

# THE JEW WITHIN

---

Self, Community, and Commitment  
Among the Variety of Moderately Affiliated

By Steven M. Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen

Analysis and Comments by

David M. Gordis

Deborah Dash Moore

Jonathan D. Sarna

Jonathan S. Woocher

The Susan E. David Wilstein Institute of Jewish Policy Studies

# THE JEW WITHIN

---

Self, Community, and Commitment  
Among the Variety of Moderately Affiliated

By Steven M. Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen

Analysis and Comments by

David M. Gordis

Deborah Dash Moore

Jonathan D. Sarna

Jonathan S. Woocher



The Susan & David Wilstein Institute of Jewish Policy Studies

Boston – Los Angeles

1998

The publication of this volume has been made possible in part by  
a gift from Miriam J. Roland of Montreal, Canada

Copyright 1998 Wilstein Institute of Jewish Policy Studies

# CONTENTS

## Contributors

<b>Preface</b>	<b>1</b>
David M. Gordis	
<b>The Jew Within: Self, Community, and Commitment Among The Varieties of Moderately Affiliated</b>	<b>3</b>
Steven M. Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen	
I. Population and Method	8
II. The Commitments of Sovereign Jewish Selves	16
A. Liberal Individualism and the Chosen People	16
B. Close Relations: Friendship, Dating, Marriage	21
C. Sacred Times and Spaces	25
D. God and the Synagogue	29
E. Israel, the Holocaust, and Jewish Difference	32
III. Journeys	35
A. Obstacles to Involvement	36
B. Stimuli to Involvement	39
IV. Policy Implications	46
<b>Reflections on "The Jew Within"</b>	<b>50</b>
David M. Gordis	
<b>Comments</b>	<b>59</b>
Jonathan S. Woocher	59
Deborah Dash Moore	68
Jonathan D. Sarna	72
<b>Reply to Comments on "The Jew Within"</b>	<b>75</b>
Steven M. Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen	

## Contributors

### Principal Investigators

- Steven M. Cohen      The Melton Centre for Jewish  
Education, The Hebrew University
- Arnold M. Eisen      Professor and Chair of the Department  
of Religious Studies, Stanford University

### Commentators

- David M. Gordis      Director of the Wilstein Institute of  
Jewish Policy Studies; President and  
Professor of Rabbinics, Hebrew College
- Jonathan S. Woocher      Executive Vice President, JESNA  
(Jewish Education Service of North  
America)
- Deborah Dash  
Moore      Professor and Chair of the Department  
of Religion, Vassar College
- Jonathan D. Sarna      The Joseph H. & Belle R. Braun  
Professor of American Jewish History  
and Chair of the Department of Near  
Eastern and Judaic Studies, Brandeis  
University

## Preface

Dr. David M. Gordis

Jewish life on the threshold of the new millennium is complex and confounds attempts at simple description and analysis. Along with the familiar litany of problems and predictions of imminent demographic and affiliational catastrophes produced by assimilatory forces in the open society, observers of Jewish life also detect vigor, new demonstrations of Jewish interest and commitment, and new experiments in institutional development.

Studies of patterns of Jewish behavior and belief have proliferated in recent years. Jewish identity has become a preoccupation of the community on both the national and local levels. For many readers, these studies, many of which were conducted with rigor and care, leave the impression that something is missing. These studies accurately describe behavior and belief patterns, but don't quite get to the heart of how Judaism and Jewishness function in the lives of American Jews. Steven M. Cohen and Arnold Eisen, two of the keenest observers and analysts of American Jewish life, have undertaken in this study to probe beneath the surface, to explore the foundations of belief and behavior typical among "moderately affiliated" American Jews.

Rather than rely exclusively on "closed-end" survey techniques, the authors undertook the much more demanding approach of eliciting personal Jewish narratives from Jews across America. They were anxious to hear from their subjects about their "Jewish journeys," their current Jewish life-style and belief patterns as well as their sense of how they had arrived at their current place and, when appropriate, what directions their continuing journeys might take in the future. The authors' skilful explorations have produced fascinating narratives. In this study we meet a variety of Jews representing the moderately affiliated, typical members of Conservative and Reform congregations, and the personal stories they tell are rich, suggestive, and meaningful. Few readers will be left unmoved by these accounts.

In characteristic fashion, the authors have provided insightful analysis of these narratives. They have suggested patterns which emerge from their data and put forward possible policy directions which emerge from their own reflection on their findings. The narratives along with the authors' analysis and comment represent a rich and important source for the Jewish community as it enters a new and significant phase of planning. The Wilstein Institute is pleased to have

nurtured this work and to offer it as an instrument for informing and enhancing communal planning and decision-making.

It is a tribute to the richness of these materials that they allow for a range of readings and directions. To begin what we are convinced will be a fruitful discussion of the profound issues raised by this study, we have appended to the study itself the critical essay and comments which follow the study as well as the authors' responses to the essay and comments. We do this with the firm expectation that continued discussion of and reflection upon this study will bear fruit for effective Jewish communal planning. We look forward to convening discussions of this study and the book length quantitative study that will follow it and to making these discussions available in published form as this becomes possible.

It remains for us to express our thanks to Steven M. Cohen and Arnold Eisen for once again broadening our perspective on Jewish life and deepening our understanding of it. Continued discussion of this major study will be the best indicator that the authors have achieved their objective and contributed substantively to helping reshape and rebuild a viable American Jewish community.

## **The Jew Within: Self, Community, and Commitment Among The Varieties of Moderately Affiliated**

Steven M. Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen

American Jewry's heightened concern with issues of Jewish identification and "continuity" has led to increased interest among scholars and communal leaders alike in the factors which shape, nourish and sustain Jewish commitment. How does one raise, develop, engage, and mobilize active Jews? What leads some Jews to place Jewish commitment at or near the center of their lives, while others are content (or driven) to leave it at the margins? Are experiences during childhood the most critical in preparing the ground for Jewish commitment -- or can adolescent or adult experiences prove of greater or equal value?

The answers to these and related questions bear great and direct import for communal policy-making. They also have a great deal to tell us about the way that the organized Jewish community should be allocating scarce resources. Indeed, understanding how individuals move toward greater involvement with Jewish tradition and community might well prove decisive in successfully inducing or persuading greater numbers of American Jews to make the decision for substantial and long-lasting Jewish involvement.

Our purpose in this study is to explore the forces and motivations, which most affect Jewish commitment, by probing the behavior, attitudes, and backgrounds of those we call, "moderately affiliated American Jews." Three assumptions -- two of them substantive, the third methodological -- have guided us from the outset. All are based on previous research by us and others about American Jews, as well as on recent studies of religion and ethnicity among baby boomers more generally.

The first assumption is that to an ever larger degree the discovery and construction of Jewish meaning in America (as of ultimate significance more generally) occurs in the private sphere. American Jews, we believe, enact and express their decisions about Judaism primarily in the intimate spaces of love and family, friendship and reflection -- the spaces in which late twentieth century individuals are in

their own eyes "most themselves"-- rather than in the public spheres of organizational life, support for Israel, or the various political, philanthropic and social causes in which they are involved. It is primarily in the private sphere that American Jews discover and define the selves whom they are and want to be. By contrast, the roles they play in public institutions, and the behavior on display there, are often regarded as just that: roles and displays which do not reveal, let alone constitute, their true selves, the essence of who they are.

Our second assumption, a corollary of the first, is that communal loyalties and norms are no longer as powerful in shaping identity as they were even two decades ago. They certainly cannot be taken for granted. The sovereign authority for most American Jews is the self. Each person performs the labor of fashioning his or her own self by pulling together elements from the repertoire available, rather than stepping into an "inescapable framework" of identity (familial, communal, traditional) given at birth. And this labor is always in process, never complete. Decisions about observance and involvement are made and made again, considered and reconsidered, year by year and even week by week. American Jews speak of their lives and so of their Jewish beliefs and commitments (which we shall call their Judaism) in terms of ongoing questioning and development rather than of answers or arrival. They reserve the right to choose anew as Jews in the future, and defend their children's right to do so for themselves in turn. Such are the habits of the contemporary American Jewish heart.

Our third guiding assumption is methodological. If we are to uncover these habits, we have to use a research method capable of taking us inside and beyond the reports of public behavior and of unreflective attitudes, which are often the stuff of questionnaires. We need to penetrate to the reflections, motivations, memories and intimate relationships in which, and through which, contemporary American Jewish selves are discovered and constructed. Existing research has established that Jewish adults vary significantly in terms of the extent and nature of their involvement. It has provided an operational definition of Jewish identity and some sense of how to measure it. Adult behavior has been convincingly correlated with factors such as Jewish schooling, camp, and Israel experiences. But research to date has not provided systematic knowledge of the complex ways in which Jewish differences express themselves. Still less has it clarified the highly personal factors, which bring Jews to decide for serious Judaism rather than against it. Quantitative social scientists in

this field would be the first to admit that the nuances and subtleties which are critical to the understanding of American Jewish identity in its many varieties, as well as to effective intervention in the formation of that identity, have yet to be adequately explored.

That is why we decided to probe the motivations and decisions of American Jews through depth interviews of some length, each conducted over two sessions with most respondents. Interviews of this length give each respondent the opportunity to describe his or her Jewish development in some detail. Our associates and we conducted more than fifty in-depth interviews around the country, mostly with those we call "moderately affiliated Jews" (a category defined below). The interviews were supplemented by two focus groups, and have since been followed by a quantitative survey, which asks similar questions of a thousand respondents statistically representative of North American Jewry as a whole. This report is the first full account of our findings from the qualitative interviews. It adumbrates a full-scale presentation of our work, which will be published in 1999 by Routledge.

The first and most important finding, which emerges from it, is double-edged. On the one hand, we can state with confidence that the quest for Jewish meaning is extremely important to our subjects, as the search for meaning (analyzed by previous researchers) is important to contemporary Americans more generally.<sup>1</sup> Middle-range American Jews seek an abiding significance in their lives that goes beyond the activities of daily life and the limits of their own mortality. They readily discussed their highly personal searches for transcendent purpose. Our subjects reported a strong desire to find a sense of direction and ultimate purpose, and the wish to find it largely or entirely in the framework of Jewish practices and beliefs. Their decisions concerning Judaism are, as we would hope and expect, inextricably wrapped up in the search for meaning. That is perhaps the primary reason that their Judaism is expressed most often in the private sphere, where transcendent purpose is most readily discovered and located by contemporary Americans of whatever tradition. Judaism "happens" at home, with family or good friends. It transpires in the "place" within the self given over to reflection, longing, faith and doubt.

On the other hand, however, the search for meaning is complicated and at times precluded by a variety of factors. The American Jews we interviewed (a group which included, by intent, very few of the most committed sorts) overwhelmingly follow the pattern explained years ago by Robert Bellah and his co-authors in their classic

study of contemporary American attitudes toward self and community, *Habits of the Heart*. The "first language" that our subjects speak is by and large one of profound **individualism**. It is universalist, liberal and personalist. **Community** -- though a buzzword in our interviews, a felt need, even a hunger -- is a "second language." Our subjects, like Americans more generally, do not speak it either as often or as well.

Indeed, to a surprising degree, the first language remains predominant even after the second language has found expression and enactment. Community and commitment, in fact, are repeatedly redefined and apprehended by our subjects in terms acceptable to sovereign and ever-questing selves. Only in those terms is commitment possible and community permitted. Even the seemingly more committed among our sample of moderately affiliated Jews told us repeatedly that they decide week by week, year by year, which rituals they will observe and how they will observe them. They repeatedly reconsider which organizations and charities they will join or support, and to what degree; which beliefs they will hold; and which loyalties they will acknowledge.

What is more, almost all our subjects, including the most committed among them, demonstrated enduring ambivalence towards the organizations, institutions, commitments and norms which constitute Jewish life, whether these be families of origin, synagogues, federations, or God. Not only is the freedom to choose retained, even after the recognition that one has been chosen and is obligated. Ambivalence, too, continues to be felt and expressed, even after one has decided to be or become a serious Jewish self, and is embarked on the path that such a self has determined that it must walk.

That ambivalence, and more particularly its causes and effects, bear important and direct implications for communal policy-making. The indifference to Jewishness and Judaism about which lay and professional leaders so often complain, and to which intermarriage is so often attributed, is -- among our sample at least -- well-nigh non-existent. In part, of course, that is because our sample selection excluded the least involved segment of the population. Nonetheless, the finding is of great importance. If moderately-affiliated American Jews do not come to synagogue or join organizations or give to federation philanthropic campaigns as often as these institutions' leaders wish they would, it is not because they do not care at all about being Jewish. It is rather that they care too ambivalently. They have

strong feelings about Judaism and Jewish institutions, both positive and negative.

These feelings are inextricably bound up in the attachments and experiences that most determine and define them -- relations to parents first of all -- and these same feelings, ineluctably two-sided, are just as inevitably called to mind whenever American Jews are confronted with the opportunity to connect with, express, reject or evade their Judaism. Ritual observance, synagogue attendance, and Federation appeals regularly provide and provoke such associations and opportunities -- as do news reports about Israel, Holocaust commemorations, and holiday celebrations with family and friends. So -- most decisively, perhaps -- do friendship, dating, marriage and child-rearing. Each person's Jewishness, we have learned, is shaped and informed by highly ambivalent memories of past stages in his/her Jewish biography. Adult identity bears the scars and joys left behind by childhood, and is inseparable from the subsequent pains and growth of relationships, marriage and parenting.

The paths along which people turn toward and away from the community and Jewish tradition are extraordinarily diverse, defying simple classification. The stories told by our subjects are highly individual. The issues brought into play by and around Jewishness and Judaism are of enormous complexity.

We readily draw at least one policy conclusion from this mystifying melange: Communal interventions aimed at increasing Jewish identification must be correspondingly subtle and multi-faceted if they are to prove adequate to the task at hand. We believe that our research can help with that effort, because our subjects, in describing their Jewish development, repeatedly mentioned people, events and experiences which had been crucial to them, turning points at which the right person or program made a difference, and so could make a difference to others at similar stages. We will present and analyze those moments in this study. Our purpose throughout is to understand our subjects' discovery and construction of Jewish meaning in their personal lives, the better to suggest communal policies which might lead more such middle-range Jews to undertake a higher level of Jewish involvement.

This account of our findings consists of four parts. In the first, we present the study's methodology and its logic, and explain the boundaries of and differentiation within our target population of moderately-affiliated Jews. In the second section, we present the differences between the two groups in some detail, drawing extensively upon quotation from our subjects' accounts of their own movement toward and away from Jewish commitment. The third section teases out for examination the forces and influences which, according to our findings, make for greater and lesser concern with Jewishness and Judaism. In the final section we will offer further analysis of our findings and a preliminary set of suggestions regarding communal policy.

## I. Population and Method

We chose to examine moderately affiliated rather than highly committed or totally unaffiliated American Jews for several reasons. One is that scholars of American Jewry already know a great deal, formally and anecdotally, about the most involved 20% of American Jews, and how their involvement is nurtured and sustained. We know much less (though we can make well-informed speculations) about the 20% of American Jews who hardly ever set foot, throughout the entire course of their lives, in a Jewish communal setting. It is doubtful, however, that increased understanding of that group would be as useful to the community as knowledge about the middle group -- those who, for at least a significant portion of their lives, are at least somewhat involved with Jewish institutions and tradition. These people, we are convinced, offer the most worthwhile targets for efforts at "outreach." They are not only identifiable (no small advantage when it comes to reaching them), but are demonstrably capable of considerable intensification in their observance. These Jews have already made the choice to walk through at least one of the community's gateways (to use the felicitous phrase of Barry Shrage, president of Boston's Combined Jewish Philanthropies). If we can understand why they have come this far, the lessons learned might well help us to induce or persuade them to go farther.<sup>2</sup>

Operationally, we have defined moderately affiliated Jews as those who belong to a Jewish institution (a JCC, synagogue, or organization) but are not as involved, learned or pious (as measured by scales of ritual observance, institutional participation and belief constructed and used frequently in survey research) as the most highly engaged fifth of

American Jews.<sup>3</sup> The Jews in whom we are interested in this study comprise the typical members of Conservative and Reform synagogues, and perhaps even the "nominally Orthodox" as defined by Heilman and Cohen (1989). Within that population, we selected individuals who for the most part are between thirty and fifty years old. Most are married with children, and the vast majority are married to other Jews, though several are single, married to non-Jews, or involved in lesbian relationships. The respondents are cited or described in this study with fictitious names meant to protect the privacy we promised them.

The 1990 National Jewish Population Study, the authoritative study of American Jewry sponsored by the Council of Jewish Federations, provides several parameters which support our choice of subject. Of married Jewish adults between the ages of 30-50, our target generation in this study, fully three quarters identify as Reform or Conservative Jews, as do the bulk of our sample, while just over one quarter reported that they attend worship services monthly or more often than that. Those who do so would tend to fall outside our target population, and be numbered among the more involved "activists" rather than the moderately affiliated. About a quarter of the NJPS sample were married to non-Jews -- largely from the unaffiliated segment of American Jewry who fall outside our sample on the other end. Correlatively, only a handful of our respondents are inter-married.

Our method of data collection over the last three years has consisted primarily of in-depth interviews conducted by us directly or by our associates with individuals suggested by contacts in synagogues, federations, JCC's or other Jewish agencies. The interviewers we engaged were generally women, generally in the age range of our prospective respondents, and often trained therapists or those in other professions where interviewing skills can be presumed.

Our contacts in the Jewish institutional settings (rabbis, educators, or other professionals) were asked to recommend names of articulate men and women between the ages of about 30 and 50 who were members, but not activists, in their or other organizations, or who had become active only recently. We also intentionally interviewed several people whose involvement fell "over the line" of moderate affiliation on either side, with a somewhat greater number who were more involved rather than less involved. We did so as to better understand the varieties of Jewish identity characteristics of the moderately affiliated, who remained our key target group.

All the interviews except one were conducted individually. We also conducted three focus groups consisting of six to eight individuals each. Two of the groups consisted of members of an economically upscale suburban Conservative synagogue who were parents of children attending supplementary school in a building that housed a fairly popular Conservative day school. The other group consisted of parents of children in the day school. The former fit squarely with our definition of "moderately affiliated Jews," while most of the day school parents may be regarded as among the more involved of the moderately affiliated, or, perhaps more often, substantially more active and committed than our key target group.

As befitting the canons of qualitative social research, we were concerned more with assuring the variety of views than with constructing a representative sample. We chose our respondents, explicitly seeking diversity in terms of geography, family status, denomination, gender, occupation, personality, and, perhaps most importantly, their relationship to Judaism. In all, we were guided by our sense of the distributions of these characteristics in the American Jewish population, as reported in numerous random sample surveys. As the interviewing proceeded, we worked to fill in what we gathered were under-represented social categories. The early interviews slanted too heavily toward the relatively under-involved, so in the second stage of interviewing, we compensated by seeking out more involved Jews. Because the first segment of interviews focused on both coasts, we made a special effort to extend our interviewing to the Midwest.

Men and women are equally represented among our subjects. They live in a wide variety of locales throughout the United States, from the Bay Area and Los Angeles on the West Coast through Chicago and Detroit in the Midwest, to Boston, New Haven, Manhattan, and suburban New York in the Northeast. Jews living in or around large urban centers predominate in our sample, as they do in the American Jewish population as a whole. We also interviewed three individuals who had come to study for a year at the Pardes Institute in Jerusalem. All the interviews were taped, and then either transcribed verbatim or extensively summarized. The findings arrived at in this way, and reported here, will soon be followed by a mail survey of a thousand respondents to be conducted on our behalf under the auspices of the Jewish Community Centers of America by Market Facts, Inc.

Having said that we were not concerned about strict representativeness of the total sample, we are concerned to present findings, summaries and inferences that generally represent the thinking and sentiments of our target population. One standard we used to select and interpret our interviews derives from our familiarity with the target population derived from a combined half century of systematic research and nearly twice as much time in their midst as family members, friends, neighbors, and colleagues. Very simply put, this is not a population with which we are unfamiliar, a circumstance that brings with it both advantages and limitations. More formally, we drew upon quantitative research conducted in the past and survey research we designed subsequent to collecting the qualitative interviews. The survey research led us to and confirmed the general directions we uncovered; the qualitative interviews lent richness and depth to those directions, provided context, and, we hope, raised new questions for further inquiry. Last, and not least, we were informed by classical and contemporary social theory and research. Writings on modernity, post-modernity, American society, American religion, and American ethnicity in particular influenced our thinking, our perceptions, our exploration, and our conclusions. That this literature makes sense of our findings and that our findings comport with a general reading of the relevant literature only strengthens our sense that we have arrived at reasonable conclusions.

One other preliminary issue requires a word of explanation: our use of such terms as "highly involved Jews," "less involved," "more involved," and the like. It should go without saying (but, of course, needs to be said), that we are not passing moral judgment on the respondents. As social scientists, we do not mean to imply the "more involved" Jews are better Jews or that "less involved" Jews are less Jewish. In fact, we readily concede, that from a certain philosophical point of view, one cannot speak of more or less involved Jews because the very behavior and attitudes of the Jews, in the aggregate, defines Jews, Judaism, and Jewishness. Particular works of music are not more or less musical; music is music and Jews are Jews. Music may be judged good or bad by music critics; and Jews may be judged by rabbis, educators, leaders, and ideologues of all sorts, but that is not our role here.

Aside from the evaluative problem with using these terms, they entail a possibly misleading conceptual distortion as well. Speaking about greater or lesser involvement connotes some underlying

unidimensional scale of Jewish involvement. In point of fact, we uncovered considerable diversity in the patterns of Jewish involvement. There are many different building blocks, which can be assembled in such patterns. We do not wish to portray Jews in any simplistic fashion as situated on, or moving up and down, a unidimensional ladder of Jewish involvement.

However, while we cannot speak of precise end-points of Jewish involvement, we can conceive of "regions" of Jewish involvement. People may be regarded as more Jewishly involved (or less so) as a result of a variety of characteristics: their social ties, their ritual practices, their institutional affiliations, their beliefs, their knowledge, or their subjective evaluation of their involvement and their commitment. What is more, it turns out empirically that all these dimensions are related, some loosely and some more tightly. Knowing a subject's stance on the chosen people question, for example, or on closeness to Israel, turns out to be a very good predictor of synagogue attendance, charitable giving, and holiday observances. Thus, while "more (or less) Jewishly involved" may defy sharp definition, we believe it is still useful. If one can speak of Americans who are more or less liberal, or more or less conservative, we can speak of Jews as more or less Jewishly involved.

The distinction we offer below between lower and higher levels of Jewish involvement aims to present features that, at best, only tend to differentiate one from the other. Not all the traits ascribed to either region will be found within every person located there. Rather, the aim is to identify and briefly describe the sets of features that generally apply to Jews at one or another end of the spectrum. We are constructing "ideal-types" which, in their entirety, rarely appear in the real world, though the features we mention do tend to cluster. Thus, to say that some individuals exhibit relatively lower levels of Jewish involvement is not to say that they entirely lack any involvement. These are after all moderately affiliated Jews. Most are members of Conservative and Reform congregations, attend religious services at least occasionally, celebrate some holidays, and send their children to part-time Jewish schools for the several years preceding Bar/Bat Mitzvah or (if Reform) Confirmation. They are, as we have noted, overwhelmingly married to Jews. Others, substantially less involved, would not have entered our sample. Conversely, those at the higher end of our spectrum rarely exhibit all the traits that comprise the

corresponding ideal type, even if, once again, the patterns that identify them are clearly marked.

Our classification of respondents is to some degree intuitive, but not entirely so. We relied upon patterns of ritual practice, synagogue and/or organizational involvement, philanthropic activity, and personal testimony as to the subjective importance of the respondents' Jewish identity. Our interviews' transcripts were first coded separately on these variables and only later were they checked against responses on the panoply of attitudes and behaviors addressed in our study (for example, ethnic attachment, belief in Jewish chosenness, salience of Israel). Only in a few cases did we hit upon discrepancies -- a person who qualified as "high" according to our initial criteria but then on further investigation seemed to be behaving or believing as a "low."

Two examples -- the first from our "low" group, the second from the "high" -- should concretize the distinctions between them, as well as the features which make interview in our sample so rich, interesting, and complex in its own right as to defy categorization in any simplistic fashion.

Karen, a 43-year old accountant from suburban Boston, grew up in the New York area in a family affiliated with a Reform synagogue. She reports that Jewish observance in the family ebbed and slowed; spiritual discussion in her family was non-existent; her parents had "the typical embarrassment about being Jewish;" she belonged to no youth group and never went to a Jewish camp. She has pleasant memories of Passover seders, unpleasant memories of being humiliated at Hebrew school when she confessed her family had a Christmas tree. She remembers little else of Hebrew school, and stopped after Bat Mitzvah. When she met and married her husband in graduate school, his being a Presbyterian was not an issue because "he had said right away we could raise the kids Jewish." Karen began wishing "he were more a part of things," however, and was pleased when he decided of his own volition a couple years ago to convert. "It changed our family. We define ourselves as a Jewish family now."

Karen's own decision to become more active Jewishly had to do, as she understands it, with her "need for a spiritual life," (her practice of yoga was instrumental in returning her to Judaism, she notes) and her wanting to "have something authentic to pass onto" her children. The key influences were the rabbi at the local Reform synagogue and the teachers in *Me'ab*, the innovative adult education program begun several years ago under the auspices of the Boston Hebrew College and

the Boston Federation. The family recently traveled to Israel for the first time, began home observance of Shabbat with the help of tapes prepared by their synagogue's cantor, attend a family service together on Yom Kippur. The children study at the Hebrew school of their synagogue; Karen would consider day school, but knows her husband would object. She has recently taken on responsibility as an officer at the synagogue. She believes in God, though without believing God answers prayers; says the Holocaust makes her realize "how many situations are not equally horrible but that sort of stuff is still happening...humankind are capable of it," and interprets the chosen people idea to mean that Jews have "specialness and responsibility," that "we chose ourselves through the years, our survival is a unique story." Karen does not believe that rabbis should perform Jewish wedding ceremonies for couples who are inter-marrying, though perhaps there is another ceremony they could do. "You can't push Jewish law too far."

Gil is a fifty-year old physician in suburban Boston and likewise a student in the Me'ah program; he grew up in a conservative synagogue in Philadelphia, attended its Hebrew school as well as Camp Ramah, and spent a lot of time as a child with his Orthodox grandparents. During college he spent a summer on a kibbutz and loved it, though he notes that he has been back only twice in thirty years. It was important to him to marry a Jewish woman and he did; she began with less interest in active involvement than he did, but that has now changed. They send their children to their Conservative synagogue's Hebrew school as well as to Ramah.

Gil's description of his family's ritual calendar runs the gamut from high holidays, through Succot and Simchat Torah (his synagogue initiated a *sucvah* project a couple years ago that encourages each family to build its own *sucvah* with the help of other members), though Hanukkah, Purim, Passover and Shavuot. The family are not "*shomrei shabbas*," he says, but do bless the children and light candles each Friday night, make it a special evening, and attend services "on a fairly regular basis." He goes to *minchah-maariv* services on Shabbat about six or eight times a year. Gil regards Judaism as both religion and ethnicity, has mostly Jewish friends, is not certain he has "a very coherent sense of God. prayer comes hard for me." Shabbat is a time to contemplate, think about the week past and upcoming, spend time evaluating his life. "That's in a sense my dialogue with God." He does not believe the Jews are God's chosen people -- "that's something that has gotten us in

lots of trouble" -- but he does believe that the events on Sinai described in the Bible happened. "In a morally corrupt world, the Jewish people saw the light. I don't know exactly how," but somehow the Jews got the Torah from God -- "that is something I do believe."

In this report, we will extract and analyze information collected during our qualitative interviews, which addresses the following questions:

Among those who qualify as "moderately affiliated," what distinguishes Jews with lower Jewish involvement from those with higher Jewish involvement? In other words, how can we recognize a more (or less) involved Jew when we see one?

What factors served to depress, reduce, or limit Jewish involvement (however ambiguously defined), be it recently or in the distant past? In other words, how are the relatively less involved Jews created? What are the most critical negative features described in or evinced by the life-stories of those we interviewed?

What factors served to elevate, expand, or enhance Jewish involvement, either recently or in the past? That is, how are the relatively more involved Jews created? What stages, features and encounters are most critical in furthering movement toward greater commitment and involvement?

Finally, in light of the answers to these questions, what Jewish communal and educational policies stand the best chance of enriching the Jewish identities of moderately affiliated Jews in the United States?

## II. The Commitments of Sovereign Jewish Selves

### A. Liberal Individualism and the Chosen People

Among our respondents, even the less involved expressed a keen sense of belonging to a Jewish group, one that evokes a historical resonance, and is both familiar and familial. They declare that their Jewish identity is very much a part of them -- **inalienable** and **undeniable**.

"I do say I am a Jew. Being Jewish is part of my identity, my roots, my family, my beliefs." (Gila)

"It's hard for me to separate out being Jewish from just being; it's a very strong part of my identity." (Sarah)

"I like the cultural historical identification. I like the fact that it is something that is in practice for over five thousand years, and I'm a lifetime club member." (Brad)

"It's part of who I am." (Susan)

However, in contrast with the more involved individuals whom we shall discuss shortly, the less involved sometimes admit that being Jewish is not all that important to them, and concede, even when they aver a high level of Jewish passion, that they do relatively little to put their passion into practice. They recognize that Judaism has a rich tradition but that they personally are highly ignorant of its substance, although they might like to learn more some day.

When asked to conceptualize the meaning of being Jewish, some of the less involved offer what might be called ethnic responses. To them, being Jewish is a cultural matter that expresses itself in such things as Jewish food, comedy, history (particularly the history of anti-Semitism), educational and professional achievement, charity, and a family-like bond stretching through time and space. On another level, the less affiliated more readily conceive of Judaism as primarily a set of ethical obligations or (as they tend to put it) "values." They tend to equate being a good Jew with being a good person. Their universalist commitments extend to a refusal to distinguish between Jews and non-Jews in distress, and rejection of the propriety of making special efforts on behalf of Jews in need; they claim to have no special feelings for oppressed Jews.

The most important Jewish value, said Sam, is sensitivity to others; Joshua linked Jewishness to powerlessness, Sarah to freedom of expression, Susan to concern with violence and homelessness and support of people trying to fix things in the world. Kathy said she wants her children to be socially active, even if they are conservatives. "They should still care about what happens and if it's a cause that they believe in, then work for it." David was not alone in suspecting that he picked up his liberalism from his parents and his surroundings, by "cultural osmosis," and only later connected it to Jewishness because there are "lots of affinities there."

Only Sam admitted to being a registered Republican (though Karen told us she felt alienated from her synagogue because of the knee-jerk liberalism she found there); only Joe, an unusually ethnic Jew from New York, confessed that his first priority at election time is "voting for Jews or what's best for Jews."

In the minds of such Jews, particularly the less involved, ritual observances are clearly secondary, and Jewish law is hardly in their consciousness. When they do define Judaism as religion (a notion most common among members of Reform temples), the reference is to a vague sort of ethical monotheism that -- in keeping with the pattern we shall shortly detail -- is highly personalist and universalist. In a sense, the least involved individuals in our sample represent a watered-down version of Mordecai Kaplan's definition of Judaism as civilization, combined with the triumph of the Pittsburgh Platform of 1885. One respondent encapsulated both elements perfectly when he said that his obligations as a Jew were to "pass on his cultural heritage to his children and to be sensitive to the Ten Commandments."

By contrast, those with greater Jewish involvement more clearly articulated the central importance of Judaism in their lives. They saw a distinctive Jewish point of view to life's key problems, and claimed in one way or another that Judaism's norms have direct implications for everyday life, offering guidance concerning the way they are and should be living.

That is why, said Molly, the most important thing a Jew should do, as a Jew is study. "As the rabbis said, from study comes everything else. As study enriches you, all these other ways of thinking about God or religion or charity or your place in the world all diverge out from that... The rabbis hit it on this one. [Study provides] a sense of belonging and why being Jewish does and can fill your life with meaning."

Several respondents described Judaism as a discipline: a framework that gives them a structure, which is comforting, meaningful, and rewarding. "There is a way in which [observance] is not casual," said Scott. "It never gets casual. After Shabbat... you're just not in the same place... You're either there or not... It's also a way of being in the world." Or, as Simon put it, citing Dennis Prager, "If someone followed you around for a day of your life, would they know you were Jewish based upon what you do or would they have absolutely no clue? I want to be sure my life is lived in a way that people would know, and I would be cognizant of the fact that I'm Jewish."

Such individuals spoke in a manner that we simply did not hear from those less committed to Jewish belief, observance, or peoplehood. Responding to the question of what one's primary obligations are as a Jew, the relatively more committed said such things as "to create a Jewish environment for my family and set a [Jewish] example for my children that hopefully they will want to embrace (Linda); or "charity, keep learning, perpetuate things by example and not by rhetoric" (Tony). The most important thing a Jew should do as a Jew, said Linda, is "to pursue a Jewish journey," while Tony (quoting Pirke Avot) mentioned the duties of *avodah* (worship) and *gemilut hasadim* (good deeds). Sonya said the main thing is to "stand up and say, I'm a Jew and I'm going to do something about it." Some highly involved Jews also gave universalist responses to these questions. As one subject put it, "the essence of Judaism is *rachmanis* (compassion), and if you don't have it, you're not a Jew." As distinguished from less involved Jews, however, they couched such responses in Jewish terms (such as "*rachmanis*"), and did not cite universal obligations to the exclusion of duties unique to Jews.

Two elements in the responses related to this theme deserve special attention.

The first is the palpable tension experienced between liberal individualism, to which virtually all of our subjects subscribed, and the belief that the Jews are in some sense a chosen people, that is, that Jews have a special responsibility to be ethical, a special purpose in the world, and owe special obligations to one another. We heard time and again from less involved Jews that the Jews as a group had a special responsibility to be ethical -- but so did everyone else.

Bill remarked that "if everyone lived Judaism, we wouldn't have any problems," but he added at once that "that goes for any

religion...They all basically preach the same thing." Steve feels responsible for fellow Jews but "what happens to non-Jews affects me just a much." Some tipped the balance in favor of Jewish loyalties. "Sometimes I feel more about Jews. They suffered too much. I am not here to take on the problems of the world. Let somebody else do that." Or: "I feel much empathy for any refugees which I read about. But when I hear [about the Jews of the Soviet Union] it makes my heart melt." Only one respondent in the less involved group, however, a working-class Jew from New York, said outright, "You have to take care of your own first." Others denied, or were ambivalent about, unique Jewish responsibilities or the Jews' status as the chosen people.

Those on the higher level of involvement seemed far more comfortable affirming notions of chosenness and special Jewish obligation, though the tension between universal and particular loyalties is evident among them as well. (An earlier study by Eisen on this issue demonstrated that the tension is found even among the community's rabbis and theologians.)<sup>4</sup>

Jews are chosen, said one highly involved respondent, "only in that through [Jewish] teachings we created a set of parameters within which to organize our communal and religious life. So I guess you can say that we've chosen ourselves." (Dave)

"I have trouble with [chosenness]. I think it's true in some way." (Tony)

"No. I think each group has their own things they're special with. We just happen to be descendants of the people who got the Torah." (Betsy)

"My first response," said Nancy, is "oh no, there we go, and my second is [that Judaism is] a blessing and a responsibility." Chosenness includes an obligation to have "a massive amount of humility." It also means: "Here I am, I can't help it, what should I do?"

Only a few respondents were unequivocal. "The Jews are God's chosen people. What it means is up for interpretation." (Ken)

"I've studied it. Chosenness means increased responsibility... truths available to you if you want to embrace them. Not that you're closer to God. God said to the Jews: here it is. Others may get here differently. But this is it. If you turn away, that's your loss." (Stuart)

The second point which bears emphasis in this connection -- one to which we alluded earlier -- is that virtually all our respondents regard their Jewish identity as inalienable. They are Jews because they are Jews, and no one can become more of a Jew by doing or believing more, or less of a Jew by doing or believing less. Only denying one's Judaism (which several confessed ashamedly that they had done at one point of another), or (in the eyes of some) having a Christmas tree in the home, were regarded as clear betrayals of self. The one way to cease being a Jew is to convert to another religion.

In their view, intermarriage does not affect one's Jewish identity. Moreover, if one of the two parents in a family is a Jew, so are the children, and (no matter the religion of their spouses) so are their children. This understanding of identity also helps to explain the emphasis placed by all our respondents, especially those less involved, on their dislike for Jews who proclaim themselves superior to other Jews. Tony, a high-end subject quoted above affirming Israel's chosenness, immediately followed the avowal with an attack on Orthodox stridency and dogmatism. David, until recently on the low end but moving of late toward increased Jewish involvement, averred that "I'm as Jewish as the Lubavitcher Rebbe." Less involved Jews can and do use the inalienable fact of Jewishness as a rationalization for not doing more Jewishly. More involved Jews use it as an opportunity into which they can grow, a vessel, which they can fill.

The paradox inherent in the combination of universalism and tribalism is obvious, and in our view very important. For all the liberal individualism evinced by our respondents; for all the personalism so pronounced in their statements; and despite the doubts they express about theological formulations of Israel's chosenness -- our subjects cling to a powerful Jewish tribalism: an ineradicable belonging which allows for considerable non-belief and non-observance, and which eliminates the danger that these might otherwise have posed to Jewishness. Intermarriage is likewise "safe," for the same reason. One cannot cease to be a Jew, no matter whom one marries. The children of such marriages cannot cease to be Jews, no matter how they are raised.

Our two sub-groups drew differing conclusions from this combination of universalist and tribalist assumptions. The more highly-involved stressed that the recognition of unalterable Jewish belonging gives the community a precious opening for its invitation to a more substantial Jewish identity. Why not more fully become what

one already is, and present that opportunity to one's children? Less involved Jews stressed that they feel no need to accept such invitations -- for their Jewishness is not in doubt, and is all the identity they want or need. Appeals for greater involvement will fall on deaf ears.

## **B. Close Relations: Friendship, Dating, Marriage**

Nearly all our respondents reported that most of their closest friends are Jews. Those on the lower end of involvement tended to deny any important difference in the character of their relations with Jews as compared to non-Jews. Those on the higher end were generally quite clear about the difference, citing greater trust with other Jews, a larger degree of shared experience. None of our subjects in either group expanded on this point very much. We conclude that it is now taken for granted that Jews have friends who are Jewish as well as friends who are not -- and that with few exceptions they will tend to be closer to their Jewish friends.

Jews on both ends of the spectrum reported having dated non-Jews at one point or another, even to the point of serious relationships. Some cited these relationships as the occasion for Jewish awakenings, which brought the relationships to an end and represented key turning points in their adult Jewish development. Amy, for example, reported that when her boyfriend started talking about getting married and mentioned the priest, "I realized I had a problem -- no can do."

Others held it merely a matter of luck or happenstance that they ended up marrying someone who was Jewish. (Only a few members of our sample married non-Jews). Dave, describing his thinking while he was dating his wife-to-be, reports that "being Jewish really didn't come up. I kind of knew she was Jewish." Another said, "I was glad she was Jewish, but like I've said if she hadn't been I would have married her anyway. It just makes things a lot easier that she is." Still another reported he "would have married a non-Jew if I had really fallen in love [and] came quite close to it."

Karen, a formerly intermarried member of the less involved group, said that "early on the fact that [her husband] was not Jewish was not an issue. My parents adored him... Neither of us was into religion. He was raised Presbyterian. I was into meditation." It did matter, she reported, that her husband promised early on that their children could be raised Jewish -- and his eventual conversion has made her very happy. Stuart, who has recently become highly involved, reports that when he fell in love with a non-Jew, and they decided to

marry, "It was very important to me that the kids be raised Jewish. It would have broken the marriage if she had said no."

Despite the similarity between our two groups in patterns of dating, they differ somewhat when it comes to the potential intermarriage of their children. For less involved individuals, the key issue is the upbringing of the grandchildren. As we have explained, one is not rendered less a Jew by intermarriage, in their eyes, nor does one's life necessarily become less Jewish. The grandchildren, we recall, will be Jewish by definition because one of their parents is a Jew. But a child does not remain Jewish if raised in another religion. That is the primary concern, which our respondents believed must be addressed. If it is -- if the non-Jewish partner agrees to raise the kids as Jews -- less involved Jews tend to be mildly upset, or entirely unperturbed, at the prospect of their children marrying Gentiles. They express the concern that the children "be raised as Jews" and sometimes cite the difficulties with which the marriage may have to contend as a result of the religious or cultural differences between the partners, but reveal no concern about the impact on their children's Jewish lives. What is more, they feel as parents that they have little ability to influence their children's choices of marriage partners, but can only hope their children pick their spouses wisely. Intermarriage is regarded very much a matter of chance rather than of choice.

Herschel remarked: "I just want [my daughter] to be a good healthy person with the ability to make her own decisions, and to question things that she doesn't feel right about." Joy would not be upset if her children married Gentiles, though she would like them to have the Jewish education she lacked. She might be upset if they became too Jewish -- brainwashed or swept away by cults. Nina wants her daughter to be a Jew. But "it's her decision. I don't care how she lives. It would not be devastating if she married a Gentile - I just want her to be happy if she marries out. It's up to her," though Nina would like her daughter to feel she liked what her mother gave her. Debby would be happy if her kids married Jews, and upset if they converted to another religion. Intermarriage falls in the middle. Sam stated: "Each individual has to decide the proper way to serve his religion."

More highly involved Jews, by contrast, almost always expressed strong negative feelings about intermarriage. Although these respondents too took care to point out that one cannot control one's children's destinies after they leave the home, they made this point with a sense of resignation. They very much want their children to marry

Jews, they said, but recognize that this outcome in an open society can never be certain. Highly involved Jews articulated real sadness at the prospect of their children's intermarriage, in contrast to lower-end Jews who professed neutrality, equanimity, or merely a preference in the opposite direction.

Ken is typical of the highly involved group: "I would have a serious problem if my son decided to marry a non-Jew." For such Jews, intermarriage represents a threat to the integrity of the Jewish people, and, on a personal level, may portend a degree of disconnection on their children's part from the Judaism that matters so much to their parents and from the Jewish community of which the parents feel such an integral part.

Moreover, only on the higher end of involvement did we find subjects who recognized that their partner's commitment was crucial to their own Jewish lives, and that the same would hold true for the spouses of their children; that an individual's ability to grow Jewishly, and fulfill Jewish obligations, varied with the commitment of his or her partner. More involved Jews reported that they intentionally sought Jews as marriage partners. In their college years or afterwards, some declined to date non-Jews, or at least distinguished between more serious dating partners (who were candidates for marriage) and less serious relationships. One highly involved respondent, the past president of a Reform temple, spoke of how she intentionally sought out Jewish medical students as dating partners (and eventually married one). Some recalled seeking not merely a Jewish husband or wife, but one whose Jewish perspectives and level of involvement approximated their own.

It is abundantly clear from our respondents' reports that the single most important determinant of adult decision-making about Jewish activity and involvement is the spouse or partner. In the not-too-distant past, it was generally the case not only that both partners would be Jews but that they would move in a single community. Little negotiation or decision-making was required as to the sort of Jewish lives they would lead. The latter was in the nature of a given. Today, however, Jews must repeatedly decide such matters: year by year, and even week by week. Even if both partners are Jewish, therefore, the decisions involve negotiation between them, and such discussions often involve tension. A price must be paid even for raising issues such as synagogue attendance, or circumcision by a *mohel*, or Jewish schooling for the children. What is eventually done by the family Jewishly

depends on how much likely support or opposition a proposal for its doing by one spouse is expected to receive from the other. These dynamics were articulated in almost every single interview we conducted.

"Things in common?" one less-involved subject commented.

"Sure, we were both ignorant. Potential for conflict? We're getting involved in different ways... I don't want to give anything up from childhood so no religious practice [will be allowed]. If my wife said she wanted to take the kids to synagogue, it would be a big problem." (Reuben).

Another respondent has wonderful memories of Jewish tradition from childhood, wants her child to have comparable experiences, but knows that her husband is an atheist. "If the kid gets any tradition, he's not going to be the one that gives it to him." So Ann takes him to synagogue herself.

Debby, raised Reform, started going to Conservative services with her husband, who was raised Conservative. It didn't work for her. Too traditional. He does not mind Reform services, so they go there. *Kashrut* was never an issue between them, because he did not care about it. Karen, who is happy her husband has converted of his own volition and now can be included fully in Jewish family celebrations, regrets that day school is not an option for her children. Despite her complaints about their synagogue school, her husband objects even to an afternoon school that meets three times a week rather than twice, and would never consider a day school.

On the other hand, Betsy reported a joint progress toward higher observance: study together, experimentation with *kashrut*, the joint decision to live in a neighborhood that has a suitable synagogue close by.

In sum: both our sub-groups dated Jews as well as non-Jews, and they have non-Jewish as well as Jewish friends. They disagree significantly on the importance of having a Jewish marriage partner to Jewish identity and activity. Overwhelmingly, however, indeed virtually to a person, both groups of our sample testified that it is women who now take the initiative in moving themselves and their families toward greater Jewish involvement, while their husbands either resist, acquiesce, or (less common) join wholeheartedly. The point will emerge clearly as we turn to the most widespread arena for Jewish expression among the moderately affiliated: ritual observance, particularly around holidays.

### C. Sacred Times and Spaces

In contrast with the more Jewishly involved, those less involved observe a sparser religious calendar, celebrating fewer holidays, for shorter periods, with less utilization of symbols and ceremonies. They also more readily lend universalist interpretations to the Jewish holidays, myths, and symbols to which they are connected. Their annual calendar includes Passover, Hanukkah (though it is less salient than we expected) and, clearly third in order of priority, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Succot and Shavuot are celebrated on occasion (though some respondents did not mention them when asked to survey their annual cycle of observance). Shabbat is observed irregularly. More highly involved Jews celebrate Shabbat and the three pilgrimage festivals with far more consistency, and occasionally celebrate Tu B'shvat and Tisha b'Av. As we will see, however, the difference between the two groups pertains as much or more to the significance attributed to the holidays as it does to the fact of their observance.

The most widely observed holiday among our sample, as among American Jews generally, is Passover, in part because -- as we would expect -- the major source of meaning in holidays is family. Perhaps we should put it the other way around: family is the major source and locus of meaning in life for our respondents, and so Jewish meaning is largely found there as well -- in holidays focused on and celebrated with family. Passover is an ideal framework for the discovery and construction of Jewish meaning. It is a family event that takes place in the home at evening (private space and time), allows for a great deal of individual initiative and flexibility (thereby respecting rather than infringing upon the autonomy of the individual), and is explicitly child-centered. What is more, extended family and close friends typically gather for the occasion; reminiscences concerning past seders and the family members who attended them form an integral part of the evening's story-telling; and powerful childhood memories of seders with parents and grandparents now deceased are regularly evoked. Our respondents testified to all of these elements.

"Pesach is my favorite holiday," said Molly. "I look forward to it for ages." She and her husband always host at least one seder, and sometimes two. They assign guests parts of the Haggadah reading in advance to assure active participation. "Seder is always a big deal," Linda concurred. Tony said, as did others, that "Pesach means the most

to us" -- a statement followed immediately (and again typically) by a reminiscence of the seders conducted by his grandfather.

Shabbat is also valued by our subjects, to the degree that they do value it, because of its connection to family and the cultivation of the self.

Sam likes Shabbat because after a busy week, the family Shabbat service at the synagogue provides quiet time together. "So we really like that, it's one of the things we really try to make an effort to do once a month. And when you get there you feel so good that it's, I don't know, like stability that kind of slows you down." Karen, who has only moved recently into the moderately-affiliated category, said that her family's observance began with Shabbat. "We got the books, and it was awkward at first," but they were assisted by a tape made by the cantorial soloist at their Temple. They play the tape at the right moments and it leads them in *motzi* (blessing over bread), grace after meals, and *zemirot* (Sabbath songs). The family also discussed the weekly Torah portion together. Karen tries not to do errands on the Sabbath, and is irritated that the "Temple people call me with questions about dues." The kids naturally gravitate toward not doing homework.

Her comments about other holidays shed further light on Karen's views concerning observance. Passover is a problem in her home, because "we're vegetarian, and we have no family here, so it's hard to figure out what to do." What is more, she and her husband want to elaborate at the seder on the parts that interest them, "spin through the rest, and eat what we want." At Hanukkah they light candles and exchange gifts each night, and the high holidays are celebrated primarily via the family service at the Temple. The rest of the holidays "we do sporadically, depending on what's going on at the Temple and in our lives." The voluntarism that characterizes this search for meaning is striking, and yet entirely typical. The couple chooses on a case-by-case basis what and how to observe. Note, too, the element of negotiation between them, and the leading role played by the woman in the family. Karen confesses that her husband likes the Temple's family service on Rosh Hashanah but is far less interested in Yom Kippur. She "drags" him and their son "to at least one Yom Kippur service. I go a lot."

Susan pointed up another prevalent motivation to observance when she related that her mother had called soon after her father's death to ask if she would be interested in inheriting (and using) the Shabbat candlesticks that the mother had inherited from her mother. Susan said without hesitation that she would like to have the

candlesticks and would use them, prompting her husband to wonder how that could be, given her near-total lack of interest in any form of Jewish ritual observance. "My feeling was that she [my mother] and I had made a connection about a ritual that would have meaning because it was about my grandmother and because it was about the culture and being Jewish... All of the things around the home and the family that we did sort of seem important to me." At present, in Susan's family, this means a seder loosely connected to the traditional forms, lighting Hanukkah candles, and (now) using the Sabbath candlesticks that had been her mother's. Connection to ancestors, particularly grandparents, is a powerful motivation for observance.

Tony commented, "Pesach means the most to us. When I was growing up, my grandfather did everything... we have two big [seders], eighteen to twenty people both nights, most not Jewish. Most of our friends are not Jewish." He and his wife do not have two sets of dishes but they eat only "*pesachdik* food, no bread." It is the holiday they like the best. "Shavuot we don't really do anything. Often I'll go to services and read Torah. This year I'll go to work, maybe services at night." He has never observed Tisha b'Av. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are the most difficult holidays of the year for him, Tony reports, because they are charged with memories of his father becoming ill as a result of the fast. "I have tremendous difficulty with [high holiday] services. Sometimes I go to hear *Kol Nidre*. This year I didn't. My wife and my son went. [My wife] said: aren't you going? I said I can't do it." The High Holidays "don't figure as largely as others do." Tony also dislikes the fact that the Temple is crowded on those days with people who come only then and not at other times during the year. Simchat Torah and Purim have the same problem for him -- "wild celebrations, not my thing. I can't relate to it. It's just the way I am." Succot "never meant anything to me growing up," but he has since "developed a connection to the *lulav* somehow." It now has some meaning for him. Tony reports a *d'var Torah* that he gave about Succot that relied upon a passage from Abraham Heschel that he found meaningful. At Hanukkah the family rotates use of its six menorahs. For the last few years, they have participated in a Tu B'shvat seder.

Note that the calendar in this case is much more extensive than among less involved Jews, but the element of autonomy -- individual choice -- remains. Holidays will be observed to the degree that they are endowed with positive personal meaning, and ignored or slighted if they do not. Ancestors as usual are a powerful force, working both for

observance (e.g., the grandfather at Passover) and against it (the father at Yom Kippur). The meaning to observance has to do not only with family but with participation in a Jewish calendar that has been celebrated by Jews for centuries and is currently celebrated by Jews everywhere.

Ken, at the higher end of Jewish involvement (perhaps so high that he may exceed the upper limit for the "moderately affiliated"), reports that he makes an effort to celebrate all the holidays. Shabbat is observed with candles lit "at the right time," and observance continues "all the way through to the end, to *Havdalah*." He blows the *shofar* at *shul* on Rosh Hashanah, after having practiced during *Elul* (the preceding month). On Yom Kippur he wears canvas shoes and white clothing. He builds a *succah* each year and eats most meals there. At Hanukkah his family sings the usual songs together each night, always in the same order. However, he usually does not celebrate Lag *Ba'Omer*, has "big problems with *Tisha b'Av*," and does not observe it or the minor fast days.

Linda, a member of a Conservative synagogue, also reports a full yearly cycle that lacks *Tisha b'Av* and minor fasts. Like our other respondents, she links almost every holiday in one way or another to family observance. The first seder is celebrated at her father's house, the second at their congregation. Succot observance began three years ago with a Temple family education program that included *lulav*-making. She and her husband go to services the first day, and she is conflicted about whether to keep the kids out of public school on the second. The children love Simchat Torah. At Hanukkah they always have a party the fifth night, at Purim they hear the *megillah* and send gifts, the seders are "always a big deal." Linda doesn't clean out the house for Passover, their home not being kosher anyway, but "we just don't eat *hametz*." On Shavuot -- a holiday made more significant for them by the fact that their son was born on Shavuot -- they go to the evening study session at the synagogue. They observe Shabbat almost every Friday night with candles, hallah, and a nice dinner, usually chicken.

We found no strong positive feelings among our respondents about any American holidays except Thanksgiving. We uncovered a spectrum of feelings concerning Christmas, though all rejected having a tree in their own homes. Less involved Jews seem to have a more relaxed attitude about celebrating Christmas at work or in friends' homes. One highly involved Jew, greatly upset by his son's

intermarriage, reports that he refuses to visit the latter's home between December and March because he will not go near family celebration of Christmas or Easter.

In sum: family is the main locus for observance among both groups in our sample, as well as the principal meaning found in observance. Beyond that, however, the two groups diverge. Less involved Jews observe fewer holidays, and generally endow them with universal significance (e.g., freedom).

We should also note in this connection that the less involved, when talking about their Judaism, seem to place greater emphasis than the more involved on family life cycle ceremonies, particularly weddings, Bar/Bat Mitzvahs, and periods of mourning. These events might loom larger in their Jewish consciousness because more regular occasions of Jewish significance are lacking. They typically join synagogues in preparation for the Bar/Bat Mitzvah of their children rather than to attend to their own religious needs. However, as we will see when we turn to our subjects' development as Jews, two life-cycle moments were repeatedly cited as crucial turning points on the path to higher involvement by subjects in both sections of our sample: the schooling of their children, and the deaths of their parents.

#### **D. God and the Synagogue**

The most striking finding of our study in connection with God and the synagogue is that our respondents rarely linked the latter to the former. Two points here are notable. First, with remarkable consistency, both high and low end Jews reported that they do, in fact, believe in God and have some personal relationship to God, even if they do not conceive of God in personal terms. Second, however, respondents in both groups said that they go to synagogue, when they go, in order to experience community, connect with Jewish tradition and enjoy moments of personal reflection, but do not expect or experience any special connection to God there.

They believe the relation to God is a highly personal matter, and that relation is available to all, not merely to Jews. Rarely, if ever, did our respondents, even among the more involved, described God as a Commander who commands them or as the Revealer of the Torah to Israel. God is conceived far more often as a universal "ground of being," or a personal comforter and healer, or a force mysteriously at work in nature and/or history. There is nothing particularly Jewish about this God, we might say, despite the fact that God -- and the place

set aside for public worship, the synagogue -- are both of major significance in many respondents' Jewish lives.

Consider these responses by individuals in the less active portion of our sample:

Henry: "God and man have a personal relationship above and beyond what you believe in religion. We each have a different concept of God."

Liz: "I do believe in God... that there is someone up there watching me. It's like a five-year-old's view of it, but I guess it's never changed."

Susan does not resonate to the belief in God, but "the notion of the universe is about as close as I ever come to it... There is a lot of life, which we have absolutely no control over. There is a way to be about it where you can have both joy and suffering. It's a feeling... not really a prayer -- a sense of thankfulness, and about trying to understand about suffering in life."

Debby: "I'm still trying to figure it out. I look at life as amazing. Is God an innate being?" She looks at religion more from a spiritual sense, not from Judaism. Her belief is not particularly connected to the synagogue. She feels no attachment to the prayers.

Gila goes to synagogue on Friday nights, "though I'm not observant [because] I love taking that time on Friday night to be quiet some during the service. I go because it really gives me the feeling of the end of the week and a chance to think and reflect." She also enjoys seeing her friends there. "I think I am still trying to understand faith", she says. "I think of God as a spirit that is inside of each person. It's also in nature."

Gail reports that when her father became ill she prayed to God for him to live. He died, and "I have never tried to pray or to speak to God at all since that day that my father passed away."

More highly involved respondents edged toward somewhat greater belief, and -- whether independently or not -- evince greater connection to the synagogue.

Linda: "I don't know whether I believe in God per se... I believe in something, not in God like a person, but a purpose to what we're doing, some kind of spirit or something out there. My mother who died ten years ago is somewhere out there." Does she pray? "I talk to my mother. I pray," though she is not sure it

is in the specific context of God. She reflects during services on "what's in my mind." When her children ask if she believes in God, she tells them that she does.

Tony, by contrast, says he believes in God and always has believed, but does not pray or speak to God. Does he have a personal relation of any kind to God? "That's a good question. I like to tell myself that I have. I guess I do. I feel like I have some sort of personal relation with God. Sometimes when I talk to myself out loud," and he asks why he is not making a more serious effort in life, and thinks of the things he should be doing, it "borders on prayer, talking to God." When he goes to services, Tony does not often feel like praying in the sense of communicating with God. "There is not much *kavvanah* [religious intentionality] involved there." But in other ways there is. He has the feeling that just to be in *shul*, making the effort, "that's a mitzvah." He is doing the best he can at the moment. "Maybe there is an element of real prayer in that."

Betsy laughs when the question of God is posed, then replies that she knows things happen in the world which are "not in our realm of understanding." She wishes we could get an answer sometimes, and tries. God is perhaps "the force that moves everybody along no matter what we do."

Ken says it is a big question. Most of the time he "feels really good about God." He understands God to be a "warm, living spirit to reach out to when you need love and nurturing." Lately he has been worried about evil, talked to his rabbi about the matter, and has "some issues with God. The prayer service is organized in his view to create spiritual moments. "When I'm *davening*, God can hear me." At times he feels "an intersection with God's plan for me." His felt connection to the content of the liturgy expressed here is, in our interviews at least, almost unique.

The differences between the two sub-groups, then, pertain far more to comfort level and activity in various capacities in the synagogue than to belief in or relation to God (widespread in both groups) or special awareness of God in the synagogue (rare in both). Less involved Jews complained more about their alienation from synagogue routine. "You stand up and you sit down and there is no feeling to what's going on." Brad liked Congregation Bnei Jeshurun in Manhattan, but generally dislikes synagogues because the prayers are

not interesting, the chairs are not comfortable, and "my thoughts do not lift up." Highly involved Jews by contrast generally enjoy good relationships with congregations. They are active in synagogue life, regard services in a positive light, feel competent in synagogue skills. They may describe services (or elements of them such as congregational singing or the sermon) as stimulating and engaging, or may merely find attendance comforting and familiar.

More notably, the more involved report an active intellectual engagement with Judaism that often transpires under the auspices of the synagogue. Their responses to our questions featured Hebrew terms or Ashkenazi pronunciations (Succos) which are more typical among insiders to Jewish observance; some drew upon text study (e.g., the reference to Heschel) as articulating their thoughts concerning God. But we did not find belief in God more prevalent among highly-involved Jews -- nor did we find Jews on either side of the high/low divide resonating to the content of synagogue liturgy, or feeling closer to God in the synagogue than they do elsewhere.

### **E. Israel, the Holocaust, and Jewish Difference**

We turn now to a final indicator of Jewish connectedness on which our two sub-groups differed significantly: relation to Israel and to the Holocaust. The more involved members of our sample typically maintained a stronger, warmer relationship with Israel. Many had visited the State twice or more, closely followed events taking place there, and maintained ties with family and/or friends who lived there. A few had thought seriously about *aliyah* [migration to Israel]. One or two even said that their own children should be living there.

Less involved Jews, by contrast, reported none of these feelings, but rather the usual pattern of pro-Israel sentiment and positive associations. Sam may have expressed more straightforwardly what other low-end subjects felt when he was asked if he had any intention of visiting Israel in the near future. "No, not really. I've seen it once, there are many other places I want to visit first before I go back to Israel." More active Jews, on the other hand, usually voiced the intention to make their first trip, or a return trip, soon. In neither group was Israel salient, whether as a trigger or as an expression of Jewish commitment.

The Holocaust, by contrast, looms large in the consciousness of both groups, the difference between them being whether the lessons our respondents drew from the Holocaust concerned primarily Judaism

and the Jews or were of more universalist import, though both themes figured in the responses of both groups.

Among those less involved, Paul mentioned that the Holocaust has to make one more aware of being Jewish, but added at once that it also makes one more aware of religious bigotry more generally. He discussed the growth of armed militia groups in America. Karen said she had been realizing lately that in many situations, though not as horrible as the Holocaust, "that sort of stuff is still happening." The lesson is that human beings are capable of great evil; the question is how God could let it happen. Amy responded to our question with a long story about the good relations between Jews and non-Jews in the small town where she grew up, and drew the lesson that one cannot trust the government fully and without question. It is important to speak out for what one believes in at all costs. Susan confessed that the Holocaust has "been an issue in the sense that I have avoided it because I couldn't find any way" to deal with it. She has trouble with all suffering but especially with this -- "because it's about someone who wanted to destroy all Jews, that's about me." Sarah said it had not affected her very much. In sum: most were somewhat touched by the subject but few made it central.

Ken said the Holocaust raised the question of: where was God? A Holocaust could definitely happen in America. There was the possibility of evil wherever human beings are present. Stuart complained about the degree to which Jewish identity was wrapped up in the Holocaust, a species of paranoia in his view. Linda, whose father had fled the Nazis in 1939, drew the lesson that it is a mistake for Jews to think they can be accepted by Gentiles if only they turn away from Judaism. The unbelievable can happen, and theoretically could happen here. Americans had massacred Indians a hundred years ago, and African-Americans were still struggling for their rights. Destructive and violent behavior was widespread. People have a responsibility to rein it in.

A subtle difference between the more and less involved respondents can be found in responses to two other matters. First, more involved Jews were far clearer about the relationship of their social action commitments to Jewish identity (though Conservative Jews tended to see such activity as set apart from their Jewish involvement rather than, as among Reform Jews, a central part of it). They generally acknowledged a conceptual link between being Jewish and the special responsibility to improve society, even while making it

clear that their first priority is to specifically Jewish concerns. Less involved Jews tended to relate Judaism to "values," but not to specific charitable giving or political activities. These activities, once again, were viewed as personal decisions reflecting universal values rather than Jewish commitments.

Second, the two groups also differed in one final, somewhat curious, way. Higher-end Jews more easily articulated critiques of Judaism, Jews, and the Jewish community. Many in both groups took issue with manifestations of materialism among Jews, particularly in Jewish contexts. They reported feeling put off by the prominence of wealthier Jews in synagogues and Jewish organizations, and were annoyed by what they regarded as an over-emphasis on fund-raising. Our more involved respondents, though sharing these concerns, tended to be more positive (though far from uniformly so) about Federation. They criticized the community on other counts: alleged Orthodox self-righteousness and arrogance; lack of sympathy for feminist concerns; barriers to participation by homosexuals and other elements of a non-inclusive social policy on the part of congregations; lack of spirituality in worship services; and the indifference of other Jews.

### III. Journeys

We turn now to the question of how individual Jews on both ends of our moderately affiliated spectrum came to make the commitments and adopt the patterns that now characterize them. What prompts, advances and blocks movement in one direction or another (or a third, or a fourth)? Two observations are in order before proceeding.

The first concerns the small distance most traveled. To an extraordinary extent, our adult respondents have arrived at a level of Jewish involvement that could have been loosely predicted from their childhood. Based on the interviews, we divided respondents into high and low levels for their childhood and adolescent years on the one hand, and their present situation on the other. Almost all were consistent (low-low or high-high). In other words, adult levels of involvement were about the same as childhood levels, albeit in different times and contexts.

This is not to say that the nature of their involvement remained unchanged. American society and the Jews within it have certainly evolved over the twenty or thirty years that separate our respondents from their upbringing. No less important, most have not just stood in place but have taken circuitous and sometimes difficult routes to arrive at their present commitment. It is striking, however, that the great majority fell within the same broad range of Jewish involvement (measured quantitatively) at both widely separated periods in their lives. Very few could be classified as low-high, the functional equivalents of *ba'alei teshuvah*. (In contrast with the term's conventional meaning of one who turns to Orthodoxy from a non-observant life, Charles Liebman once defined a *ba'al teshuvah* as someone who turned out to be more Jewishly involved than his or her parents or teen-age friends had any right to expect.)

Neither were there many respondents that we labeled as high-low. The reason for the small number of Jewish drop-outs (counterparts to "lapsed Catholics") may be a result of our sampling decisions. We know from quantitative surveys that intermarriage constitutes the prevalent means by which those with a moderately or highly involved upbringing as youngsters come to adopt low levels of Jewish involvement as adults. By largely excluding mixed married Jews from our interviews, we eliminated this major source of high-low configurations.

The second observation concerns the huge variety of influences mentioned by our respondents. We did discern, however, several patterns, factors, both positive and negative, mentioned over and over again in our interviews. But we were struck nonetheless by the individuality and idiosyncrasy embedded in these narratives. The expansion of individuality, the degree to which the biographies of modern and post-modern individuals are increasingly differentiated from one another is, of course, one of the master themes of classical sociological thinking. Choices and choosing are multiplied, cultural ferment is ever more widespread, and geographic and social mobility make for still less stability. The self is penetrated constantly and throughout life by multiple and diverse cultural stimuli. One of the characteristic features of the post-modern age is the freedom and tendency to assemble new identities, drawing upon elements from once-disparate cultural systems. In this world, individuals are free to decide to emphasize or downplay aspects of their religious, ethnic, cultural, political, or sexual identities. They are free to combine and recombine elements in accord with their changing needs and tastes. And, of course, this feature applies to their Jewish selves as well.

If for no other reason, every modern and post-modern individual is unique; and modern Americans are probably still more unique (*sic*). Even when investigation is restricted, as in this study, to American Jews who fall within a certain age range and who are concentrated in the same general region of the Jewish identity spectrum, we encounter a stunning variety of biographical detail. Even siblings of the same families have widely varying experiences. Generalizations concerning both the positive and the negative influences on the identity of American Jews, therefore, come hesitantly.

### **A. Obstacles to Involvement**

With these cautions in mind, we may proceed to four factors which seem to have dampened enthusiasm for Jewish involvement.

The first of these is **parents**, who without exception seem to have played a crucial role in shaping our respondents' orientations to things Jewish. Although the attitudes expressed concerning parents were generally positive, the latter's influence on their children's Jewishness seems often to have been quite the opposite.

Some respondents reported parents who themselves were either indifferent to Judaism or in rebellion against the Jewish involvement of their parents (the respondents' grandparents). Tony, for example,

reported that his mother kept a kosher home, lit candles on Friday night, and went to services with his father half a dozen times a year. But Judaism at home "didn't mean all that much." Many complained of their parents' pro-forma commitment and erratic observance. Linda, for example, said that Jewish life was always evident in her house, an elaborate seder was conducted each year, and attendance at services on the High Holidays was required. But her parents never went to synagogue on Shabbat or the festivals, and dropped off the kids at Hebrew school without venturing inside. Several perceived the rules enforcing their own behavior and attendance at Hebrew school as hypocritical given their parents' lack of interest and observance. Molly, for example, remembers that her parents never went to synagogue on Saturday mornings but insisted that the children go to junior congregation. She was not allowed to color or play cards as a child, or to play pick-up sports -- while her mother, who would not cook on the Sabbath, nonetheless went shopping.

Other respondents, by contrast, spoke of parents who were highly committed -- but who did not maintain particularly warm relations with them when they were children, or whose spouses did not share this commitment or even opposed it. Some respondents spoke of observant family members (including, but not limited to parents) who were pushy and over-bearing. All of these circumstances worked to shape (or are used by our subjects to explain) relatively low levels of Jewish involvement in adulthood. In such stories, we see a cognitive dissonance paradigm at work. We may think of two connections: between the child and the parent, and between the parent and Judaism. If one connection is positive and the other negative, a negative relationship with Judaism is more likely to emerge later on. The converse is also true: a combination of warm relations with parents combined with their warm attitude toward things Jewish seems likely to eventuate in positive attitudes toward being Jewish in adulthood.

**Hebrew school** was consistently named, even by high-end respondents, as a negative feature of their childhood experience of Judaism. Tony told us simply that "I hated it," despite the fact that the teachers were nice. Almost no one spoke positively about Hebrew School or named individual teachers as role models for their present-day commitments. We of course have no way of knowing if these or other memories are accurate. Jabs at Hebrew school seemed to come routinely in our interviews, almost as if they were expected and a marker of someone in the know. High school and college years for

most of our subjects were barren in terms of Jewish involvement or encouragement of same.

Many respondents reported negative encounters as young-adults or newly-married couples with **rabbis and congregations**. Some told of experiences with socially inept or dogmatic rabbis whom they saw as aloof and cold, or who failed to present Judaism in relevant terms. Our subjects spoke just as regularly of unfriendly or unwelcoming congregations, of synagogues or organizations where they never felt they had a real place, and about groups of people with whom they felt they could never become friends. Experiences with boring or uninspiring services seemed to reinforce dispositions against Judaism already in place. Again the interplay of social context and Judaism is clear. Negative experiences with identifiable Jewish contexts generate negative attitudes; and the reverse is also true.

With the exception of those who were heavily involved in Jewish communal life, few respondents had anything good to say about **UJA, federations, and Jewish organizations generally**. Some said they thought these organizations probably did good things, but on a personal basis they found involvement in the organizations unattractive. Many, particularly younger respondents, were repelled by the emphasis on money, status, and fund-raising (in synagogues as well as federations). The vast majority lacked any clear understanding of what their local federations did. The impression of many was that federations are cliquish, excluding people like them or, more particularly, all but the wealthiest. Boston's CJP was the exception that proves the rule in this regard. It was regarded favorably by interviewees who had participated in the Hebrew College *Me'ab* Program of adult Jewish study, initiated by the CJP. Their enthusiasm for the program spilled over to the organization responsible for it.

Finally, as we have already noted, some respondents spoke negatively of **Israel**, which -- though not a salient feature of their lives -- stands for them as a disincentive to higher Jewish involvement. A few report having been there and not being moved in a positive Jewish direction. More were troubled by Israel's apparent militarism, or simply perplexed by Israel's seeming lack of enthusiasm for pursuing peace and inability to tolerate Jews whose religious beliefs and practices differed from their own.

## B. Stimuli to Involvement

The list of positive factors bearing on Jewish identity begins in childhood. Many respondents mentioned their **grandparents** as formative Jewish influences. We cannot say definitively whether these grandparents were primarily those with Old World backgrounds, or whether American-born grandparents also "did the trick." Nor can we tell if the memories held and recounted by our subjects are accurate. Clearly, though, grandparents are recalled as a major and extremely positive factor, in comparison with which parents -- even if cited as a positive force -- pale in importance. We were surprised to see how rarely respondents directly attributed high levels of Jewish involvement to their parents, even with the frequent mention of Passover seders -- presumably led or attended by parents. The key element at the seder seems to have been the strong presence of extended family, interacting with special food, singing, and, for some, the intense discussions around the Seder table. Passover seems a still more powerful memory when presided over by grandparents who, for our respondents, emerged time and again as the image and transmitter of authentic Jewish living. Parents figured in our subjects' Jewish development, if their reports are to be trusted, far more in death than in life. The period of *shiva* and *kaddish* was reported by several as a crucial turning point on the road to greater commitment.

When Tony, as a child, moved to an East Coast city with a significant Jewish population, his grandparents retired and moved to a house around the corner. His cousins lived upstairs. This past year he took a Yiddish course "to reconnect with my grandparents and [their] world." He recalls his grandfather as the most decisive influence on him today, and when asked about turning points in his life, says again that the key people in this regard were his grandparents. "This really is a big thing to me." He recalls that when he went to services his grandfather would be there, that the latter always drank *shnapps* [whiskey] after services and ate egg *kichels*. "To this day when I go [to synagogue] on *shabbos*, I think we ought to have that." Contrasting his own attitude toward Judaism to that of his wife, he begins by saying, "My way of doing things -- maybe it has something to do with my grandparents, like I wear my grandfather's *tfillin*, not because I'm putting on *tfillin* but because they were my grandfather's, and I know he would really like it. When my wife does something, she does it because she wants our son to grow up in this kind of household, where this is a value or experience, and hopefully he will carry it on."

Molly, to cite one more example, told us that her Jewish loyalties were prompted by her grandparents. Her mother's mother had died by the time she turned five, but her grandfather was around, and so were her mother's sister and brother. "I felt very close to him" [i.e. the grandfather]. She recalls him as the sweetest, kindest person she has ever met – very insightful but also non-judgmental; a person who was learned enough to know how a Jew should ideally live, someone whose entire life was filled with being Jewish. "I just adored him... He was like what it was to be a Jew." When he died, during her teenage years, Molly "seriously questioned the existence of God and no one around me was able to help me through that period. I remember exactly what I was doing when he died." It was a real turning point in her life – prompting a withdrawal from Judaism that has been reversed only recently. (We quoted earlier from Molly's quite negative account of her parents' relation to Judaism.)

The relatively few respondents who participated significantly in **Jewish youth groups** or who attended educationally **intensive Jewish summer camps** spoke warmly of these experiences. Some attributed the coalescence of their Jewish commitment to their summer camp experience. Notwithstanding the general alienation from things Jewish during the university years, many of the more heavily involved spoke highly of Jewish experiences during their college years. They may have been active in a campus Jewish community or been touched by a Hillel rabbi. A very few cited particular events in this stage of life as turning points: e.g., nomination by their rabbi to participate in a special Jewish experience (such as a trip to Israel, a period at Brandeis Camp Institute).

As already reported, several respondents reported that **dating non-Jews, and breaking up with them** proved a moment which occasioned the realization on our subjects' parts of how much Judaism mattered to them, prompting the end of those relationships and the start of a journey toward greater commitment. Ken articulated this experience as follows. He was teaching in a non-Jewish prep school after college where he was one of only two Jewish faculty, put up a mezuzah on the door of his suite, and "started an affair with a non-Jewish woman who was very serious about me." He ended the relationship. "I felt maybe I should go find my people." This marked the beginning of a journey back, which involved a weekend at HUC in Cincinnati, a trip to Israel, a relationship with a Jewish woman. "It all started at the moment when I said: I need to find my people."

Far more commonly, our subjects spoke of the positive influence of their **spouses**, an influence felt in several ways. The presence of a spouse, first of all, introduces new incentives for Jewish activity, at home or in the congregation. Rituals take on meaning in his or her presence; it is much harder to do them when alone. The pattern (and demands) of couple-based socializing can also point the couple to the congregation as a source of like-minded friends.

Secondly, each spouse brings to the family his or her own set of Jewish requirements. Although, as noted above, individuals sometimes curbed or did not act upon inclinations toward increased Jewish activity because of strong spousal disapproval, we generally found that couples settled differences over Jewish practice by adopting the patterns of involvement favored by either spouse (i.e. the one who cared more) rather than settling at some average of the two configurations. Thus, if one favored saying *kiddush* Friday night and the other liked building a *succah*, the couple was likely to do both of those things. Similarly, spouses prevailed upon each other to get involved in one or another aspect of civic Jewish life (organizations, philanthropy, political activity). We heard stories of the more involved spouse prompting the other to participate in a UJA mission to Israel, or to attend worship services more often, or to send their children to day school.

This brings us to the next key stage in the life course. The vast majority of our respondents who were parents pointed to their **children** as a source of increased Jewish involvement. Their observations are well-supported by quantitative data on Jews and other American religious groups that credit children with increased religious activity on the part of the parents.

Children force parents to make decisions about Jewish upbringing. They lead parents into synagogues where Shabbat morning services provide social circles for both children and parents in a context that is valued for its religious and educational meaning. When they enroll their children in day school or supplementary school, the Jewish school community often provides parents with yet another source of Jewishly minded friends and social circles. Children also lead parents into higher levels of observance, whether because they bring the mandate for such observance home with them from school, or because the parents decide on their own accord to practice more for the sake of raising Jewish children.

Our respondents were quite clear on the importance of decisions about Jewish schooling as a marker of Jewish commitment. Linda and

her husband, for example, opted to send their children to public school and a three-times-a-week Hebrew school at the synagogue because the suburb in which they live has a good school system and "we like being part of the community." They are conflicted on the matter, and are now thinking of sending the children to a new Jewish high school in their area.

Molly and her husband have just moved their child to a day school, at her initiative -- part and parcel of her emerging commitment to Judaism. Karen and her husband, by contrast, send their children to a twice-weekly Hebrew school that will go down to once a week after Bar/Bat Mitzvah. Karen's husband would have objected to any greater commitment. Stuart and his wife send their children to public school because they do not want an all-Jewish school for the kids. However, he has recently gotten involved as a teacher in their synagogue Sunday school in an effort to make sure it is not a place to which his children have to be dragged kicking and screaming.

We might note in this connection that the more highly involved evinced a far greater investment in the Jewish upbringing of their children, a reflection of the importance they ascribe to the Jewish portion of their identities. They are, as a result, more demanding with respect to their children's Jewish schooling and socialization. Our study supports the findings of others that the more involved parents among Conservative congregants are now to a great extent sending their children to day schools, a generalization we could not have made just ten years ago. In fact, day school enrollments have spread so widely that a few Conservative day school parents in our sample were classified among the group whom we have counted as the less involved.

Finally, despite the lack of interest in liturgy to which we have alluded, our subjects sometimes spoke warmly of **congregations** as providing contexts for their Jewish growth. For the highly involved, warm and inviting synagogue communities seem crucial. These communities are described as sources of friendship, love and nourishment, as well as important contexts in which to celebrate holidays, raise children Jewishly, and socialize with friends. To a degree which surprised us, we heard the synagogue (and with it, Judaism) described time and again as a place of refuge -- whether from an unhappy home, a harried work-week, or an uncaring world.

Nancy, whose concerns as a lesbian were in the forefront of her interview, spoke with great enthusiasm of her Temple's openness on gay and lesbian issues, and mentioned a particular person she had met

there -- "an angel," she called her -- who had offered indispensable comfort at a time of personal hardship. Tony told us that he became active in his Temple when a friend invited him to join the adult education committee, and his passion for that pursuit translated into loyalty to the institution as a whole. Jack expressed enthusiasm for the sermons of his Temple's rabbi -- the only part of the service, which interests him.

We heard time and again about welcoming (or unwelcoming) environments, about people who reached out and people who did not. Several individuals, like Jack, mentioned rabbis who successfully conveyed the joys of Torah learning or related Judaism to critical personal issues and problems, whether from the pulpit, in a counseling session, or -- more frequently -- in a class. Several respondents who were not congregation members, but live in the catchment areas of successful congregations with particularly attractive rabbis, spoke highly of those rabbis and their congregations -- and, by extension, of Judaism.

For several individuals, the task of preparing for an adult Bar/Bat Mitzvah, usually to compensate for the ceremony they missed as a child, occasioned an intensive period of study and Jewish awakening. Others credited the efforts of a Jewish professional, often an educational director of a pre-school or Jewish elementary school for their children, who served as a guide and mentor to increased Jewish involvement. The positive consequences of more intensive, more enduring, and more recent Jewish education are readily apparent in these conversations. Better-educated individuals displayed a more sophisticated understanding of Jewish concepts and more readily alluded to such concepts. A very few on the higher-end of our sample (though only a few) even expressed attachment to the Hebrew language, and regarded mastery of the language as a desirable goal for themselves or their children. But experience with text study and family education programs among both sub-groups was widespread, and uniformly enthusiastic.

Highly involved interviewees with liberal political inclinations spoke positively of the liberal tone of the congregations with which they were familiar. Generally, they saw these congregations (and/or their rabbis) as surprising but welcome exceptions to what they perceived to be the conservative bent of most other American Jews or congregations. They were gratified to learn that at least some interpretations of Judaism (clearly the ones they saw as most legitimate)

comported with their interests in social action generally or, more specifically, with their positions on gay/lesbian issues, feminism, the homeless, and church/state separation. In contrast, few respondents tied their own increased Jewish commitment to anger at the Jewish community generally for doing something wrong or not doing enough. Their sense of injustice propelled them into protest activities that actually elevated their Jewish involvement. This was particularly salient in our interview with Nancy, a lesbian on the board of her Temple, but it was no less clear in other cases. Karen, therefore, constituted the exception who proved the rule when she complained that she and her husband felt alienated from their congregation in a Boston suburb because they did not share the liberalism, which prevailed there.

We should also note again that a host of idiosyncratic **convergences between Jewish contexts and personal needs** are at work. Several individuals observed that their Jewish involvement had increased because of the chance to express their better side, or to put their capabilities to good and competent use. One respondent (a bit of a throwback to an earlier era, perhaps) said he enjoyed using his political talents and fund-raising abilities within Jewish contexts. A woman in her early thirties told of feeling insecure as a mother and being psychically rewarded as the leader and organizer of the weekly "Tot Shabbat" program at her synagogue.

For some searchers, **Jewish books** were critical, while to others, the key was Jewish (or even non-Jewish) individuals. The following instance demonstrates both factors at work. One 42 year old with minimal Jewish background, whom we interviewed outside the formal context of this study, spoke that while in her early 20's, her devout Catholic boyfriend challenged her to learn more of her own religious background. She picked up Herman Wouk's *This is My God*; later found herself in a trendy, urban Conservative congregation; eventually married a rabbi, and now works as a Jewish communal professional.

Several spoke of **chance encounters** with a particularly attractive Jewish role model, whether a rabbi sitting next to them on a long plane ride or a professional peer who approached them one day at services. The impact of serendipity cannot be over-stated. The enormous diversity in biographies, paths, and outcomes also implies an enormous diversity in the sorts of experiences that promote meaningful shifts in Jewish identity. Our sense is that serendipitous encounters cannot be planned, but the probabilities that they will take place can be enhanced

by changing or enriching the environments in which Jews naturally dwell.

To be sure, some (perhaps most) respondents told us there had been no dramatic turning points in their journeys, and little or no significant introspection along the way. Just as certainly, others reported engaging in a highly personal process of evaluation and discovery; and a few, even, spoke of epiphany-like experiences where they suddenly changed course. For all the patterns that we have identified in our subjects' journeys, then, the individual variations -- twists and turns that cannot be predicted, let alone programmed -- are just as striking, if not more so.

#### IV. Policy Implications

What then should the community do to stimulate adult Jewish development, and increase their chances of emergence of what most would regard as positive Jewish identity configurations?

We undertook this research in large part to help inform Jewish communal policymakers in their quest to devise more effective means of promoting Jewish involvement. This goal was uppermost in the collective mind of the Wilstein Institute when it lent considerable support to our study, and will be furthered upon publication of our findings with a series of conferences (likewise sponsored in part by the Wilstein Institute) which will involve scholars, professionals and lay leaders. At this stage, pending the results of our quantitative survey and the completion of our book, it is still too early for us to formulate detailed policy recommendations. Yet, even at this stage, certain possibly fruitful directions have emerged. Tentatively, we offer the following preliminary thoughts:

**1. Multiply opportunities for involvement.** Increased Jewish involvement often turns on the right opportunity presenting itself in the right way to a Jewish seeker at the right moment. We cannot know in advance what will stimulate the decision to embark on a period of more serious searching or deepening involvement. But, given the diversity of those seeking, a diverse array of opportunities for serious Jewish living is required. The decision to embark upon a search for more Jewish learning and involvement may come about for reasons beyond the control of educators and communal leaders; but once the decision is made (even if apprehended only vaguely) the opportunity to begin a course of Jewish enrichment needs to be available and visible. It is like prospective passengers who walk to a bus stop on their own accord and get on the bus, provided it arrives in short order and promises to take them where they think they want to go.

**2. Build meaningful Jewish communities in congregations and elsewhere.** Synagogues emerge as the single most influential organized Jewish institution in the lives of our respondents. Better congregations were depicted by them as friendlier, welcoming, and inspiring. They were marked by attractive services, involved congregants, strong education programs for adults as well as children, and approachable and engaging rabbis. Any policies that can expand these features, which in principle should not be in short supply -- are worthy of urgent consideration. Moreover, we need to see whether the

salient attractive features of exceptional congregations can be developed in other settings, such as schools, camps, Jewish community centers, and elsewhere.

### **3. Promote intensive forms of informal Jewish education.**

Youth groups, summer camps and Hillel foundations constitute important breeding grounds for high levels of Jewish involvement in later life among the moderately affiliated. (Our respondents are too old to have benefited from the expansion of day schools over the past two decades.) They drew uniform praise, but adult education was particularly valued. Our six respondents who had been part of Hebrew College's *Me'ah* program gave it rave reviews. Expansion of such opportunities should have high priority. For the search for Judaism is conducted by individuals, most of whom are thoughtful, reflective and highly intelligent. Their ambivalence is marked not only by strong negative feelings about Judaism but by strong positive feelings. The quest for meaning is important to them. They regret their ignorance about the tradition and would like to know more. In this respect, as Heschel noted forty years ago, the community errs in stressing only the obligations individuals bear to the group and not the obligation that the Jewish community bears toward every Jew: providing resources for intellectual and spiritual growth. Adult learning can play a key part in this effort.

### **4. Capitalize on parenthood.**

The centrality of children in sparking increases in Jewish involvement among our sample strengthens the case for intervention in this area on the part of rabbis, pre-schools, congregations, Jewish Community Centers, and Hebrew schools. Early parenthood is a time when people are searching for community for themselves as well as for their children, and are anxious to be the very best parents they can be -- a new major locus of personal identity and worth. Young parents are open to advice on how to create a Jewish home, and welcome rituals which will strengthen family bonds. Requests for observance which would have been summarily rejected had they come from rabbis, parents, or other adult authorities, are welcomed and heeded when they come from children.

### **5. Mobilize grandparents.**

From our research, we cannot be certain as to the degree to which grandparents have been idealized in the warm glow of nostalgia. Perhaps our respondents recalled actual events and relationships; or perhaps they invented them retrospectively. We also are unsure as to whether grandparents who were immigrants to America have functioned differently in this respect from those who are

American-born. Nonetheless, we may do well to remind grandparents of their ability to favorably influence the Jewish identity of their grandchildren. All can serve as attractive and accessible Jewish role models; some may wish to commit their resources to making intensive Jewish education financially affordable. Given high rates of geographic mobility, many grandparents and grandchildren find themselves bereft of contact with one another. In this context, inter-generational programs might be used to create proxy relationships between substitute grandparents and substitute grandchildren. Parents are essential to their children's Jewish upbringing, of course. We do not want to minimize that responsibility for a moment. But there may be tasks which, for good psychological reasons, parents simply cannot undertake.

Our findings point neither to the imminent revival of American Judaism nor the mass return of American Jews to substantive commitment. But, our respondents' many stories of both Jewish intensification and Jewish alienation point to their openness to influence for well and for ill by policies and programs, events and happenstance.

Communal efforts aimed at "continuity" can in no case be assured of success, even with the wisest of policies and the most generous use of resources. The social and cultural forces, which shape American Jewish lives, are often too powerful to counteract. The first language of individualism comes too naturally to be completely supplanted by the second language of community. Feelings of ambivalence toward Jewish involvement, many deeply rooted in childhood, cannot easily be overcome.

Moreover, issues of Jewish identity in the modern or post-modern era of the self are more deeply burrowed and may be less amenable to outside intervention. They must be addressed at their source inside the self -- an object of communal effort far less accessible than, say, the mobilization of support for Israel or the struggle against anti-Semitism. Autonomy will not be foregone. "I really think it's all about my process and my... coming to terms with what I want and whether I decide whether there is something important for me about being involved."

On the other hand, we also know that many Jews are prepared to lead more involved Jewish lives, if the right opportunity is presented to them. For we have heard these stories, too. Though the decisions of moderately affiliated Jews will always remain theirs alone, these decisions also depend upon communal decisions: on organized Jewry

making available opportunities through which questing American Jewish selves can discover the richness, beauty and fulfillment of a life lived inside the Jewish community and tradition. The organized Jewish community may be able to increase the chances that moderately affiliated Jews will make the journey to greater commitment.

Bringing about intensification of Jewish lives will not be easy, for reasons which our research makes abundantly clear. But we can say with confidence that it can be done, at least in some cases – for some of our subjects have already traveled a long way to reach the Jewish commitments they hold today. They express the desire and intention to travel further, if only the community assists them by helping to make possible the serious Jewish living that they seek.

## NOTES

1. See, for example, Robert Bellah et al, Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in America, 2nd edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Robert Wuthnow, Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and America's New Quest for Community (New York: Free Press, 1994); Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney, American Mainline Religion: Its Changing Shape and Future (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987).
2. Jack Wertheimer, Charles Liebman, and Steven Cohen, "How to Save American Jewry." Commentary, Vol 101, Number 1, January 1996, pp. 47-51.
3. See, for example, Steven M. Cohen, "Content or Continuity? Alternative Bases for Commitment" (New York: American Jewish Committee, 1991).
4. Arnold Eisen, The Chosen People in America (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983).

## Reflections on "The Jew Within"

David M. Gordis

On a few occasions when the legal disposition of a particularly difficult matter was not immediately apparent, the rabbis of the Talmud ruled: *Puk haz'ei mai ama aveid*, "Go see what the people are doing." The resolution of the matter at hand is to be informed by what prevails as the actual practice of the community. It is in that spirit of "*puk haz'ei*" that Steven M. Cohen and Arnold Eisen have undertaken this important study of patterns of Jewish engagement of a sample of "moderately involved" Jews, defined as more-or-less typical members of Conservative or Reform congregations in a number of major American cities. The researchers used an open-ended approach, seeking to elicit from subjects rich and nuanced narratives describing their "Jewish journeys," in the effort to understand how these Jews understand and evaluate their Jewishness and the ways they express it and articulate it in their lives. The researchers were not disappointed. Subjects seemed eager to talk about who they are as Jews and how they got there. The resulting narratives are revealing and significant. Both the stories told and the analyses and comments of the researchers provide much to ponder.

Who are these Jews? What emerges in bold relief from these narratives is that they represent a new breed of Jews. They are thinking people who choose their Jewish patterns carefully. Rarely do they associate Jewishly out of nostalgia alone, though nostalgia sometimes plays a part in their choices. It is not for lack of alternatives that these Jews gravitate towards other Jews or to the synagogue or other Jewish institutions. In the open society alternatives certainly are available, and many other Jews, not the subjects of this study, choose them and opt out of Jewish involvement.

What leads these Jews to opt in? The researchers are anxious to identify stimuli to Jewish participation among their subjects, and they find quite a few: the influence of grandparents; non-formal Jewish educational experiences such as summer camps and youth groups; spousal influence; the need to make a decision about choice of a spouse (sometimes following upon a break-up of a relationship with a non-Jewish partner) or about raising a child; reading a Jewish book; some congregational experiences and other instances of convergence of personal needs and Jewish contexts; and personal influences either by

impressive Jewish personalities within Jewish organizational structures or through chance encounters.

No less telling are the subjects' reports of obstacles to their Jewish involvement. Among those reported: parental influence; Hebrew School which was almost uniformly reported by participants to have been profoundly detrimental to their Jewish connection; unsatisfactory encounters with rabbis and synagogues and with Jewish organizations generally, including federations and UJA, and ambivalent feelings about Israel. In a preliminary set of policy recommendations the authors conclude reasonably that efforts should be made to reinforce and strengthen the stimuli and remove the obstacles to greater Jewish involvement on the part of the population that forms their sample. A book length follow-up to this study will include the results of a complementary quantitative study of a larger sample group, to validate and refine the findings of this qualitative study. The authors promise a more expansive set of policy recommendations with that study; we await that next phase eagerly.

Though the study dealt with a somewhat loosely defined group of "moderately affiliated" Jews, the authors found it useful to divide their sample group into two sub-groups: those who demonstrated a greater degree of Jewish engagement and those who demonstrated a lesser degree. The authors report a high degree of consistency within each group; i.e., those who were identified as "more highly involved" on the basis of one or two indicators were likely to fall into that group in other indicators as well. The more highly involved evinced a far greater investment in the Jewish upbringing of their children. The more highly involved respondents edged toward a somewhat greater belief (in a personal God), and though autonomy was retained even by the more involved group they were generally more committed to traditional Jewish observance. The authors comment on the entire group studied: "Holidays will be observed to the degree that they are endowed with positive personal meaning, and ignored or slighted if they do not." The more highly involved almost always expressed strong negative feelings about intermarriage, consistently more negative than the less involved. Those on the higher level of involvement seemed far more comfortable affirming notions of chosenness and special Jewish obligation.

The authors are particularly interested in what they term the interplay of tribalism and universalism:

For all the liberal individualism evinced by our respondents; for all the personalism pronounced in their statements; and despite

the doubts they express about theological formulations of Israel's chosenness- our subjects cling to powerful Jewish tribalism: an ineradicable belonging which allows for considerable non-belief and non-observance, and which eliminates the danger that these might otherwise have posed to Jewishness... One cannot cease to be a Jew, no matter whom one marries. The children of such marriages cannot cease to be Jews, no matter how they are raised.

Our two sub-groups drew differing conclusions from this combination of universalist and tribalist assumptions. The more highly-involved stressed that the recognition of unalterable Jewish belonging gives the community a precious opening for its invitation to a more substantial Jewish identity. Why not more fully become what one already is, and present that opportunity to one's children? Less involved Jews stressed that they feel no need to accept such invitations - for their Jewishness is not in doubt, and is all the identity they want or need. Appeals for greater involvement will fall on deaf ears.

The authors are quite clear that in dividing the sample into "more involved" and "less involved" they are not attempting to be judgmental:

One other preliminary issue requires a word of explanation: our use of such terms as "highly involved Jews," "less involved," "more involved," and the like. It should go without saying (but, of course, needs to be said), that we are not passing moral judgment on the respondents. As social scientists, we do not mean to imply the "more involved" Jews are better Jews or that "less involved" Jews are less Jewish. In fact, we readily concede, that from a certain philosophical point of view, one cannot speak of more or less involved Jews because the very behavior and attitudes of the Jews, in the aggregate, defines Jews, Judaism, and Jewishness. Particular works of music are not more or less musical; music is music and Jews are Jews. Music may be judged good or bad by music critics; and Jews may be judged by rabbis, educators, leaders, and ideologues of all sorts, but that is not our role here.

Aside from the evaluative problem with using these terms, they entail a possibly misleading conceptual distortion as well. Speaking about greater or lesser involvement connotes some underlying unidimensional scale of Jewish involvement. In point of fact, we uncover considerable diversity in the patterns of

Jewish involvement. There are many different building blocks which can be assembled in such patterns. We do not wish to portray Jews in any simplistic fashion as situated on, or moving up and down, a unidimensional ladder of Jewish involvement.

As social scientists, the authors are quite successful in maintaining this non-judgmental stance. They effectively convey the complexity of the narratives they have assembled. But they are passionate Jews; not simply dispassionate social scientists. In this area, their own conceptions, preferences, and biases intrude into the discussion. They do in fact take on the role of leaders and, to use their own term, "ideologues," when they suggest: "The organized Jewish community may be able to increase the chances that moderately affiliated Jews will make the journey to greater commitment." This suggests that on some level the affiliation pattern of the moderately affiliated, particularly the "lesser involved," is viewed as problematical, and the challenge to policy planners in the view of the authors is to elevate them to a higher level of commitment as exemplified by their "higher involved" group.

This observation is sharpened by some of the decisions the authors made in classifying some of the sample.

The individual chosen to illustrate the "lesser involved" is Karen:

Karen, a 43-year old accountant from suburban Boston, grew up in the New York area in a family affiliated with a Reform synagogue. She reports that Jewish observance in the family ebbed and slowed; spiritual discussion in her family was non-existent; her parents had "the typical embarrassment about being Jewish;" she belonged to no youth group and never went to a Jewish camp. She has pleasant memories of Passover seders, unpleasant memories of being humiliated at Hebrew School when she confessed her family had a Christmas tree. She remembers little else of Hebrew School, and stopped after Bat Mitzvah. When she met and married her husband in graduate school, his being Presbyterian was not an issue because "he had said right away we could raise the kids Jewish." Karen began wishing "he were more a part of things," however, and was pleased when he decided of his own volition a couple of years ago to convert. "It changed our family. We define ourselves as a Jewish family now."

Karen's own decision to become more active Jewishly had to do as she understands it with her "need for a spiritual life," (her practice of yoga was instrumental in returning her to Judaism,

she noted) and her wanting to “have something authentic to pass on to” her children. The key influences were the rabbi at the local Reform synagogue and the teachers in the innovative adult education program begun several years ago under the auspices of the Boston Hebrew College and the Boston Federation. The family recently traveled to Israel for the first time, began home observance of Shabbat with the help of tapes prepared by their synagogue’s cantor, attend a family service together on Yom Kippur. The children study at the Hebrew school of their synagogue; Karen would consider day school, but knows her husband would object. She has recently taken on responsibility as an officer at the synagogue. She believes in God, though without believing God answers prayers; says the Holocaust makes her realize “how many situations are not equally horrible but that sort of stuff is still happening... humankind are capable of it,” and interprets the chosen people idea to mean that Jews have “specialness and responsibility,” that “we chose ourselves through the years, our survival is a unique story.” Karen does not believe that rabbis should perform Jewish wedding ceremonies for couples who are inter-marrying, though perhaps there is another ceremony they could do. “You can’t push Jewish law too far.”

Though the authors indicate that this narrative (and the Gil narrative which follows it and illustrates a subject in the “high involved” group) illustrates the difficulty of simple categorization, their classification of Karen in the “lower-involved” group raises important questions. How does this description of Karen square with the description of the lower-involved group’s navigation of tribalism and universalism? Is it accurate to say that Karen, unlike those who seek more substantial Jewish identity, feels “no need to accept such invitations?” Does Karen really rely on her “tribal” identity to satisfy her Jewish needs? Does Karen’s Jewish life represent “appeals for greater involvement...falling on deaf ears?”

The authors also observe that most respondents traveled a small distance from childhood:

To an extraordinary extent, our adult respondents have arrived at a level of Jewish involvement that could have been loosely predicted from their childhood. Based on the interviews, we divided respondents into high and low levels for their childhood and adolescent years on the one hand, and their present situation

on the other. Almost all were consistent (low-low or high-high). In other words, adult levels of involvement were about the same as childhood levels, albeit in different times and contexts.

To this reader, Karen seems an uncomfortable fit in the less engaged group. And whatever the classification, she certainly seems to have traveled a very far distance Jewishly from childhood. So far, in fact, that it seems appropriate to ask: Does Karen represent a problem for the Jewish community which should seek ways to make her more involved, or is Karen perhaps a Jewish success story, active, involved, though perhaps somewhat unconventional from a traditional point of view?

The issues raised by the Karen narrative are particularly interesting. Karen's interpretation of the Holocaust views its lessons in universalist terms. This may be one feature of her account which leads the authors to classify her as "less-involved" along with her somewhat less intense attitude towards intermarriage. A third criterion for her inclusion in the "less-involved" category may be her lack of belief that God answers prayers (though she affirms her belief in God). Should it be an objective of Jewish community policy to try to move Karen to the "higher-involved" group if that means that she should be encouraged to adopt a more particularistic interpretation of the Holocaust, a more traditional view of a personal God who hears prayers and a stronger anti-intermarriage stance? I am not at all convinced that those should be our objectives, though they would appear to emerge from the classification and analysis of the present study.

The authors point to universalism and individualism as major challenges to complicate and at times preclude the Jewish search for meaning:

The American Jews we interviewed (a group which included, by intent, very few of the most committed sorts) overwhelmingly follow the pattern explained years ago by Robert Bellah and his co-authors in their classic study of contemporary American attitudes toward self and community, *Habits of the Heart*. The "first language" that our subjects speak is by and large one of profound **individualism**. It is universalist, liberal and personalist. **Community** - though a buzzword in our interviews, a felt need, even a hunger - is a "second language." Our subjects, like Americans more generally, do not speak it either as often or as well.

The term "universalist" carries a number of different meanings. In one sense, universalism may be in tension with any particularism or commitment to a particular group; in another sense there is no tension at all. Karen's particularism is not incompatible with strong Jewish group identity. It does not represent the rejection of particular group identification in favor of identification with some notion of "universal person-hood." Karen acts out her Judaism throughout her life. Karen's universalism is the drawing forth from her own Jewish experience lessons which are applicable to all people. For Karen, Judaism is not an alternative to human-ness, but the Jewish way of being human. In a world where particularisms are a source of pathology on a global scale, this form of universalism may be a major Jewish contribution to the world. The suggestion that this form of universalism constitutes a Jewish problem is not convincing to this reader.

A similar observation may be suggested concerning Karen's position on God. Karen affirms belief in God but does not believe that God answers prayer. Should it be a Jewish communal objective to move her to more traditional belief? Maybe and maybe not. The authors point out that the vast majority of the "moderately affiliated" Jews that they studied, including those who are active in the synagogue, do not find God in the synagogue. They report a struggle with prayer and with God language. But does this constitute a problem? Does the fact that these Jews are thoughtful, inquiring, unwilling to simply accept on the basis of traditional formulations represent a weakness for the Jewish community? Is this kind of individualism a threat, or does it suggest an intelligently engaged community which is seeking a Judaism which makes sense and contributes to their search for meaning? Are these Jews not telling us that they are seeking a Judaism in which they can find themselves and not lose themselves, and that traditional formulations may not always work for them? The challenge to the community may not be to encourage these Jews to affirm belief in that which they consider unbelievable, but to shape a Judaism which can be affirmed by thoughtful, intelligent, searching Jews in their search for meaning and community within their Jewish worlds.

The authors' suggestion that individualism and autonomy in some way preclude both the search for meaning and Jewish engagement also strikes me as questionable. The Jews who participated in this study do make their own choices, and shape their relationship to Jewish tradition and Jewish institutions on the basis of criteria that they have established: do they find the life style and the institutional connections

to be life enhancing? They are not individualistic in the sense that they have abandoned concern for those in need or turned away from association with others: they are, after all, by and large synagogue members despite the fact that they have reservations about the synagogue. Once again, consider Karen, the authors' example of a less-involved Jew. She is a synagogue officer, has a rather rich life of Jewish observance and shapes that life by making thoughtful and informed choices. It may be that this is not as new or recent a phenomenon as the authors suggest. And even if it is recent, I would judge it to be both hopeful and constructive rather than problematical. As a community we should be concerned to shape a meaningful and life-enhancing Judaism and institutions which satisfy real needs for connection and engagement. These are the conditions which should lead Jews to make Judaism central in their lives. The individualism described here is no challenge: it represents an opportunity.

The authors' decision to create out of their "moderately affiliated Jews" two sub-groups, more highly affiliated and less highly affiliated, leads them to suggest a set of programmatic objectives which are conventional and traditional. While they have listened to the narratives, from a policy point of view they have adopted the implicit program for the community of moving people from their "lower" to their "higher" group. Though they would deny it, the criteria they use are those of familiar quantitative identity studies in which a set of beliefs and behavioral norms are used as the standards against which levels of Jewish identity are plotted. But the strength of these narratives lies not in suggesting how the community can move the "lower" group up. Just as in the Talmudic *puk hazei* instances, we should be hearing what these people are saying to us about who they are in order to learn from them, not in order to determine how to make them conform to what we know to be the proper way. For in truth, regarding many of these issues, we really don't know the answers.

At the threshold of the new millennium we have, in fact, entered a new age for American Jewry and world Jewry. Intellectual and ideological issues which arose during the Enlightenment and were put on hold by the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel can now be considered once again. Large numbers of Jews, ambivalent about Jewish institutions and traditional beliefs and practices, are nevertheless open to explore how Judaism can contribute to their search for meaning. It is remarkable that so many are willing to be engaged despite doubts and difficulties. Many others choose not to

engage because ideological, communal and institutional deterrents are too great and alternative addresses for engagement are found to be more attractive. There is great wisdom in these narratives if we would hear it. We can learn to do better as a Jewish community if we are truly open to what these respondents have to say. Our challenge as a community is not to induce conformity with traditional norms which may be obsolete, adherence to particularistic notions which may be destructive or allegiance to institutional structures which may have outlived their usefulness. As I hear the voices of these narratives, I hear not "more" and "less" but "traditional" and "unconventional" modes of engagement among these moderately affiliated Jews. What the "unconventional" Jews have to say to us may be far more important than anything we have to say to them.

The preliminary policy recommendations put forward here are unexceptionable. But a major one should be added: Create space for this creative, thinking and searching community to shape a new Judaism for a new age. We require new ways of thinking about Jewish tradition; we require new liturgical formulations; we need to reshape our Jewish organizations, our synagogues, our schools, our federations, our public policy organizations to meet the needs of a new Jewish community with a new mind-set and new needs. This is a community that is not seeking to opt out. It wants to opt in and for Jewish life. Many of the obstacles are real. Many new stimuli can be developed. We don't yet know all the answers and it may be a mistake to press too far with current models. In other words, the journey to Judaism for the next millennium, both for individuals and for the community as a whole, still remains to be undertaken.

## Comments

### Jonathan S. Woocher

Despite all the discourse and debate, programs and policies that characterize the Jewish community's current preoccupation with "Jewish continuity," efforts to understand what is actually happening in the minds, hearts, and lives of American Jews have not, until recently, gone much beyond the parsing of survey results. This is both unfortunate and potentially damaging to the "continuity endeavor" itself. After examining, and occasionally conducting, surveys over the past three decades, I am convinced that the widely reported numbers that we spend hours dissecting obscure at least as much as they reveal. I am equally certain that the categories and images we typically employ for talking about Jewish identity are inadequate to capture the diversity and subtlety of what is occurring today.

For these reasons, the new wave of qualitative research on Jewish identity, of which the study by Eisen and Cohen published here is an outstanding exemplar, is both timely and important. These studies paint portraits of Jews seeking to construct meaningful Jewish identities using the raw materials of their personal and often idiosyncratic encounters with individuals, institutions, traditions, and events — most, though not all, Jewish — and with perhaps the most seductively complex culture Jews have ever lived in. The resulting picture is both compelling and "real" in a way that no survey can ever be. Statistics may not "lie" (though we know that respondents to surveys do often shade the truth a bit), but they do inevitably flatten out variations and make things appear far neater than they actually are. We badly need the reminder provided by studies like this one (and those from researchers like Bethamie Horowitz, Diane Schuster, Riv-Elle Prell, and Joe Reimer): there are as many Jewish identities and as many paths to them as there are Jews. Seeking the patterns among these stories, looking for the empirical and conceptual order that we strive for in order to "understand" these portraits, carries a risk: On the one hand, without such interpretation and categorization, no useful conclusions can be drawn at all. On the other hand, if we fail to listen carefully enough to hear the ways in which today's stories may no longer fit our customary analytic categories, we may miss the point of what is really taking place, ending up no better off than if we continued to rely on pallid statistics alone.

So, what is going on here, and what should we make of it for our work as communal policy-shapers and program developers? Here's what I see as I read the fascinating profiles and analysis presented by Eisen and Cohen — though with a vision, I must confess, that is far from clear:

First, for many Jews today (perhaps most), being Jewish is a “constructivist project.” That is to say, “Jewishness” is continually being re-created and re-enacted in the process of living, at times consciously, at times unconsciously. It is not a “choice” in the sense of being something that individuals re-select anew each day from scratch (the interviewees’ sense that their Jewishness is “inalienable,” noted by Cohen and Eisen, is encouraging in this respect). However, what “being Jewish” actually entails for these individuals *is* open-ended. Many influences, not least the role of serendipity, shape the course of their journeys. It is intriguing to learn that early upbringing still plays an important role, that for many, the journey either does not carry them far from or leads them back “home,” at least in terms of conventional measures of Jewish attitudes and behaviors. In a sense, this is reassuring because it gives us an anchor to hold onto in seeking to understand (and perhaps influence) how the many choices Jews do make are made. But, here again, the “loosely predictable” connection between childhood and adult levels of “involvement” is hardly the whole story, and certainly not everyone’s story. Fastening only on the outcome may cause us to ignore the drama where the real “action” takes place.

Second, Cohen and Eisen’s study reinforces the growing recognition that Jews today enact their Jewishness in ways that are most likely to provide them with *meaning*, and that this meaning is being found increasingly within the “private / familial” (as opposed to “public / institutional”) domain. This finding is widely supported by other research, and entirely in keeping with trends in American religious life in general. Because Judaism, by its nature, is a communal endeavor, some observers find this turn troubling, even dangerous. I confess that my own values lead me to share in this concern. However, at a time when large numbers of Americans seem to find public life unappealing as an arena for meaning-making, we should, perhaps, be grateful that Jews are seeking to reconstruct and revalue the private Jewish domain — the alternative, after all, might be the abandonment of Jewishness as a source of meaning and values altogether. Many Jews, apparently, are trying to find places in their lives where Judaism

both fits and works, part of the constructivist project that defines being Jewish in America today.

The shift from the “public” to the “private” realm as the predominant arena for Jewish meaning-making presents the organized Jewish community with a choice and a challenge. Should it a) support and accentuate the directions that Jews themselves are choosing by offering more opportunities for personalized meaning-making and spiritual seeking (e.g., meditation, healing services, family education); b) try to help Jews again find meaning and satisfaction in the “public / institutional” domains of Jewish life by reconstructing these along more personalist lines (e.g., transforming Jewish institutions like synagogues and Jewish community centers; promoting new direct relationships with Israel) c) attempt to reframe the terms of the discussion by pointing to the inadequacies and inauthenticity from a Judaic perspective of a purely “personalist religiosity,” à la the critique of American individualist religion in *Habits of the Heart*; or d) all of the above? My suspicion is that the last option, despite its intellectual incoherence, represents the most viable strategy. I cannot imagine Jewish life thriving today either simply as an echo of the dominant culture of American religiosity *or* as a dissenting counter-culture that stands entirely apart from the currents around us. We will need both of these thrusts to do justice to the sensibilities and experiences of the people Cohen and Eisen describe *and* to the character of Judaism itself as a complex, multi-dimensional, multi-vocal phenomenon.

If we follow this course, we will *de facto* be aiding and abetting the third major conclusion that I see emerging from the Cohen / Eisen study and other recent research: Jewish identity today is incredibly diverse, and likely to grow more so. The corollary of choice is variation, and the varieties of Jewishness that we encounter today are almost unlimited. What this means for me is that all of our conventional labels for grouping Jews (by denomination, levels of involvement, etc.) should be understood as heuristic devices: To the extent that they permit us to point conveniently to empirically verifiable “clusterings”— either of particular attitudes and behaviors in the lives of specific individuals, or of groups of people who think and behave similarly and often together — we should continue to employ them. Such “clusterings” do exist, as Eisen and Cohen’s research and numerous previous studies demonstrate. However, if we allow our labels to become reifications, i.e., if we treat them as *determinative* of behavior, rather than as useful, but limited, classifications inferred from

a complex, dynamic reality, we run the danger of having them constrict our thinking and our vision. While it may be true that Jews who score "high" on scales of ritual observance also tend to score "high" on other measures of Jewish identity, this fact tells us very little about the specific identities of the numerous individuals who make up the statistical aggregates. Indeed, the primary lesson of qualitative research on Jewish identity, including Cohen and Eisen's, is that so much is going on at once, both within individuals and among Jews as a group, that our models and snapshots now *do* hide as much as they reveal.

We will, I think, need to search for a new vocabulary to describe and understand the Jews whom Eisen and Cohen write about. Terms like "universalism" and "particularism," "religiosity" and "ethnicity," reflect distinctions that may no longer be operative in the minds, behaviors, and relationships of end-of-century American Jews. Sylvia Barack Fishman has suggested that our prevailing model of "hyphenated" Jewish identity — "Jewish" on this side tugging with "American" on that — may no longer describe the synthetic identity of many younger Jews who fail to recognize any tension or distinction between "Jewish" and "American" values and norms. I suspect that the same could be said about several of the other key terms in our customary discourse about Jewish identity: Though they are by no means totally outdated, they are less and less adequate for capturing the complex intermingling of traditional and new elements that comprise a growing proportion of Jewish identity constructs. Is a vegetarian "eco-Kashrut" embraced both as an expression of contemporary environmental consciousness and as an extension of Jewish dietary regulations more "universalistic" than traditional Kashrut observance and more "particularistic" than none at all? Is a feminist Seder which celebrates solidarity not only with generations of enslaved and redeemed Jews, but of oppressed and liberated women thereby less "ethnic" than a traditional Seder? Increasingly, if we take seriously the stories we are hearing of how Jews are being Jewish today, we will have to review and revise the language we use to try to make social scientific sense of them.

This, I take it, is in part the basis for David Gordis' critique of the way in which Eisen and Cohen organize the presentation of their findings. The central question Gordis poses is whether a conventional model of "higher" and "lower" levels of involvement is the appropriate rubric around which to organize the data that they gathered. Even if used in a non-judgmental way, do these labels do justice to the

identities of the individuals so characterized? Are the “clustering” of attitudes and behaviors so pronounced and consistent as to mark those in each group as both decidedly similar to one another and distinct from those in the alternative category? Based on reading the essay itself (with no direct access to the interviews), I cannot respond with a sense of certainty. The case that Cohen and Eisen make for dividing their interviewees in this fashion and for using these labels appears reasonable and plausible. But, the larger issue — whether we accept and utilize conventional classifications in seeking to understand (and often, implicitly, to evaluate) contemporary expressions of Jewish identity too readily — remains.

Take the two dominant models used today to depict the variations of Jewish identity among the mass of American Jews. One is a spectrum arrayed from “right” to “left,” with regions labeled Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, Just Jewish, and Secular (or some similar categories). Jews who identify themselves with labels farther to the “right” score higher on most measures of Jewish identity than those further to the “left.” We can do a tremendous amount with this spectrum model — calculate differences in average scores between the categories, map changes in the number in each category over time and space, etc. However, trying to use this model to depict broadly, much less describe in detail, the “Jewishness” of any specific Reform Jew would simply be guesswork (with relatively low odds of success) — and using it to predict how this Jew might change her or his attitudes and behaviors over the course of five or ten years would be impossible. We know that there are no small number of “Reform” Jews who are far more “Jewish” than many “Conservative” Jews. We also know that depending upon which element(s) of Jewishness one chooses to look at, very different pictures of “strength of Jewish identity” emerge (despite the statistical correlations among all elements). What this means is not only that, as always, our efforts to simplify and categorize inevitably produce distortions and anomalies, but that at some point we must become suspicious as to whether the categories themselves tell us what is most important to know.

So too with the second dominant model, that of concentric circles of “intensity” of Jewish involvement (whence categories like “highly-“ and “less involved” might be derived). This model, introduced by Daniel Elazar, has the virtue of looking beyond simple denominational labels to focus on the salience and centrality of Jewish identity and of its expression along a number of inter-related dimensions. The

concentric circles model has undoubted empirical and conceptual validity. But it too is a limited model which fails to do justice to our increasingly nuanced understanding of Jewish identity. An example: How, using this model (or the spectrum), do we deal conceptually with the ambivalent feelings about Jewish institutional life which Cohen and Eisen found prominently manifested by many of the Jews they interviewed? Are Jews who are equally involved behaviorally, but carry with them very different emotional loadings with respect to their involvements (e.g., one enthusiastic, one ambivalent, one more or less routinely engaged) “the same” in their Jewish identities? Are they likely to traverse similar courses over the next period of years? One of the strengths of Cohen and Eisen’s presentation is their emphasis on the dynamic nature of Jewish identity — Jews growing more engaged, Jews drifting away, Jews making dramatic turns, Jews being pulled in different directions. In such a situation, it is not clear whether relatively static categories such as “high” and “low” involvement really do provide an adequate lens through which to see the whole moving picture.

In fact, we can carry this skepticism a step farther. Much of our educational and continuity policy-making is predicated on the assumption that we can apply causal and predictive models to Jewish identity development. So, we look for the antecedent correlates of “strong” Jewish identity: high levels of familial observance, intensive Jewish schooling, participation in informal Jewish educational activities, an Israel experience. We carry out regression analyses to separate out the effects of what in real life tend to be linked and mutually reinforcing experiences. Why? Because our underlying assumption is that if we can somehow manipulate the variables, channel more people into this experience or that setting, we can “improve” the outcomes. The more variables we introduce and the longer the time span we embrace (i.e., looking at adulthood, as well as childhood), the more complicated the picture becomes, the more difficult to separate “cause” and “effect.” Still, we persist in trying to establish correlations and build policy on the basis of these statistical analyses.

But, what if this is not the best way to look at the process of identity formation among American Jews? What if, instead of trying to define predictable and manipulable relationships among variables, we looked at what is happening as an instance of what chaos theorists call “self-organizing systems”? In chaos theory patterns do emerge from out of the apparently random flux of constant activity, but these

patterns (called “strange attractors”) are complex, themselves continually changing, and not predictable from specific system events. Based on studies such as Cohen and Eisen’s, I am beginning to suspect strongly that chaos theory (or some similar non-linear model) offers us a much better conceptual framework for understanding contemporary American Jewish identity, with its shifting patterns and complex dynamics, than our traditional linear models.

This does not mean that we should give up on the notion that we can have any effect at all on the Jewish identity of others. Rather, it means emphasizing precisely the individualized contacts and encounters which Eisen and Cohen point to as being influential in shaping the Jewishness of their interviewees. In practice, my policy prescriptions for strengthening Jewish identity do not differ dramatically from theirs, but I come at it from a slightly different angle. I believe our goal should be to create an environment which encourages Jews to pursue their constructivist work of Jewish meaning-making as energetically as possible and with access to as many resources as they are likely to need. This means being there whenever and wherever Jews are ready — to offer encouragement, give guidance, facilitate opportunities to connect with other Jews similarly occupied, supply tools to assist in the work, offer validation for diverse outcomes, and foster what educators call “critical collegueship.” A community, and professional and volunteer leaders, who see their role as facilitating and (where possible) orchestrating the myriad of micro-interventions that appear actually to make a difference in people’s lives, and whose aggregate effects our statistical studies reveal, would be subtly but not insubstantially different than the one we know today. It would be less hung up on labels, less demanding of immediate and demonstrable results, less wedded to the specific institutional forms of the moment, more flexible in responding to individual need and circumstance, more open to diverse visions of Jewish life, and more agile in matching people to the resources they are seeking. (I imagine, e.g., a system of “just in time” Jewish education — a myriad of different types of learning experiences and a variety of teachers that would be available to Jews in multiple settings [including electronically] to provide quick answers to urgent questions, *torah lishma* learning interludes in the midst of busy schedules, intensive immersions, skills refreshers, forums for discussing the “big” issues of life, etc.)

Though geared to our highly individualistic culture, the Jewish world I imagine most definitely makes room for community, for norms

and shared values; indeed, it is vital that genuine Jewish communities emerge and achieve a measure of coherence and stability, lest the flux of change dissipate into total disorder. But these communities will be defined more by their content than by permanent boundaries, and they are likely to be more permeable, less enduring, and more diverse internally than our image of communities in the past. Individual Jews and Jewish families will come together in a variety of different collective configurations over the course of their lifetimes (and even simultaneously) — built around common life stages, interests, experiences, spiritual needs and visions, patterns of practice, etc. The challenge, to be sure, will be for these to take on the character of true communities, communities of memory and responsibility, and not to remain merely, in Bellah's language, "lifestyle enclaves."

I do not take this challenge lightly, for I see the reconciliation of the individualism that permeates our society (and Jewish life with it) with Judaism's traditional emphasis on life-in-community as the path to genuine self-fulfillment and human achievement as *the* great task and test of our era. Like David Gordis, I am not sure that conventional measures and understandings of "higher" or "lower" levels of Jewish involvement adequately capture the dynamics of the present moment or define the goals for our educational and communal work. But I *do* believe that we must seek ways to reinforce the message that the quest to create (even temporary) "order" in the contemporary "chaos" of Jewish living is inherently a *collective*, not an individual endeavor. The current litmus test being applied to Jewish involvement — does it help me in my search for meaning? — is not misguided. The Jews who view Judaism in this way err only (in my view) if they believe that they or any humans can find ultimate meaning in the absence of community.

If many Jews today look skeptically (or worse) at the institutions that claim to be the instruments of "community" in Jewish life and find them irrelevant, unhelpful, alienating, or demeaning, the shame is on us. Yes, we are struggling against a culture which renders our claims about the importance of community implausible, but the answer is neither to bemoan our times nor to berate the Jews who are shaped by them. By better understanding both the times and the Jews (we among them) who, somewhat amazingly, persist in seeking to be Jewish despite the fact that they no longer have to do so, we can, I am convinced, assist them in their quests, their journeys, *and* keep Judaism vital and influential as a source of meaning and a compelling pattern for individual and collective living. To do so, we will have to create better

Jewish communities, as Cohen and Eisen urge, and we will also have to listen hard, as they do, to the voices of individual Jews who will, in the end, decide whether Judaism does "work" for them as we are convinced it can.

This is where Eisen and Cohen's research leads me, as it does, I think, them: to a recognition of how difficult, but also exciting and promising, the task of Jewish education and community-building is today. They have provided a wonderful, provocative invitation and point of entry to a dialogue that will surely continue, a dialogue among those of us who seek (perhaps immodestly) to shape the future of American Jewry and with those who are making the choices that we can only hope to influence. I look forward to being part of this dialogue, to listening, and to learning.

## Deborah Dash Moore

Steven M. Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen admit at the outset that three assumptions guided them, all "based on previous research by us and others." They are true to their word. In place of quantitative research they have adopted a methodology of personal interviews, asking individuals to describe their Jewish journeys. But they have not discarded their assumptions in their analyses of these accounts. Thus their "purpose throughout is to understand our subjects' discovery and construction of Jewish meaning in their personal lives, the better to suggest communal policies which might lead more such middle-range Jews [they sound like acoustics] to undertake a higher level of Jewish involvement." The Jewish ideal flourishes at the high end, what others with commitments similar to Cohen and Eisen have called "Jewish Jews." The conclusions, then, come with few surprises and the recommendations for "outreach" to the affiliated reflect ideological statements previously proposed by the authors.<sup>1</sup>

This is unfortunate because the methodology invites a nuanced ear, listening to mid-range, low-range, and high-range together to hear what is being said. Not to mention how the stories are told. Do we hear in these journeys an account of kinship as a moral sense? Do we understand what are the ethical requirements of a *mentsb*? How does this Jewish interpretation of what it means to be human relate to the sense of identification with family and, by extension, with Jews everywhere?<sup>2</sup> And what, exactly, does this identity mean? We are very far here from the relatively familiar journeys from tradition to modernity. These contemporary American Jewish journeys travel from modernity to post-modernity, or perhaps from a pre-Holocaust to a post-Holocaust world, or perhaps from an urban to a suburban society. I raise these possibilities to suggest some questions not asked because of the conventions shaping the analysis.

To assume that there has been little change, because change is constructed as movement from high to low or low to high, is to construct a Jewish world like a seesaw. To borrow from Robert Bellah's Protestant interpretation of American religious behavior for Jews who describe themselves as inalienably Jewish--how much further could you get from a Protestant understanding of identity as inward and acquired?--is to miss an opportunity to learn something new. To lean on ambivalence as a crutch to balance the seesaw is to skirt struggling to explain how American Jews are expressing their Jewishness.

Only Cohen's and Eisen's previous impressive scholarship would convince them that "knowing a subject's stance on the chosen people question . . . turns out to be a very good predictor of synagogue attendance, charitable giving, and holiday observances." Really?! If that were the case, then why bother with these in-depth interviews? Can Gil's disbelief in the chosen people predict his ritual calendar that includes all of the major Jewish holidays and several of the minor ones, in addition to fairly regular Sabbath synagogue observance? Such predictive statements suggest that the authors are still looking for quick and easy correlations, still resisting the rich individuality they elicit in their research, still connecting the languages of American Jews to an older Enlightenment discourse.

Of course one can speak of Americans as more or less liberal or conservative, because one is speaking about attitudes toward a range of public policies. Similarly one can speak of Jews as more or less Jewishly involved. But to use such categories defeats the very purpose of the research, namely, to discover those elements that "shape, nourish and sustain Jewish commitment." It does, however, allow one to answer what may be the real question behind the research, namely, "what leads some Jews to place Jewish commitment at or near the center of their lives . . . ?" The metaphor of center and periphery borrows from Daniel Elazar's influential concentric circles of Jewish identification.<sup>3</sup> It is one way of interpreting Jewish identity and community. It is not clear which question motivates the current research. To answer the first question, Karen's journey (labeled low) is as legitimate as Gil's journey (labeled high). To answer the second question, only Gil matters (even if he doesn't believe that Jews are the Chosen People).

Assuming that Cohen and Eisen really did set out to discover what shapes, nourishes and sustains Jewish commitment, and only got waylaid by their assumptions and previous scholarship, I would like to suggest a few alternative interpretations. Let me begin with universalism and tribalism.

The "paradox" of universalism and tribalism dissolves into air once the concepts are discarded. Neither universalism nor tribalism describes the fierce affirmation of a Jewish identity expressed in the interviews. These American Jews locate themselves, without apologies, at the end of the twentieth century--a very difficult, traumatic century for Jews--as Jews. They see this as *inalienable*, and in that sense universal. It has little to do with chosenness or with tribalism and much to do with historical and sociological facts. Their great discomfort with

chosenness stems from its antidemocratic character. Indeed, a commitment to democracy and democratic values of equality undoubtedly underlies what Cohen and Eisen call “doubts” about theological formulations of Israel’s chosenness.

Similarly, I think the authors overstate the tension between individualism and community because these concerns dominate discussions in American society, especially in the field of religion. For American Jews the issues would be more effectively explored were the categories of personhood substituted for individualism (thus eliminating considerable ideological baggage) and peoplehood used in place of community. There seems to be a dialectical and generative tension between personhood and peoplehood, a process of interactive growth and changing relationship. Perhaps a key to explain the changes can be found in the movement from un-selfconscious to self-conscious Jewishness.

The conclusion regarding the critical role of women’s initiative in developing self-conscious Jewish behavior is among the most important in the study. Cohen and Eisen should revisit this insight to analyze the religious behavior of American Jews. The centrality of family and of food, which lies at the heart of the American Jewish Passover, reflects women’s perspectives and experiences. Perhaps there also exists a revolt against male authority? We are increasingly aware of how few immigrants transplanted male gendered sacred knowledges and practices to the United States. Women, by contrast, replicated a wider repertory of Jewish behaviors even as they transformed their meanings.

I found the discussion of God and the synagogue mystifying. Why do Cohen and Eisen argue that “there is nothing particularly Jewish about this God,” who is conceived of as a universal ground of being or personal comforter or healer or a force at work in nature and history? Is the only Jewish God a supernatural revealer of the Torah or a Commander of *mitzvoth*? Surely, Cohen and Eisen do not subscribe to such a narrow understanding of the God of Israel at the end of twentieth century in the United States. The naturalistic God preferred by many American Jews is definitely not Christian or Moslem or Hindu. In fact, this God is very Jewish in the American context. The statements Cohen and Eisen quote echo credos of such Jewish heroes as Einstein.

There is a similar measure of tone deafness in their discussion of the synagogue and in their conclusion. Why should they expect

American Jews to understand the liturgy, to know what they are saying when they pray and why they pray certain prayers at specific times? To comprehend the structure of a worship service is highly esoteric knowledge. Perhaps if Cohen and Eisen imagined American Jews as women--in the traditional gendered understanding of what Jewish women were expected to know--they would recognize continuities with the reports of synagogue experience they describe.

I will not discuss the policy recommendations for I am not a policy specialist. Nor do I have the chutzpa to assume that "mother knows best." My interest is in understanding American Jews. I have great confidence that knowledge leads to action. I cannot, however, refrain from pointing out the misnomer of expecting any "mass return" of American Jews to "substantive commitment." As an historian, I know quite well that American Jews never evinced anything that would resemble a "substantive commitment" acceptable to Cohen and Eisen. Hence there is no way for them to return, either individually or en masse. Nor will American Jews respond positively to an invitation to "a life lived inside the Jewish community and tradition." Such language mis-hears what those interviewed are saying. American Jews don't want to live "inside" anything; that is far too confining. What they want is to be a part of a community, to relate their personhood to their peoplehood, to express tradition not just as something they receive from the past but also as something they make for the future.

## NOTES

1. See "A Statement on the Jewish Future," published by The American Jewish Committee: 1997.
2. I borrow from Marc Kaminsky, "A Table with People: Storytelling as Life Review and Cultural History," *YIVO Annual*, ed. Jack Kugelmass (1993), 21: 89.
3. Daniel Elazar, *Community and Polity* (Philadelphia: 1976).

## Jonathan D. Sarna

I read Steven M. Cohen and Arnold Eisen's "The Jew Within" with great interest. Its focus on moderately affiliated Jews – the middle 60% – fills a significant void in our understanding not only of this group, but of all contemporary American Jewish life. The paper also represents something of a methodological advance, since the authors rely on qualitative evidence – a welcome respite from the faceless numbers and percentages that so often dominate Jewish social research.

The shadow of Robert Bellah et al's *Habits of the Heart* (1985) hangs over this paper. Looking at white, middle-class Americans, Bellah and his co-authors examine their "individualism and commitment." Cohen and Eisen, looking at white, middle-class Americans who are also moderately affiliated Jews, examine their "self, community and commitment." Both sets of authors also locate individualism ("the self") at the core of contemporary American values. Where they part company is in their analysis of what this development means. Cohen and Eisen view it uncritically. The fact that "the sovereign authority for most American Jews is the self," is to them simply a datum. Bellah and associates, by contrast, in perhaps the most famous passage in their book, view religious individualism as a grave cause for concern:

Today religion in America is as private and diverse as New England colonial religion was public and unified. One person we interviewed actually named her religion (she calls it her "faith") after herself. This suggests the logical possibility of over 220 million American religions, one for each of us. Sheila Larson ... describes her faith as "Sheilaism." "I believe in God. I'm not a religious fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It's Sheilaism. Just my own little voice"... We must consider how it came about that "Sheilaism" somehow seems a perfectly natural expression of current American religious life, and what that tells us about the role of religion in the United States today. How did we get from the point where Anne Hutchinson, a seventeenth-century precursor of Sheila Larson's, could be run out of the Massachusetts Bay colony to a situation where Anne Hutchinson is close to the norm? (pp. 220-221)

Even if one does not agree with Bellah and associates' analysis of current American religious life, and many scholars do not, their warning – the specter of "Sheilaism" – must be addressed. In terms of Cohen

and Eisen's paper, this means looking both at the historical background of contemporary Jewish religious individualism and at its implications. One wonders, for example, whether the findings in "A Jew Within" reflect recent changes in American Jewish life, or whether surveys done half-a century ago have reached similar conclusions? What's new here and what's not? In addition, it would be valuable to be able to compare Jewish developments to what is going on elsewhere in American religion today. Are moderately affiliated Jews simply following in the ways of the Gentiles? Is theirs a case of independent parallel development? Or, as Cohen and Eisen imply in their discussion of choseness, are there special features to Jewish "habits of the heart" that set moderately affiliated Jews apart from their neighbors? Our hopes that in their forthcoming book-length study, the authors will examine some of these questions in greater detail.

What I found to be the most revealing point in the Cohen-Eisen analysis is the conclusion that gets away – while stated, its critical implications are not drawn out either in the text or in the subsequent policy recommendations. That conclusion is that the "self" in the case of moderately affiliated Jews is not nearly so independent as most of them passionately believe and claim. For all that they talk about individualism and freedom of choice, Cohen and Eisen discover that their subjects' "level of Jewish involvement could have been loosely predicted from their childhood." To an astonishing degree, it turns out, moderately affiliated Jews are actually shaped and constrained by their past – their parents, their grandparents, their experiences growing up, and – though I wish that Eisen and Cohen had probed much more deeply here – their level of Jewish education (or lack of same).

This, to my mind, is the central lesson of Cohen and Eisen's study and the one that most deserves to be highlighted: *Ironically, moderately affiliated Jews think that they are "choosing" their type of Judaism, but in fact they are far more constrained than they know.* Doubtless, this conclusion still needs to be refined and qualified. It also needs to be reconciled with other studies. The 1995 Wexner study that examined the "journeys" of young Jewish leaders, for example, uncovered a different pattern consisting of one quarter who appear to have been "groomed" for their profession, one quarter who (seemingly in spite of their upbringing) "bloomed" as Jews in college, and fifty percent who fell somewhere in between. Nevertheless, the Cohen-Eisen findings, even in the form presented here, are highly suggestive. For one thing, they indicate that we need to know far more than we do about the predictors of Jewish

involvement so that we can find ways to (at least surreptitiously) strengthen them. Second, they show that we need to exercise a healthy skepticism toward the fashionable rhetoric of "free choice" that pervades Jewish life today. Beneath all the bravado seems to lie the ancient wisdom found already in the Ethics of the Fathers (3:15): "Everything is foreseen, yet freedom of choice is granted." Finally and most importantly, they reinforce an obvious if sobering lesson that sensible Jews have always known — namely, that a firm Jewish upbringing matters. Those who spend their childhood in a loving Jewish home, with regular synagogue attendance, years of intensive Jewish education, lots of Jewish summer camp, youth group, and Israel experiences, and deep parental involvement in Jewish life are the most likely to remain Jewishly affiliated as adults. That may be the central lesson of this paper, and if Cohen and Eisen really want to "inform Jewish communal policymakers in their quest to devise more effective means of promoting Jewish involvement," that is certainly the message that they need to underscore — there is no choice.

## Reply to Comments on "The Jew Within"

Steven M. Cohen and Arnold Eisen

We welcome this exciting opportunity to engage in a serious dialogue on our research with four friends and esteemed colleagues. Their comments, all of them, have advanced our thinking and sharpened our ideas. We learned where our thinking was undeveloped, where we were ambiguous, and where we were misunderstood. And, yes, we also learned where we differ with our colleagues, but that too is of enormous value.

We have learned a bit in the months since we put down our "pens" on "The Jew Within," in part as a result of conversations with these colleagues and others (particularly Riv Ellen Prell and Paula Hyman). In particular, we have come to more deeply appreciate the extent to which we are describing what may well turn out to be a shift from modern to post-modern Judaism. (The plural form of Judaism is legitimate in both instances.)

Modern Judaism entailed a rebellion against the seemingly coercive control of a traditional rabbinate. They consisted of competing and conflicting ideologies that sought to preserve parts of the Jewish past, discard some ancient forms, and invent new ways of being Jewish in the modern world. In all instances, modern Jewish ideologies grappled with the new opportunities for Jews to participate in the larger society. And almost all Jews rushed with enthusiasm to escape the physical and cultural ghettos of their ancestors, and to establish their legitimate places in the newly opened societies. At the same time, the struggle against those who would seem to want to push them back into the ghettos pre-occupied these new, proud citizens of Western democracies.

That this description seems so cliched and out-dated, that it is so inappropriate as a description of the current reality in Jewish identity is precisely the point of our research. Jewish modernity has ended (even in Israel). Something else is taking its place (post-modernity?).

Consistent with post-modern theorists, as little as we think we understand them, the newly emerging Judaism embraces the following elements:

1. It emphasizes personal meaning as the arbiter of Jewish involvement. Accordingly, it is personalist (to use Charles Liebman's coinage) and voluntarist (emphasizing the freedom

of all to make their own Jewish decisions). It also follows that post-modern Judaism is non-judgmental – everyone interacts with Judaism in ways that suit them, none of us is capable of determining what is a good Jew (an elusive term, to say the least), and therefore none can judge another's Judaism.

2. Jewish meaning is sought and discovered in odd places, not necessarily in the conventional quarters of the synagogue and the Jewish organizational boardroom.
3. Jews construct seemingly unusual and increasingly diverse configurations of Jewish involvement. With the re-valorization of tradition, they feel free to borrow, selectively and perhaps only temporarily, from traditional Jewish cultural sources, even as they combine them with elements from anti-traditional movements or from the larger society, if not from non-Jewish religious traditions as well.
4. Jewish passion shifts from the public domain to the private sphere, from organizations and their interaction with the larger society, to the family and the individual in their search for identity and belonging. Spirituality emerges as a central motif.
5. If subjectivity increases and conventional Jewish behaviors become less significant, we should see the rise of Jews with high subjective commitments accompanied by relatively infrequent participation in conventional Jewish activities. Unconventional commitment can now accompany conventional inactivity.
6. Not only are the boundaries between the modern Jewish ideological camps of less significance, so too are the boundaries separating Jew from non-Jew. Denominationalism is out. And so too is the ideological commitment to maintaining separation from the non-Jewish world.
7. If boundaries are fluid, so too is the life course. People's Jewish orientations can change any time, and they do. People perambulate throughout their lives, increasing and decreasing their Jewish involvement, and simultaneously altering the character of their Jewishness. As adults, few wind up where they started as children. "Local narratives" replace global claims. "Multiple life-worlds" allow for fluid movement among and within commitments that were formerly held to be exclusive.

Now, if all that describes the post-modern vision of the American Jewish future, then our investigation points to an uncompleted and far from comprehensive transition. As we note in our analysis, American Jews may have moved in these directions, but they have not arrived at the end-point of the transition. (We write these words with some skepticism – common in the literature of and about post-modernity – that the break with modernity has been as absolute as some partisans of post-modernity have claimed). Indeed, we are not even sure that the recent trends will continue. And that is one point of difference with those commentators who seem more convinced than we are by our evidence of a sweeping change in American Jewish identity.

More pointedly, both David Gordis and Deborah Dash Moore are troubled by the meaning we ascribe to what we may call “conventional” indicators of Jewish identity – ritual observance, communal affiliation, informal links to other Jews, piety, opposition to intermarriage, commitment to children’s Jewish education, etc. We read both commentators as suggesting that these constitute both our own criteria of Jewish involvement and our own agenda for communal policy.

Going into our research, we had every reason to locate, describe, and trumpet the unconventional aspects of contemporary Jewish identity. As we review our early proposals, penned about five years ago, we see references to finding Jewish meaning in unusual places. We promised, a la Captain Kirk and his Starship to “boldly go where no one has gone before.” And, indeed, we did uncover much that is relatively new among American Jews, as all our commentators recognize. The signs of new approaches to Jewish life that we uncovered and described certainly point to the emergence of profound qualitative differences in Jewish identity. So, there may be indeed a significant transition underway (although to what destination, exactly, we do not know).

With this said, it is also fair to say that this ill-described and poorly understood transition is by no means complete. We would have loved to have gone out on our sociological safari and returned with the trinkets and artifacts of an exotic, alluring new world. Despite our initial predisposition, and the understandable scholars’ eagerness to “make news,” we were struck by the conventionality of much we had seen, even amidst the change we focused upon (both in our observations and in our interpretation). We cannot be faulted for observing the extant reality. That reality is that the package of conventional dimensions and

indicators still holds. The quantitative data confirm this conclusion, and our qualitative interviews presented living examples of the conventional packages at work.

We obviously need to correct an inference about our position that we certainly did not intend. Some commentators read our writing as suggesting an endorsement of the conventional as objectives of communal policy. They think we said that because more involved Jews share certain characteristics, and that because we clearly came out in behalf of more Jewish involvement, that we were advocating primary emphasis upon enhancing conventional models of Jewish involvement. We need to correct this misinterpretation.

We did, in fact, note the persistence of the "conventional package." It is marked by the general presence or general absence of a variety of indicators of conventional Jewish involvement, wherein the presence of one or two such indicators (or absence) often implies the presence of others (or absence). We did state that the way we saw things there is still validity in distinguishing more involved Jews from less involved Jews, with all the caveats about the diversity of involvement and the lack of moral judgment here. We did, in fact, respond to the request by the Wilstein Institute to venture some policy ideas (not our particular area of expertise) on behalf of the organized Jewish community, one which we think correctly aspires to help Jews become more involved Jews in a variety of ways. (We do not believe it is our role as analysts, in this paper, to challenge that goal, although, truth be told, it is one which we generally share.)

Having said all this, we had no intention of advocating pursuit of enhancing the conventional in Jewish life without regard to value, aesthetics, authenticity, continuity, relevance, meaning, and so forth. An absurd example may prove this point. Suppose that in our role of observers we had noted that [the fictitious] "National Jewish Organization" members who were also hawkish on Israel tended to score considerably above the average on a variety of conventional indicators of Jewish identity. Now, it so happens that neither of us is particularly attached to "National Jewish Organization," and both of us are long-time supporters of Peace Now. Clearly, in terms of content, we would not be advocating a major drive to expand the number of hawkish American Jews who belong to "National Jewish Organization." To make a parallel inference with respect to our other observations is to simply misread our analysis.

Last, we have a comment on Gordis' additional policy suggestion: "Create space for this creative, thinking and searching community to shape a new Judaism for a new age." On one level we have no problems with this view. Over the years, our personal lives as Jews have placed us in the center (along with all the commentators to our piece) of a creative community (or communities) that have, inter alia, shaped new Judaisms for a new age. In fact, and here is where we may disagree with our friend and colleague David Gordis, that space is both broad and secure. America, if anything, has been the land of opportunity for Jewish creativity and inventiveness. It is a land which, in just the last few decades, has given forth: feminism, the havurah movement, spirituality, new rituals, alternative charities, non-Orthodox day schools, increasing acceptance of homosexuals in Jewish life, eco-Judaism, text study, Jewish Studies in academia, book publishing, the use of the Internet for Jewish ends, and on and on. Space for a new Judaism is in no special need of creation these days; it is a present, if not dominant, feature of American Jewish life, and has been for decades, if not centuries.

Finally, we relate to criticisms from the left and the right of our studied neutrality in responding to the rise of the Jewish self.

Jonathan Sarna sees the phenomenon at troubling. Moore and Gordis seem more enthusiastic. Jonathan Woocher is ambivalent, and so are we. For us, the jury is out on the rise of the self and the decline of the public dimension to Jewish identity. Too many imponderables are at work. One issue is whether the growth of private Jewish passion is equivalent to the decline in public Jewish commitment. Are we witnessing merely the falling away of public Judaism with a consequent rise in the private sphere? Or, are we seeing new strength in the private realm that is compensating for, if not exceeding, the losses in the public realm? We don't know the answers to these questions, at least with the data at hand and so early in the transition.

But beyond these pseudo-quantitative concerns, we are confronted with a qualitative, even philosophical issue: What's Judaism? What features of Jewish life today are essential for an authentic Jewish existence tomorrow? And how does one measure the relative value of losses and gains to Jewish life over time? For example, which is more consequential, the loss of Yiddish or the acquisition of the State of Israel as a feature of American Jewish life? Closer to home, how do we evaluate the decline in Jewish organizational investment, activity, and attachment? Are these features essential to a "good" Judaism, or are

they epiphenomena, suitable for a particular period in the past, but irrelevant to the future?

We can ask these and similar questions about all the changes we cite. As much as we struggle, as social scientists, to avoid ideological issues in our scholarly work, these sorts of questions frame our research and intrude into our analysis. Ultimately, a judgment about the meaning of recent changes depends both upon an accurate and rich reading of the data and upon some inevitable decisions about the nature of Jewish life and culture.

**The Jew Within** probes behind the statistics of Jewish affiliation and attitudes of moderately affiliated Jews to the deeper motivations, commitments and anxieties that attract them to elements of Jewish life or distance them from it. It combines the skills of a foremost sociologist of American Jewry with those of a leading scholar of American Jewish religious thought and practice.

**Steven M. Cohen** is on the faculty of The Melton Centre for Jewish Education at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and formerly served as Professor at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Among his recent publications is *Two Worlds of Judaism: The Israeli and American Experiences* (with Charles S. Liebman)

**Arnold M. Eisen** is a Professor and Chair of Religious Studies at Stanford University whose recent publications include *Rethinking Modern Judaism: Ritual, Commandment, Community*; and *Taking Hold of Torah: Jewish Commitment and Community in America*.

**The Susan and David Wilstein Institute of Jewish Policy Studies** is an independent research and planning resource for the Jewish Community in the United States seeking to identify and critically analyze vital issues and stimulate effective response. The institute facilitates the collaboration of scholars, communal professionals and lay leaders bridging the gap between policy-making structures and academic resources, the theoretical and pragmatic elements in the policy process. It maintains centers at Hebrew College in Boston and in Los Angeles.

