



"**The Future of Family and Tribe**," a seminar of CLAL's Jewish Public Forum held January 28-29, 2002 in New York City, brought together a dozen leading thinkers on gender, gay rights, adoption, reproductive law, bioethics, and aging. **eCLAL** is publishing a series of articles based on participants' contributions to the seminar.

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## **Memory vs. Markets: The Future of Jewish Identity**

**By Riv-Ellen Prell**

What will it mean to have a culture or be part of a culture in 2015? What institutions, groups, or people will transmit culture to the next generation? Most of us who study culture no longer regard it as a coherent, unchanging system shared by all members of a unified group, undifferentiated by gender, race, religion, or class. Rather, culture is understood as dynamic and protean. We know that it is shaped by the powerful structural relations of nation, market, technology, and media. Yet, for all of its fluidity, culture defines our experience, and shapes our very capacity to negotiate reality. Without understanding how culture is transmitted we will be able to understand very little about the future.

I will start my reflections on the future of culture by talking about the past. A few months ago, I sat with my brother and my dear friend Rabbi Laura Geller in Los Angeles to talk about my father. He had died, at nearly 91, that morning, and she was preparing his eulogy for the funeral the following day. I talked about my father as a man with a strong work ethic, and as someone whose commitment to

justice shaped much of how he lived, including which sports teams he rooted for (those from public universities), whom he employed (people down on their luck), and his propensity for helping others.

My father rarely walked into a synagogue, but he never doubted that the values and issues with which he identified were Jewish ones. Why? Because he was part of a Jewish culture that he learned from the street, from his friends, from his family—almost, it seemed, from the air he breathed. And my father's kind of Jewishness is familiar to many people I know. The rabbi—like all of the friends and family who know about my father's life or who heard about it at the funeral that day—told me that the story of my father's life is more than just *his* story. It is the story of a whole generation of the American born children of Jewish immigrants.

I believe that we will encounter neither that culture nor its means of transmission in 2015. By that not too distant time, if current trends continue, few American neighborhoods will be as ethnically defined as his was. Few people in the middle class will participate as actively in public and organizational life as he did. They will live lives that are more culturally diverse than his, and their universes—whom they know, where they travel, what forms of entertainment they consume—will be far broader. Certainly, culture will remain a crucial source of identity; what “culture” and “identity” will mean in the future is less clear. Both will become less fixed and more synthetic, reflecting a world of boundaries even more porous than today's. Cultures and identities will be more global, multicultural, and transnational.

The great cultural divide between members of my father's generation and those who will come of age in 2015 is the issue of choice. My father lacked choices that will be widely available to that future generation. Perhaps more importantly, even though *my* view of culture may lead me to insist that he made plenty of choices about who he was, *he* did not believe he could choose who he was. He did not see his identity and culture as items he picked out, like clothing at a department store. No, he thought of himself as obligated to care for those he cared for, to support the causes he did. Today, we operate under the illusion that we have nothing but cultural choices. We may believe that this is particularly so for the educated and affluent elite, but we also think that anyone, particularly in America, is entirely free to invent and reinvent herself.

In other words, we often operate as though culture were just another consumer good, something individually customized. We operate as though we could choose from a veritable boutique of privately tailored identities that come off the rack whole and brand new, free of memory, history, and communal connection. If, however, our culture shapes our experience—that is, if it defines our sense of identity and reality—it is never simply a personal invention. Culture is a collective affair that invents us as much as we invent it. But if culture cannot be a purely individual matter, and if the forces of family, neighborhood, and community are waning, where will culture come from in the future?

To my mind, the vision of a future in which everyone believes she has absolute cultural freedom constitutes a dystopic fantasy. In that world there would still be powerful forces defining identity and culture, but they would most likely be market forces. A consumer-driven world needs us to believe that it is through "ownership" and "style" that we can best define who we are, and that infinite choice and perpetual newness are the ultimate good. Indeed, the market already provides the vocabulary by which we construct reality. We "buy" ideas and "choose" our best "options." True, even in an extremely market-driven world we might continue to feel connected and loyal to nations and religions as well as to corporations, logos, and brands. But our identities and actions as consumers—of goods, services, even communities—might well define daily life to a far greater extent than traditional relationships embodied in family or other collectivities. After all, it is possible to imagine the America of 2015 as one in which many of the institutions of American life, from the neighborhoods in which we live to the schools and religious institutions some of us attend, have become inseparable from brand names.

Is this dystopic world the logical result of the post-war American middle class ideal? The suburbanized family that lives in a cookie-cutter, private house, cut off from multigenerational relationships and people of other economic classes, part of a cultural consensus devoted to deracination, seemed to be the solid social foundation of a post-industrial nation dependent on a homogeneous citizenry of eager consumers. The French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss warned that such a culturally undifferentiated society, which he called a "mono culture," was bound to be a depressingly sanitized world that privileged standardization and efficiency at the expense of memory and cultural texture. A mono culture, he believed, would inexorably erase the cultural variability that stands at the core of human existence. Levi-Strauss could not have anticipated chain stores and restaurants, or even the dominance of consumption. I doubt, however, that he would have been surprised at a mono culture grounded in the illusion of choice, the conviction that what replaced "the old" was better and more desirable, not least because it was "chosen" freely.

I don't believe, however, that even the most homogenized world could be completely devoid of difference and dissent. There would be countercultures even in this "monocultural" dystopia. Their followers would reject market driven choice. They would draw on memories that still exist in their personal lives, as well as in books, films and music. In a world in which families were even less stable, neighborhoods more splintered, and personal histories more global and heterogeneous than they are now, I imagine that such countercultures could be fostered and transmitted primarily by means of what historians Sara Evans and Harry Boyte call "free social spaces," meaning places of association where people can meet, share memories, and imagine alternative realities together. Free social spaces like beauty parlors and barber shops, union halls and voluntary organizations, write Evans and Boyte, are places that can provide people with a sense of culture, connection, identity and belonging. It was the

culture fostered by such places, for example, that helped mobilize people to demand radical change in the Civil Rights Movement in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s. Indeed, virtually every analysis of movements for political change reveals that such social settings are crucial because we are never socialized by families alone, and formal institutions never do the work of cultural transmission in isolation. Intermediate levels of association also have an important role to play, and one that could, I believe, become increasingly more important in the future.

Even if the particular free social spaces that have proved important in the past—closely knit neighborhoods, ethnic and religious associations, clubs—do not exist in 2015 (indeed, many have disappeared already), it is not impossible to imagine new experiments with such intermediate associations. In the world of Jewish culture, the world that I (like my father) know best, many of the most important settings for socialization have disappeared, but I can think of possibilities for future ones. Perhaps aged, retired Jewish Baby Boomers, for instance, might create multi-generational cultural houses where people get together to make music, create art, tell stories and think about change. Instead of being rooted in the Jewish neighborhoods of my father's generation, perhaps such places could pop up in shopping malls or near suburban synagogues. Indeed, synagogues continue to have the potential to be communal houses: ongoing experiments with synagogue transformation suggest that their classical functions as houses of assembly and learning are re-emerging for adults.

What might happen in such Baby Boomers' houses is difficult to anticipate, but they could certainly be places that draw on history and memory to provide an alternative model of culture that is not simply didactic, but rather deeply felt. They could be places that involve the senses, community, and stories. They could be places where older people are valued, places that ask things of people--to act and care for others, to remember, and to learn. They would not be cults; they would have to accommodate the diversity of people's lives. But they would tie identity to something that cannot be purchased or replaced.

The increasing importance of computer technology cannot be overstated as a critical dimension of the transmission of culture. It has reshaped our sense of time and space. It has created powerful forms of association and collectivity via the Internet. Nevertheless, whatever technological wonders await us, no matter how promising the computer is for redefining work, entertainment, and even erotic pleasure, it will never replace human association for most of us.

The nightmare future of 2015 is one that erases difference as cultural reality and replaces it with difference defined by consumption or ownership. But no social or cultural revolution has entirely done away with resistance to homogenization, with the power of memory to define and redefine identity, or with the power of social collectivities to define destiny. We can continue to seek out and create spaces and institutions—free social spaces—that help us shape and transmit

alternative forms of culture. Writing as a member of the Jewish minority, I know that the existence of the Jewish people depends on investing in forms of association that are built on memory and values that resist the market as the source of identity.