Jewish identity' is-or should be seen as-a social identity, referring not only to beliefs and attitudes but also to how Jews interact with others, and how Jews act and behave. Judaism and Jewishness place primary emphasis on interaction with other Jews and participation in community and society. There is no accurate word for the complex of Jewish belief, behavior, and belonging. As a result, we employ the term identity for lack of a better one."

Jews Within

Cohen continues: "Critical to understanding how Jews' identities have changed is the enormous change in the integration of Jews into the larger American society. In contrast with just fifty years ago, today's Jews have far fewer Jewish spouses, friends, neighbors, and coworkers. Not surprisingly, they feel less attached to both Jewish peoplehood and Israel.

"This increasing integration certainly reflects several positive developments such as lower anti-Semitism, rising Jewish achievement, and greater acceptance of Jews by non-Jews. Not only do most young American Jews have loving relationships with non-Jews, but hundreds of thousands of non-Jews love Jews—a very common circumstance now, and a fairly rare occurrence just a few decades ago. At the same time, this integration has brought some adverse consequences for Judaism and Jewishness.

"Aside from integration, the other major development is the rise of the Jewish Sovereign Self, as Arnold Eisen and I argued in *The Jew Within*.^[1] Jews feel far more ready to assert whether, when, where, and how they will express their Jewish identities, shifting from normative constructions of being Jewish to aesthetic understandings. A normative approach argues that Jewish involvement is good and right, and that certain ways of being Jewish are better than others. An aesthetic approach is less judgmental and directive. It sees being Jewish as a matter of beauty and culture, as a resource for meaning rather than as an ethical or moral imperative.

"In the 1960s there was still largely a consensus that being Jewish was a matter of obligations. Such norms can derive from God, parents, nostalgia, tradition, *halakha* (Jewish law), and/or belonging to the Jewish people. One could violate these, but then one felt guilty about it. Fewer people today regard being Jewish as a matter of norms and obligations.^[2]

"The combination of these two shifts of increasing integration into American society on the one hand, and decreasing emphasis on Judaism as a normative system on the other, has led to both substantial changes and increasing diversity in what it means to be a Jew in America, as defined and experienced by the American Jewish public. This is what Charles Liebman referred to as the folk religion, as opposed to the elite religion, of American Jews."^[3]

The Major Denominational Labels

"The major labels that American Jews use to define their ways of being Jewish remain Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform, albeit with other possibilities—such as Reconstructionist and Jewish Renewal—and the growth in nondenominational and postdenominational tendencies as well. The Jewish Community Centers (JCC) movement is, however, the largest institutionally based association in American Jewish life, with about a million Jewish members. It even outnumbers Reform Judaism, the largest denominational movement in American Judaism.

"Few observers, however, think of the two hundred JCCs as constituting a movement within Judaism, notwithstanding an impressive organizational range and complexity that embraces early childhood education, day camps, youth groups, continentally based sports events, adult Jewish education, cultural events, communitywide organizing, and engagement with Israel.

"The denominational nomenclature is so prevalent in the United States because American society defines being Jewish as primarily a religious option: it's Protestant-Catholic-Jew-and now Muslim, Hindu, and so on—rather than Italian, Irish, Hispanic, Jewish.^[4] In other regions of the Diaspora, where being Jewish is more overtly ethnic, denominational labels are far less compelling. It is thus worth reviewing each denominational camp."

Growing Larger and Sliding Right

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"In broad strokes, Orthodoxy has been demographically growing.[5] Its population, by all standard sociological measures, scores highest in terms of Jewish commitment, education, activity, and social ties. On average, on a person-for-person basis, Orthodox Jews undertake more hours of Jewish education, perform more rituals, give more charity, have more Jewish friends, more often visit and move to Israel, more readily claim to be Jewishly committed, and on and on.

"At the same time, Orthodoxy has gradually become more separatist and sectarian with respect to other Jews.[6] This 'sliding to the Right' is partly due to a triumphalist conviction that only Orthodoxy will survive, and in part a reaction to what Orthodoxy sees as the failure and immorality of non-Orthodox versions of Judaism.

"Deep within, most committed Orthodox Jews see other systems as violating Torah-true, authentic understandings as to what Jews should do and what they should believe. They thus have far more of a problem with Conservative or Reform rabbis than with Conservative or Reform Jews. This attitude expresses itself in many ways such as the refusal of Orthodox rabbis to lend legitimacy in any way to non-Orthodox rabbis, even as many Orthodox bodies make a massive investment and commitment to reach and educate non-Orthodox Jews as individuals. Many of the most traditional Orthodox figures say, in effect, 'To non-Orthodox denominations, nothing; to non-Orthodox Jews as individuals, everything.'"

Ethnic Decline and Conservative Shrinkage

"The Conservative movement has traditionally reflected the underlying ethnicity of Jewish America.[7] Marshall Sklare referred to the Conservative synagogue as an 'ethnic church,' drawing its strength from the ties of family, community, and peoplehood-or ethnos-that once widely characterized American Jews.[8]

"As Jewish ethnicity has weakened, with the decline of Jewish marriages, friendships, and neighborhoods,[9] so too has Conservative Judaism. In the 1950s and 1960s it was the major affiliation of synagogue Jews, about two-thirds of whom belonged to Conservative congregations. Now it has declined to about one-third, and is rapidly shrinking demographically.

"Yet Conservative Judaism still occupies a very critical place-ideologically, socially, and philosophically-between Orthodoxy and Reform. The movement offers a model of intensive Jewish living that is both modern and accessible to large numbers of American Jews. It boasts an institutional infrastructure that embraces congregations, day schools, camps, youth movements, Israel-based institutions, publications, and informal networks, to say nothing of its thousands of rabbis, cantors, educators, other professionals, and lay leaders. Those who care about a healthy American Jewry should worry about how to help the Conservative moment revive itself and become again a strong pillar of American Jewry."

Jews (and Others) Choosing Judaism

"The Reform movement, for its part, has made a signal contribution to American Judaism by strongly advancing and developing the notion of 'Judaism by choice.'[10] In effect, its leaders have taught that for Judaism to be compelling and sustainable, Jews must make their own choices, which are informed by teaching that is Judaically authentic and at the same time relevant to the contemporary, modern context.

"This approach has attracted and sustained the involvement of hundreds of thousands of Jews, including many with minimal exposure to Jewish education and social networks. And, under the leadership of Rabbi Eric Yoffie, at the helm of the highly regarded Union for Reform Judaism (URJ), the movement has grown to over eight hundred congregations, many of which display an extraordinary level of energy and vibrancy. With four campuses in the United States and Israel, the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, under the outstanding leadership of Rabbi David Ellenson, has been training scores of rabbis, cantors, educators, and communal professionals annually for an expanding movement with ongoing demands for its ranks of professional leadership.

"At the same time, perhaps half of the couples joining Reform temples have a partner who was not born Jewish, only a minority of whom have converted to Judaism. Because the Reform movement attracts these people, it has a population of congregants that, on average, is not highly educated in Jewish terms, at least when compared to their Orthodox or Conservative counterparts in the aggregate.

"Not coincidentally, the Reform movement, its synagogues and rabbis, are often blamed for serving as the primary home for apparently 'weak' Jews in their midst. In response, we can do a thought experiment and assume that the Reform movement decided to close shop. What would happen to all these Jews, particularly those who are intermarried, or had weak childhood education in Judaism, or both-as is often the case? Certainly some would join Conservative synagogues, but probably the vast majority would not be attached to Jewish life. And, notwithstanding the large number of mixed-married and poorly educated Jews, over the years the movement's official policies have placed more emphasis on ritual practice, Jewish learning, Zionism, prayer, and Hebrew, trends embodied by its newly published *siddur* (prayer book), *Mishkan T'filah*.

"Reform rabbis and educators and lay leaders are thus engaging with and struggling to engage with their population, some of whom are among the most marginally involved in conventional Jewish life. This struggle is to their credit. Sometimes they succeed. On other occasions they fail, as is manifest in the large number of congregants who leave their temples upon the bar/bat mitzvah of their youngest child; perhaps about half do so. Even more worrying, perhaps, are the large numbers of children raised in Reform Judaism who marry out, more by far than in the other two major movements. But, with that said, Reform is now the largest Jewish denominational movement in the United States, holding steady in recent years."

The Orthodox Struggle with *Clal Yisrael*

"All three major religious movements are standing at a variety of crossroads. One of today's major struggles within Orthodoxy concerns whether an Orthodox person can be part of the real *Am Yisrael* (the Jewish people) in America-not the Jews they want, but the Jews we have. That translates into 'Can one have common educational, intellectual, or communal relationships, not only with non-Orthodox Jews but also with non-Orthodox rabbis? How does one maintain dialogue and genuine collaboration with them?'

"To me it seems that Orthodoxy is weighing the extent to which it wants to remain an integral part of the entire Jewish people. The alternative to *Clal Yisrael* (the Jewish collective) is to separate itself from the majority of the Jewish people. For many Orthodox, the break with Jewish law as they understand it by Conservative, Reform, and other non-Orthodox movements is too high a barrier to overcome. The ordination of gay and lesbian rabbis is one issue. Also the seeming acceptance of intermarriage and the incorporation of large numbers of non-Jews into Jewish congregations deeply trouble Orthodox rabbis of all persuasions.

"The high rates of intermarriage, patrilineal descent, and what they regard as illegitimate conversions, mean to many Orthodox parents that their children might unknowingly marry what to them are non-Jews, albeit those who were raised in Reform or Conservative congregations. Significant numbers insulate their children from the effects of the larger society and from contact with non-Orthodox Jews.

"The isolation of Orthodoxy from the wider precincts of American Jewry means that those outside it who are arguing for placing Jewish interests first, seeing Israel as central, and stressing the importance of Jewish learning and observance are now viewed as more extreme and parochial in their movements. When Orthodoxy was more a part of the overall Jewish mix, these people were seen as more moderate.

"Yet despite these concerns, a number of notable efforts seek to promote more openness and engagement with all of Jewry. One finds an internal struggle at Yeshiva University over which way the institution will go under the leadership of Richard Joel as its president, either in the direction of greater sectarianism or greater engagement with all of Jewry. The newly established Yeshivat Chovevei Torah,

headed by Rabbi Avi Weiss, is producing rabbis committed to the unity of the Jewish people."

Conservative Turnaround?

"The population of the Conservative Movement is shrinking. Reflecting trends that date back to 1960 or so, there are probably twice as many Conservative senior citizens as there are Conservative children.

"The newly emerging Conservative leadership-both the recently installed and the soon-to-be appointed-will be addressing the critical demographic challenges of shrinkage and aging. Any transition from great leaders of the older generation to younger persons of great talent raises hopes for change. With Arnold Eisen as the newly appointed chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS), there is a widespread expectation of revival in the movement, notwithstanding that JTS is just one important element in the Conservative institutional array.

"JTS is not alone in the transition to a new and younger leadership. In the three major professional leadership positions of the Conservative movement, the older generation is giving way to a new one. As with JTS, that will also happen within the next two years at the United Synagogue and the Rabbinical Assembly. The three leaders who have steered these bodies over the past two decades deserve respect and admiration. One must hope that the transition will not only mean a change in personnel but a thoroughgoing and appropriate shift in culture, language, and ethos that only a new generation can bring.

"The emerging generation of prominent rabbis, congregational leaders, thinkers, and others will need to reconfigure the Conservative Movement so that it regains the attachment of its erstwhile natural constituency. These are young-adult Jews who are socially progressive, religiously liberal and, at the same time, religiously and textually serious, and committed to high-quality spiritual experiences. In the recent past, the exodus of such individuals to Orthodoxy or to nonaffiliated communities has deprived Conservative congregations of their highest-caliber potential leadership."

"Who Lost BJ?"

"Over the years, the Conservative Movement has been extraordinarily productive, and has created important endeavors many of which, however, are no longer associated with it. It is American Judaism's biggest exporter of home-grown talent, people, ideas, and institutions. Conservatism just cannot seem to hold on to some of its finest creations.

"The Reconstructionist movement is but one example of this tendency, as is the *havurah* movement of the 1960s and 1970s (small religious fellowships generally focused on prayer and study).[11] The American Jewish University-the former University of Judaism-is no longer Conservative, while its rabbinical school is. The Jewish Museum is affiliated with the JTS, yet hardly anybody knows this. The best-known synagogue in the United States is B'nai Yeshurun ('BJ') on New York's Upper West Side, which was formerly Conservative but disaffiliated some years ago. Just as some conservative American politicians used to ask, 'Who lost Red China?' there must be some Conservative Jewish leaders who ask-or should ask-, 'Who lost BJ?' This innovative congregation with arguably the highest profile in North America is one more formerly Conservative export.

"So too are the many independent *minyanim* (prayer groups) that have been started by people trained in the Conservative movement.[12] These leaders were and are capable of being leaders in the Conservative movement, yet have decided-at least for now-to build their communities outside the formal boundaries of Conservatism.

"One might thus conclude that Jewish intensification often means leaving Conservative Judaism. The question then becomes how does one create a space where these people will have a sense of belonging? How can they remain within the Conservative orbit even if they operate with no formal affiliation with the

usual Conservative institutions?"

The Intermarriage Challenge

"The Reform movement, in the forefront of efforts to engage intermarried Jews in congregational life, is tackling the question of how to keep the intermarried and their children attached to Judaism in an authentic way. This issue is particularly challenging as so many non-Jews with hardly any Jewish background come into Reform temples with their Jewish partners, many of whom themselves have weak Jewish backgrounds. More and more, Reform temples consist of growing numbers of well-groomed alumni of North American Federation of Temple Youth (NFTY), religious schools, and URJ camps alongside Jewish and non-Jewish congregants with minimal Jewish social and educational capital.

"The growth of both sorts of populations propels seemingly contradictory tendencies. For example, more alternative services have been springing up in Reform temples' chapels and basements. At the same, the larger sanctuaries on Shabbat mornings are filled with one-Shabbat-a-year worshippers celebrating bar and bat mitzvahs. And a good fraction of these families will soon leave the congregation (a troubling event to say the least).

"Both intermarried Jews and their non-Jewish spouses function as full members of Reform congregations, serve as temple board members, and officers, albeit with frequent limitations on the leadership opportunities available to the non-Jewish partner. Their needs and values shape temple practices, policies, and personnel, underscoring the challenges posed by the presence of so many non-Jews and their intermarried spouses. For example, how does the rabbi clearly promote the conversion of non-Jewish spouses to Judaism without undermining the attempt to welcome mixed-married couples? Even more pointedly, how does one teach a confirmation class of adolescents that Jews should marry Jews when half the sixteen-year-olds are the children of Jewish and non-Jewish parents? Although these dilemmas are most keenly felt in Reform temples, they emerge in Conservative and Reconstructionist congregations as well." [13]

Multiple Modes of Jewish Engagement

"There are many other ways outside of congregational life in which American Jews are Jewishly engaged. Many still live in such Jewish neighborhoods as New York's Upper West Side, Squirrel Hill (Pittsburgh), and Silver Spring (Maryland), even as more move to such radically different locales as Las Vegas and other sparsely settled Jewish environs in the Mountain and Pacific regions. Jews in areas of greater residential concentration, largely in the Northeast and Midwest, not only have more Jewish neighbors; they also report more Jewish spouses, more Jewish friends, and more Jewish institutional ties. Jews in the older areas of settlement often still have an ethnic style; many manifest Jewishness through domestic political concerns or with regard to Israel.

"On another plane, the JCC movement, as mentioned earlier, is widely overlooked as locus of Jewish community-building, to say nothing of its great strides in informal Jewish education. Furthermore, American Jews have a very rich cultural life in music, art, literature, scholarship, journalism, dance, museums of various kinds, and also now on the Internet.

"Indeed, there are hundreds of millions of pages on the Internet on Jewish matters. Obviously, none existed fifteen years ago. There is a documented increase in Jewish involvement in social-justice activism, of which Ruth Messinger and the American Jewish World Service (AJWS) is the most visible phenomenon. There are more Jewish cultural activities than ever, be they concerts, musical events, drama, or Jewish literature magazines. [14]

"There is thus a plethora of Jewish life that is being led by people in their twenties and thirties outside the traditional network. And one cannot ignore the ongoing influence of more pervasive movements and what

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may be called Jewish 'sensibilities,' be they nearly forty years of Jewish feminism,[15] or the more recently emerging Jewish spirituality movement with its shaping of prayer, healing, and clergy such as by Rabbi Rachel Cowan and others.

"Perhaps most exciting is the work of many of the younger generation-Jews in their twenties and thirties-who are involved in self-initiated acts of Jewish communal creation.[16] The newly established independent minyanim and rabbi-led emergent spiritual communities are particularly impressive. About eighty of these have sprung up all over the United States, several of them outside the major Jewish centers. Some such communities-Hadar and IKAR come to mind-report upward of three thousand people on their mailing lists, while other communities number as few as sixty or seventy participants (they avoid using such conventional words as 'members' or 'congregations' or 'officers').

"These minyanim and rabbi-led communities keep costs very low. They may get a Torah scroll donated and rent a church on a Shabbat morning. They rely on large volunteer investment and -often excessively-low professional personnel costs.

"To their credit, some local federations and foundations have made grants to some of these often cash-strapped startup communities. Although most manage to get by on the passion of volunteer or underpaid leadership, at least fifteen such groups over the last ten years have emerged and then stopped functioning, leaving evidence of their existence on untended pages on the Internet."

Extended Singlehood

Cohen says: "The question is: how fast will the American Jewish community recognize the value of the endeavors by younger people outside the traditional institutional framework and support them in view of the major demographic shift that has just taken place: the vast expansion of singlehood among non-Orthodox younger adults?"

"Today, reflecting a worldwide pattern, most non-Orthodox Jewish adults under the age of forty are not married. In the recent past Jews used to marry five to seven years after leaving university. This now happens after ten to fifteen years, if at all. There are also somewhat higher divorce rates than at mid-century. All this means that among non-Orthodox Jews there is a large percentage of unmarried people, almost always without children. In the past, childrearing has brought Jews to congregations and JCCs.

"Since this younger generation is spending many more years unmarried and without children, the Jewish community must develop institutions they can use. Few will come to JCCs, synagogues, or federations as currently constructed. There they would find mainly married people, most of them to Jews, and often with young children of their own, or middle-aged and older empty-nesters."

Strengthening the Jewish Collective

"If I had to point to one issue, I'd say that our primary challenge is to strengthen the Jewish collective. The decline in commitment of many Jews to the Jewish people, Israel, and the Jewish community is deeply worrying. Fewer Jews see themselves as obligated to support the collective interests of the Jewish people, or even to relate personally to the very notion of the Jewish people at all.[17]

"The extent of intermarriage and intergroup friendship is truly significant. About two-thirds of older American Jews have mostly Jewish friends. In contrast, two-thirds of the under-thirty generation have mostly non-Jewish friends. Most young Jews today who have a partner-married or not-are either married or romantically involved with non-Jews. I can say with relative certitude that none of my grandparents ever dated a non-Jew; and I can say with equal certitude that the vast majority of Jews my children's ages have had intimate and loving relationships with non-Jews. Personal experiences inexorably affect collective identities.

"The interpersonal integration of Jews with non-Jews poses major questions as to how one can strengthen, preserve, or make meaningful the Jewish commitment to the collective, without seeming or being racist. How does one argue for and promote Jewish marriage and friendship in this world without appearing bigoted and insular? Causes such as Israel, building the Jewish community, or caring about Jews locally and all over the world demand the establishment and nurturing of strong Jewish networks of friends and family. Yet to many Jews, younger somewhat more than older, teaching to forge and pursue such in-group ties seems so un-postmodern and un-American."

Taking Hold of Torah

"If Judaism is a matter of norms, of right and wrong, one can teach one's children that Jewish involvement is right, and distancing from Jewish life is wrong. But if to be Jewish is a matter of aesthetics, then one can only teach that Jewish engagement is akin to the love of music and art. Such engagement can lend purpose and meaning and spiritual enrichment, but it is by no means a moral decision.

"In fact, many Jews now see being Jewish the same way as loving music or art. It is a good thing to do, but for them it is not a matter of right or wrong. They have no sense that for a Jew to be Jewish is the right way to be, akin to one's patriotic duty as an American or other nationalities.

"Such morally laden language and concepts, while Judaically authentic, are admittedly not the most immediately compelling way to reach indifferent contemporary Jews. We need to develop a third way of speaking, modeling, and teaching, one that combines the normative and aesthetic approaches. This approach should appeal to Jews so that they find it meaningful to be obligated, or, to quote the title of Arnold Eisen's book, that they engage in *Taking Hold of Torah*. [18] We need both individual autonomy-'taking hold'-and a turn to Torah, in the broadest sense.

"Rabbis and other leaders in all three movements and beyond are working on blending the Judaism of meaning with the Judaism of obligation. They are struggling to bridge the longstanding gap between the Judaic mission to which they are committed and the reality of the American Jewish marketplace in which they work. To the extent that they succeed, the future of American Jews and Judaism will be assured. Fortunately and unfortunately, the diversity of American Jews, and the inevitability and rapidity of change makes the task of bridging Judaic mission and Jewish market an ongoing and never-finished challenge."

Interview by Manfred Gerstenfeld

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Notes

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