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著者	O'Brien, Patrick
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Who Am I? Jacob's (Post) Modern Identity Crisis

Patrick O'Brien

But you are a Jew, my sister says. You are a Jewish boy, more than you know. . .

Alexander Portnoy¹

The definition of the Jewish community as a purely religious unit was, of course, a sham from the time of its conception

Jacob Katz²

The essence of Judaism is the affirmation that the Jews are the chosen people; all else is commentary.

Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg³

What distinguished the Jews from other immigrants, then was their image of themselves. . . They differed in believing that they differed. . . . Indeed, no historian who fails to deal with the deeply ingrained self-image of the Jews will ever understand them. . . . Jewishness has always been a form of consciousness. . . the conviction that he [the Jew] was at [world-history's] center, the unique agent or victim of its design. . . possessed of a special vantage point on the world.

Leon Wieseltier⁴

Who is a Jew?

This section cannot pretend to definitively answer the question of who is a Jew, since that question has been asked—and fought over—for much of Jewish history. What this section will do is provide a glimpse of some of the more common definitions to the question, beginning with what is in the end perhaps the most workable definition in the context of 20th-century American Jewry, to wit,

William F. Buckley, Jr.'s, quip: "The famous answer to the question, Who is a Jew? is of course, 'Anyone who says he is a Jew.'"⁵

More substantively, we might turn to respected rabbi and author Arthur Hertzberg to begin framing the issue: "One might say that the problem lies in the complexities of defining Jewishness. At various times Jews have been classified as a religion, a culture, a nationality, a class, a race, or a combination of the above."⁶ As Joseph Bram has written, "Louis Wirth has said that 'the elementary question as to whether the Jews are a race, a nationality or a cultural group remains unsettled.' Other writers who have tried to find a proper definition for them have expressed the difficulties in very characteristic terms. They refer to the Jew as 'an unusual type of nationality,' 'a social anomaly,' 'a peculiar people.' Talcott Parsons considers them 'unique social phenomenon,' Carl Mayer calls them 'a chimeric people' leading 'a life of unreality'"⁷

Raphael Patai has devoted considerable attention to the issue of Jewish identity. "Halakhically," he writes, "a Jew is an individual who was either born to a Jewish mother, or converted to Judaism."⁸ Beyond this simple and clear-cut definition, Patai offers other definitions:

...to be Jewish is primarily a matter of feeling, of emotional commitment. To feel Jewish can, of course, be the result of one or more of several factors. Some Jews feel Jewish because they believe that they are of the seed of Abraham; others, because they adhere to the Jewish religion. Still others feel themselves Jews because they consider themselves members of the Jewish people, or because they feel a close identification with the State of Israel, or because they were traumatically shaken by the Nazi holocaust, or because they resent the latent (Or not so latent) anti-Semitism they encounter in their professional and/or social life, or because the

Jewish past lives in their consciousness, or for one of several other possible reasons. The common denominator in all these cases of feeling Jewish is their cognitive nature: they all derive from *knowing* something about the Jews, and from feelings produced by that knowledge. Thus, in the ultimate analysis, to be Jewish is a state of mind.⁹

Within Jewry itself, even the religious definition of Jewishness is almost completely unsatisfactory, in that there has been intense disagreement among Jews as to what constitutes legitimacy in this area. For example, while it was once widely thought that Orthodox Judaism would disappear in America, in recent years American Orthodox Jews have begun espousing a kind of Jewish triumphalism¹⁰ with respect to their Conservative and Reform brethren, as they have better resisted assimilation (largely as measured by rates of intermarriage) and have better encouraged allegiance to Judaism among the young (and, it might be added, among non-Orthodox young Jews who “return” to Judaism through conversion to Orthodoxy — the *ba'al teshuvah* movement¹¹).

American Orthodox Jews have generally continued their policy of segregation, not only with respect to non-Jews but to non-Orthodox Jews as well. Many Orthodox leaders even refuse to join in Jewish communal organizations with non-Orthodox Jews “lest such participation confer legitimacy on inauthentic leaders.” Further, a great schism has opened between Conservative and Reform Jewry as a result of the latter’s decision to recognize patrilineality. Ordination of women has added to these tensions.¹² Obviously, the conflicts among Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform Jews in America (not to mention Israeli-Diaspora tensions) warrant a treatise of their own; they are referred to here only to emphasize the elusive nature of the Who is a Jew? question.

In addition to the strictly religious definition of Jewishness, there is

also the sociological one. From biblical times through Emancipation in the late seventeenth hundreds, Jews considered themselves a “nation” and were generally so considered by others. Since Emancipation, Jews — and others — have wrestled with the nature of Jewish peoplehood. For example, in 1806, Napoleon called for an “Assembly of Jewish Notables,” which became the “Great Sanhedrin, a central judicial body” that was to inaugurate the practices of Emancipation among the Jews in Europe.¹³

Charles Silberman addresses the issue of identity by retelling these two jokes:

The elegant and dashing Otto Kahn, a noted investment banker... was strolling down Fifth Avenue with humorist Marshall Wilder, who was a hunchback. Kahn pointed out the church to which he belonged and asked, “Marshall, did you know that I once was a Jew?” “Yes, Otto,” Wilder replied, “and I once was a hunchback.”

A Jew converts to Christianity and is asked to preach the sermon in church the following Sunday. He ascends the pulpit proudly and begins, “Fellow goyim...”¹⁴

“In the Jewish self-definition,” Silberman writes, “belief and practice determine whether one is a *good* Jew or a *bad* Jew but not whether one *is* a Jew; to be a Jew is an indelible status, from which there is no exit. The reason,” he goes on, “is that Judaism defines itself not as a voluntary community of faith but as an involuntary community of fate.”¹⁵

Of course, social identification involves both self-ascription and ascription by others. Silberman, for example, shows that here there is a congruence between what Gentiles have ascribed to Jews and what

Jews have ascribed to themselves: "For it is not only Gentiles who see Jewishness as immutable and who therefore regard Jewish converts to Christianity as Jews; this is how Jews themselves have always viewed the *meshummad*, or willing convert."¹⁶

John Murray Cuddihy phrases it another way. "Tribal, rather than civil, Jewish culture issues no exit visas. To leave is an act not of reason but of treachery; to apostatize is to betray. To be a Jew, then, is to occupy an ascribed status in an involuntary association."¹⁷ A tentative working definition of Who is a Jew?, then, will hark back to Buckley's common-sense quip, or, just as usefully, will employ Patai's final judgment:

For the overwhelming majority of Jews, the distinction between Jew and Gentile is never in doubt: a Jew is a Jew because he considers himself a Jew. Compared to this one overriding factor of self-identification, the question of why he considers himself a Jew is of minor significance. Whether he does so because he believes himself to be one by race, by religion, by ethnicity, by nationality, or simply because his parents are or were Jewish makes little difference. What matters is the feeling of belongingness, which usually translates itself into efforts to pass the same feeling on to one's children. Herein lies the secret of Jewish survival.¹⁸

Or, we could use Howe's formulation:

But for many, perhaps most, of the sons and daughters of the immigrants, difficulty in defining their "Jewishness" did not for a moment call into question the actuality of their Jewish experience. They knew they had been shaped by a common past; they feared they might have to face common danger; they suspected they shared a common fate. These problems in

self-perception led to peculiarly nervous discussions about “who is a Jew?” — although, in fact, almost everyone knew quite well whether or not he was one.¹⁹

A People Apart: Jews Meet Gentiles

*As I see them from the mountaintops,
Gaze on them from the heights,
There is a people that dwells apart,
Not reckoned among the nations.*

Numbers 23:9

*The Jews were together because they were profoundly different
but otherwise like everyone else.*

Philip Roth²⁰

But there are other elements to a common cultural possession. . . One of them is the tradition of being a Jew, the feeling which is ground into every Jew from the time he is old enough to realize that he is somebody different from the people about him.

Melville Herskovits²¹

The issue of Jewish peoplehood and separateness is as old as Judaism itself. In fact, separateness may be the key factor in what it is to be Jewish. The covenant with God — chosenness — strongly implies separateness, as we shall see. More to the point, however, is whether that sense of separateness still exists in modern America, and, if so, how it affects American Jews' participation in multicultural American life. As Rabbi Daniel Gordis describes this:

That element is expressed through the seemingly simply phrase “holy nation,” a phrase that is important because of the

unique characteristics of the word “holy” in Hebrew.

The word that the Torah uses for “holy” in this passage is *kadosh*, a term familiar to many Jews from the *Kaddish* (a memorial prayer) and the *Kiddush* (the prayer sanctifying the Sabbath or holidays, said over wine). But buried in the meaning of *kadosh* is not only the sense of “holy,” but “separateness” as well. When the *Kiddush* speaks of making Shabbat holy, it means that Shabbat is sanctified specifically *because* it is somehow separated from the rest of the week. The liturgy that ends the Shabbat, the *Havdalah* service, makes that eminently clear... *Havdalah* suggests that for Jewish tradition, holiness is closely related to separateness or distinction....

There are countless other examples, but Jewish tradition's claim is clear. Separateness is not a modern notion fashioned in an era of declining Jewish allegiance. It is not a recent invention with which Jews can respond to multiculturalism or a frightening rate of assimilation. It is an idea thousands of years old. This idea is as ancient as Exodus 19, as fundamental to Jewish life as the Torah that defines us.²²

Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg also examines this tendency toward Jewish self — segregation:

Abraham cut this groove, and his descendants deepened it. Jews in every era have struggled to reconcile two opposing inclinations. They have wanted to maintain a separate and special culture, even as they have wanted to be accepted by the majority. This desire to be both different and the same is the root of great turmoil on three levels: It is the source of tension within the souls of individual Jews who do not know to which culture they belong; Jewish factions keep quarreling with one another about how much of the majority culture is admissible before it compromises the Jewish character; and Jews are

always trying to achieve equilibrium with the rest of society, balancing their otherness with their desire for inclusion.²³

As we saw with Numbers 23:9 concerning “a people that shall dwell apart” (*am hasad*), this separateness was an important ingredient in fundamental Jewish identity and it continued well past the destruction of the Second Temple. “There remained a consistent trend in Jewish religious thought in the Middle Ages that depicted Jews as a chosen people living among hostile nations from whom they must remain separated, while remaining tied to their ancestral homeland.”²⁴

This sense of Jews being a separate people has remained strong in America. For instance, in *The Ambivalent Jew*, Charles Liebman writes:

The American Jew is torn between two sets of values — those of integration and acceptance into American society and those of Jewish group survival. These values appear to me to be incompatible. But most American Jews do not view them in this way. The thesis of this book is that the behavior of the American Jew is best understood as his unconscious effort to restructure his environment and reorient his own self-definition and perception of reality so as to reduce the tension between these values.

Some observers of American Jewish behavior see the development of American Judaism as the adaptation of Judaism to the American environment. This oversimplifies the process. Jews respond both to the American environment and to their own tradition, a tradition, by the way, that was in the process of being reshaped when mass immigration to the United States took place toward the end of the last century. In the process of their response, American Jews in turn reshaped, with a remarkable degree of success, both their tradi-

tion and their environment.²⁵

Of course, this struggle with identity is hardly confined to post-Emancipation Jews. In many meaningful ways, it is a condition experienced by a wide range of peoples who have come in contact with modernity. In the American sphere, it has been particularly pronounced among African Americans such as W.E.B. Du Bois but also among European immigrants and their children in America in the 20th century. Witness this confession by a leading New York Intellectual, Daniel Bell:

I was born in galut and I accept — now gladly, though once in pain — the double burden and the double pleasure of my self-consciousness, the outward life of an American and the inward secret of the Jew. I walk with this sign as a frontlet between my eyes, and it is as visible to some secret others as their sign is to me.²⁶

This idea of “Jewish radar” is a familiar theme. Rabbi Eugene Borowitz, for example, claims that American Jews will, “without explicit instruction — for, though all utilize it, who knows how it works? — train their child to develop that special ethnic ‘radar’ by which one Jew recognizes another despite his similarity to all other Americans.”²⁷ This concept of crypsis and Marranism still applies to Jews, Borowitz argues. “Science says it is nonsense, but most Jews claim to be equipped with an interpersonal friend-or-foe-sensing device that enables them to detect the presence of another Jew, despite heavy camouflage.”²⁸ As Silberman comments, “The most important manifestation of Jewishness... is the almost primordial tie Jews feel for one

another.”²⁹

To the degree post-Emancipation Jews live among “their own,” avoiding “commensality, connubium, and convivium with the *goyim*,” Jews “remain faithful members of the community of *Yiddishkeit*,” or so Cuddihy believes. Refusing to let go of the idea that Jews just might remain a separate people, even among the nations, Cuddihy continues:

Sometimes, *in partibus infidelium*, [the old unitary Jewish ethnic solidarity] is “magically,” uncannily revived: in the very midst of the cool civil nexus that binds the *goyim* into their solidarity of the surface, in the very heart of the sociable *Gesellschaft*, across a crowded room, you “know” that “somehow” you share a primordial solidarity of the depths.³⁰

According to his memoirs, when former Secretary of Labor Robert Reich first met Alan Greenspan, he said: “We have never met before, but I instantly know him. One look, one phrase, and I know where he grew up, how he grew up, where he got his drive and his sense of humor. He is New York. He is Jewish. He looks like my uncle Louis, his voice is my uncle Sam. I feel we’ve been together at countless weddings, bar mitzvahs, and funerals. I know his genetic structure.”³¹ Might this be “*dos pintele Yid*, . . . ‘the little Jew’ that, in Jewish folklore, exists inside every Jew. . . .”³²

Jewish American “double consciousness” remains a prominent component of many American Jews’ identity. This “curious position,” David Baile finds, is a result of “millennia of exile” in eastern Europe, where Jews viewed themselves as “a perennial minority, always vulnerable to the whims of an often hostile majority.” Jews, then, “came to America with this consciousness of difference firmly ingrained.”³³

“On the other hand,” Baile continues, Jews “also viewed America in quasi-messianic terms as a land where they might escape their historic destiny and become part of the majority.” “This double consciousness played an important role earlier in this century in prompting various Jewish thinkers to develop new theories of America that might accommodate the Jews.” Israel Zangwill and Horace Kallen, for example, clearly worked to mold society in such a way that Jews (and others) could enjoy full participation in American life without sacrificing whatever special identity they might have, without, in a word, assimilating.

In an important argument, Baile identifies these early discourses about America “as a ‘melting pot’ or as a pluralistic nation of cultural minorities” as a Jewish invention. Later, as these efforts changed and were expanded to include many others, i.e., became what is now known as “multiculturalism,” Jews still participated in many ways, though it has created “profound anxiety among Jews, because of their double consciousness.”³⁴

Recalling Jacob Katz’s assertion that “The definition of the Jewish community as a purely religious unit was, of course, a sham from the time of its conception,” we can more easily see the point Cuddihy has been making. In both his seminal 1974 work *The Ordeal of Civility* and his 1978 *No Offense: Civil Religion and Protestant Taste* he latches on to the dilemma Jews have faced in the last two hundred years. In an extended meditation on the writings of Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg, Cuddidy notes:

What has happened in America, then, according to Hertzberg, is that the doctrine of election in Judaism — and its correlate, the ethnic ingredient in Judaism — were forced to retreat

from the public domain, and a “split personality” was forced on Jews as the price for their acceptance as one of the religions acceptable to the civil religion consensus. Judaism, for decades, not unlike many Jews, “passed” as a religious denomination “like any other” religious denomination. Ethnicity and chosenness were kept in the closet. The general public image of Judaism was, in effect, a religious fiction.³⁵

Freud, too, Cuddihy notes, shared this belief in Jewish connectedness: For Freud, there was an “irresistable” attraction to other Jews, “many dark emotional forces, all the more potent for being so hard to group in words, as well as the clear consciousness of an inner identity, the uncanny intimacy that comes from the same psychic structure.” In 1919 Freud wrote a paper, “The Uncanny,” which, in Cuddihy’s words, “exactly catches the psychological coefficient of the ambiguous sociological solidarity experienced by Jews in the modernizing period of the Emancipation — namely, an unfamiliar familiarity, an open secret, an ‘us-in-the-midst-of-them’ uncanniness.”³⁶

“I believe the links holding Jews together. . . to be as invisible as air and as strong as the heaviest chains, and the Jewish ingredient to be as imperceptible to the senses yet as effective in results as vital energy itself.” “This isn’t Henry Ford talking, come back to life, retooling the old ‘*Protocols of the Elders of Zion*’ for another go-round,” writes Cuddihy. “It is Professor Talmon, of Hebrew University, Jerusalem, trying to locate and define the staying power of an ‘uncanny’ premodern nexus.”³⁷

In fact, there is evidence that not just post-Emancipation Jews in Europe or immigrant Jews in American cities lived among themselves, avoiding “commensality, connubium, and convivium with the *goyim*.” Second (and third) generation American Jews, even as they moved to

the suburbs, often managed to maintain residential solidarity. After all, "One of the first things the newly suburban Jews did was to seek out other Jews."³⁸

Irving Howe was not the only one to notice this suburban residential pattern. Karen Brodtkin, in *How Jews Became White Folks*, writes of her parents:

Their suburban community was every bit as Jewish in its makeup as the one in which they had grown up. Throughout my adolescence, my parents' workmates and friends were almost all Jews. Even after we moved to the suburbs, like so many Jewish women and quite a few men of their generation, my parents taught at public schools and visited in a Brooklyn Jewish world. We still shopped at Klein's and in Manhattan's Jewish garment district.³⁹

The Holocaust, Six-Day War, and Jewish Identity

The Holocaust is a metaphor for the uneasiness of the American Jewish community...

David Biale⁴⁰

It is now time to address a few of the important concrete historical issues that are an integral part of modern American Jewish identity. An oft-remarked upon aspect of Jewish identity concerns Jews' relationship with and perceptions of the Holocaust. "For American Jews, the Holocaust became central to their own image of themselves as Jews. With often only a tenuous relationship to Judaism, they clung to the Holocaust as the core element in their Jewish identity."⁴¹ As sociologist Chaim Waxman phrased it, Jews with such an identity needed the Holocaust to be unique, for if it were not, it "would be to

deprive them of what they perceive to be their uniqueness as Jews. . . . While for other Jews, the Holocaust was another confirmation of Jewish uniqueness, for these Jews the Holocaust is the source of Jewish uniqueness.”⁴²

One of the best accounts of the connection between the Holocaust and identity among American Jews comes in Judith Miller’s book, *One, by One, by One: Facing the Holocaust*, in which she explores the two-decade gap between the liberation of the death camps and the end of American Jewish “hesitation” regarding the Holocaust. The Holocaust “had two decades later activated and enhanced a sense of identity among Jews in America.”⁴³

In *A Time For Healing: American Jewry since World War II*, Edward S. Shapiro cites many leading Jews who find this Jewish identity with Holocaust suffering problematic. Deborah Lipstadt, for one, wrote that “if our image is only of suffering, we will have robbed ourselves of the joy and replenishment that Jewish tradition has always fostered,” while Rabbi Daniel Jeremy Silver wrote that the Holocaust “cannot, and does not, provide the kind of vitalizing and informing myth around which American Jews could marshal their energies and construct a vital culture. Martyrs command respect, but a community’s sense of sacred purpose must be woven of something more substantial than tears” (italics in original).⁴⁴

Of course this caused a dilemma because, as literary critic Leon Wieseltier wrote, “Injustice retains the power to distort long after it has ceased to be real. . . . an honorable life is not possible if they remember too little and a normal life is not possible if they remember too much.”⁴⁵

Menachem Rosensaft, born in 1948 in Bergen-Bergen to survivors of the Holocaust, also raised questions about the relationship between identity and the Holocaust. “We [the offspring] are not survivors,” he

explained. "Only the survivors have the right to use the terminology of survivors. All Jew are not survivors, as some Jews have been saying. That is nonsense." Rosensaft's approach was to make the Holocaust "part of American memory," to "share our awareness with others, to ensure that others, Jews and gentiles alike, understand why remembrance of these events is important." In time, of course, American Jews succeeded, as Judith Miller notes, in "transforming the Holocaust into part of the nation's officially recognized civic culture."⁴⁶

"I Had Not Known How Deeply Jewish I Was!"

In a telling account, Charles Silberman opens Part Two of his peerless *A Certain People: American Jews and Their Lives Today* with the theme "I had not know how deeply Jewish I was." As shown by Silberman, Howe, and many others, American Jews had become progressively less and less affiliated with Judaism and with "Jewishness," prompting many to predict that Jews would soon melt away into the open society America offered.⁴⁷ Yet to many Jews' surprise, a strong attachment to Jewishness and the Jewish people remained, as revealed by individual and group responses to the Arab attack on Israel in the 1967 Six-Day War.⁴⁸

The process was a long one. First, it must be noted that after World War II, as social and economic barriers to Jews fell and as suburbanization drew urban Jews away from areas of intense *Yiddishkeit*, acculturation and assimilation proceeded apace, as it had earlier in American history with Gentile northern European immigrants and now was with eastern and southern ones.

Indeed, there appeared to be a crisis with respect to Jews' attachment to Judaism, although, paradoxically, the post-war period was a

time of great temple building in the newly settled suburbs, where, in places such as Highland Park outside Chicago, a congregation built what Marshal Sklare described as “a building of cathedral-like proportions.”⁴⁹ The reason for this temple building, though, had more to do with the lack of knowledge about Judaism than with greater adherence to the faith. Parents who had grown up in urban neighborhoods where Jewishness could be taken for granted — even without ever setting foot in a shul — now wanted their children to stay Jewish, and to do this they felt it necessary to join a synagogue and observe some basic Jewish rituals at home. This shallow form of Judaism was being recreated for the children.⁵⁰

In fact, however, these second-generation Jews, now settled in the suburbs, may have passed more “Jewishness” on to their children than they knew. Attention to Jewish ritual and to the religion of Judaism may not have been necessary in this transitional period for American Jews. It is no coincidence that founder of Reconstructionism, Mordecai Kaplan, had promulgated the view that the Jewish people were primary and Judaism served the people. As Kaplan argued in *Judaism as a Civilization* “the Jewish religion existed for the Jewish people and not the Jewish people for the Jewish religion.”⁵¹

This “Copernican revolution” fits what was happening to American Jews in the post-war period. Exposed to Gentiles in normal settings in ways that had previously been unthinkable (at least for the bulk of eastern-European derived Jews; earlier Jews in America had mingled quite well with Gentiles), American Jews experienced new ways of being Jews in America, some to the extent of intermarrying, a sure sign of religious comity. At the same time, however, there was intense ambivalence among Jews about the loss of attachment to other Jews. As the 1960s began, Jews were experiencing a breathtakingly open

America, helped in part by John F. Kennedy's election to the U.S. presidency in 1960, which removed an important religious barrier to full participation in American life.⁵²

With a withering attachment to Judaism proper and expanding social exposure to and acceptance by Gentiles, it became increasingly difficult for American Jews to honor any meaningful sense of Jewish peoplehood, for how were they to do that without organized religion, intimately Jewish neighborhoods, or Jewish secular organizations such as those that had been common among immigrant eastern European Jews?

The answer came in the spring of 1967, when Egyptian President Gamal Abdul Nasser massed 100,000 troops on the border with Israel and proclaimed that his goal was the destruction of Israel. What happened next in the Middle East is immortalized in the name of the ensuing conflict: The Six-Day War. Israel roundly defeated Arab forces, took control of Jerusalem, and gained other strategic objectives. American Jews (and non-Jews) were ecstatic.

In the reigning narrative, American Jews responded to a dire threat to the survival of fellow Jews, many of whom had barely survived the not-so-distant nightmare of the Nazi extermination campaign.⁵³ While this narrative has survived for over thirty years, a competing account may be given, at least with respect to American Jews at the time.

Faced with a threat to continuing peoplehood in the American Diaspora, American Jews were in dire need of a rationale for solidarity, and it was readily apparent that it was not going to be a wholesale return to observant Judaism (nor was it going to be some form of socialism, though social activism had an outside chance). The rationale fortuitously came in 1967, when much-superior Israeli forces easily and predictably defeated disorganized Arab forces.⁵⁴ But what

actually happened in the Middle East was not the most important issue, for, just as Kaplan had reversed the order of primacy regarding Judaism and the Jewish people, American Jews had made themselves the primary actor in the 1967 drama, reducing the Israelis to a secondary role. In other words, if the Six-Day War had not occurred, American Jews would have had to invent it, which, in a way, is what they did.

This activism on the part of an Israel perceived to be in danger served as a powerful uniting force among American Jews, as is attested to almost universally by observers of the American Jewish scene. But for the purposes of this essay, what was most critical about this enhanced Jewish solidarity was its symbolic role in announcing that American Jews could, in fact, maintain their peoplehood in America beyond the atrophying of their religion and a diminution of *Yiddishkeit*. What this represented for Jewish participation in the construction of American culture was breathtaking, for now American Jews could openly act as Jews even as their ability to act as major contributors to American culture increased dramatically. Crypsis and Borowitz's "Marranism" were a thing of the past.

Actually, crypsis was not totally dead in that the alleged "ethnic revival" of the early 1970s had very little to do with any white Gentiles returning to ethnic roots. What it had everything to do with was a Jewish return to ethnic roots, the cultural artifacts of which can be found throughout American culture. In this regard, America has become more "Jewish" since the 1967 Middle East War than it ever had been in the past.

Obviously, support for these bold claims is in order. First, we will look at how the Six-Day War overtly affected American Jews. There appears to be more agreement on the crucial impact of the war on

American Jews than on almost any other subject related to American Jews. Thus, a look:

Charles Silberman, *A Certain People*: The catalytic event was the Six-Day War of June 1967. . . when it looked as if Israel was about to be destroyed. Indeed, it would be hard to exaggerate the impact these events had on Jewish consciousness. . . they were such a watershed in the development of Judaism and Jewishness. . . (p.181)

Arthur Hertzberg, *The Jews in America*: Many Jews would never have believed that grave danger to Israel. . . could dominate their thoughts and emotions to the exclusion of all else. . . . Almost every observer said, then and later, that American Jews had never behaved this way before. The magnitude of the response was without precedent. . . What seemed to be happening to them was that a dormant loyalty had suddenly been stirred, and that it had become at that moment an overriding passion. The Six-Day War thus united the Jews of America. . . (pp.371-373)

Rabbi Eugene Borowitz, *The Masks Jews Wear*: The breadth and passion of American Jewry's response to the Six-Day War was beyond anything one expected. The ethnic ties were simply much stronger than anyone had believed. (p.120)

Seymour Martin Lipset and Earl Raab, *Jews and the New American Scene*: American Jewry was jolted out of this complacency by the 1967 Six-Day War. . . From all over America came reports of a dramatic transformation of the Jewish community. (p.117)

Edward Shapiro, *A Time for Healing*: Nineteen sixty-seven was a crucial year in the development of American Jewish

consciousness. . . . a watershed year in the history of American Jewry. (pp.27, 207)

Stephen J. Whitfield, *American Space, Jewish Time*: That war was probably a turning point in modern Jewish history, primarily because the stunning victory of the Israeli Defense Forces made it possible for Jerusalem to be reunited under Jewish sovereignty. . . (pp.13-14)⁵⁵

Jack Wertheimer, *A People Divided*: As the fighting raged, surveys found that “ninety-nine out of every hundred Jews expressed their strong sympathy with Israel.” For many the newfound identification with Israel was a conversionary experience. (p.30)

J.J. Goldberg, *Jewish Power*: The victory marked the end of one era and the beginning of another in the life of the American Jewish community, the moment, it is often said, when American Jews gained pride in being Jewish. . . . Shoshana Cardin confirms the watershed status of the war in American Jewish history: “Nineteen sixty-seven was a critical point in the psyche of the American Jewish community. It was at that point that the American Jewish community came together at its own initiative. . . (pp.134-136)

As recounted by Silberman, the individual responses to tensions in the Middle East in May 1967 told an important story about Jewish identity in America:

Jews were emotionally involved [in the Six-Day War] in a way they would not have thought possible a few months earlier. “In those days many of us felt that our own lives were in the balance,” the late Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote

shortly after the war had ended. . . The anxiety was grueling, the isolation was dreadful. . . *I had not known how deeply Jewish I was* [emphasis is Silberman's].”

“I had not known how deeply Jewish I was!” This was the response, not of some newcomer to Judaism or casual devotee but of the man whom many, myself included, consider the greatest Jewish spiritual leader of our time.⁵⁶

Silberman goes on to show how widespread this transformation was. “I must confess surprise over the depth of my own feelings,” wrote theologian Richard Rubenstein. “There are unconscious depths to the phenomenon of Jewishness which even those of us who have spent our lives in its study cannot fathom.” Silberman even chides Rabbi Hertzberg for noting that American Jews had undergone “an abrupt, radical, and possibly permanent change”; in a 1964 essay, Silberman notes, Hertzberg had predicted the evaporation of Jewishness in American Jews.⁵⁷

“Countless more Jews who stayed home were transformed by the vicarious experience of the war. Michael J. Rosenberg,” one reporter notes, “a sophomore at the State University of New York at Albany in the spring of 1967, was a leader of the campus-anti-Vietnam War movement and a left-wing columnist of the campus newspaper.” By the time of the War, however, Rosenberg had become “consumed by the threat to Israel.” He then became highly active in defending Israel.⁵⁸

“Jews who had thought that being Jewish did not matter,” writes Silberman, “Jews who were proud of having out-grown the ‘parochialism’ of their parents or grandparents — discovered in 1967 that Jewishness lay at the heart of their being. ‘One way or another the day always comes when you discover that you are a Jew. . . Sooner or later each Jew discovers his little Jew. . . And that realization comes to him

no matter what he is or what he thinks he has become and notwithstanding his pretenses, the masks he wears or even his profound metamorphosis.”⁵⁹

What then of the argument that the “rediscovery of Jewish particularism” was a “belated” response to Holocaust? Lipset and Raab argue that at the time of the Six-Day War there was

a surge of fear for the survival of the new state, refuge for the remnant of Hitler’s victims. But it coincided with the Holocaust’s belated emergence into world consciousness. The term “Holocaust” had not been in evidence before the 1960s; the public mind had seemed unable, unwilling to grapple with the ineffable horror of the death camps. Suddenly, a searing literature of the Holocaust began to appear. The Six-Day War raised in American Jewish minds the fear of another Holocaust, this time for Israelis.⁶⁰

Obviously, there is a complex equation for determining how much the response in 1967 was related directly to the Holocaust and how much it was related to contemporary Israel — and how all of this fed into ambivalence over Jewish identity in America. One question we might ask is, if American Jews were so traumatized after World War II by the Holocaust, why did they pay so relatively little attention to the state of Israel in the fifteen years since its founding in 1948? After all, among American Jews after World War II, “the majority did not see Israel as central to their own personal Jewish identity.”⁶¹

This suggests that events in the Middle East in 1967 were mixed with internal concerns of American Jews involving identity, and that the Holocaust issue was very belatedly “rediscovered” to play a role in the Jewish American identity drama. Was this yet another case where

“the issue was not the issue”?

David Biale suggests just that. “Israel has provided the stage for American Jews to exercise collectively the power they have achieved in American society. . . . Identification with Israel has created a sense of Jewish nationalism largely absent from American Jewish identity before 1967.”⁶²

In an intriguing 1995 essay Hertzberg asks why American Jews waited for over two decades for an overt reaction to the Holocaust. While admitting that few “wanted to hear accounts by the survivors of the death camps or the horrors they had experienced,” he finds a more provocative reason for it: “an explanation is possible for the revival of interest in the Holocaust only in the 1970s. That was the point when antisemitism in America had become negligible.”⁶³

Conclusion

As can clearly be seen, a wide array of American Jews continue to struggle with their identity — as Jews and as Americans. What is of most interest to the observer of American culture more generally is the extent to which Jewish concerns over identity have both overlapped non-Jewish concerns with identity and become part of America’s general narrative of life in the late twentieth century. As Brandeis historian Stephen J. Whitfield has quipped about Jews, “Whatever its destiny, this minority has already left its skid marks. For American Jews have exerted an extraordinary impact upon the character of the United States.”⁶⁴ Whatever identity Jews come up with, then, will be of great importance to America as a whole.

Endnotes

1. Philip Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* (New York: Random House, 1967), p. 76.
2. In Kevin B. MacDonald, *A People That Shall Dwell Alone: Judaism as a Group Evolutionary Strategy* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994), p.94.
3. In John Murray Cuddihy, *No Offense: Civil Religion and Protestant Taste* (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), p.101.
4. In *No Offense*, p.102.
5. William F. Buckley, Jr., *In Search of Anti-Semitism* (New York: Continuum, 1992), p.7.
6. Arthur Hertzberg, *The Jews in America: Four Centuries of an Uneasy Encounter*, (New York: Atheneum, 1992), p.3.
7. Quoted in Gelya Frank, "Who Are The Jews? Answers Black, White, and Other," unpublished ms., 1998, p.7.
8. Raphael Patai, *The Jewish Mind* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State Press, 1977), p.7.
9. Patai p.23. He applies this criterion to Jews of mixed heritage as well:
Borderline cases are notoriously resistant to taxonomy. Nevertheless, the criteria of Jewishness in all the marginal categories mentioned must be sought in the realm of consciousness: offspring of mixed marriages as well as converts to and from Judaism are Jews if they retain or acquire a Jewish consciousness, if they feel Jewish, if they consider themselves in some sense as belonging to the Jewish community. And, since inevitably there is interaction between what we feel and what the society that surrounds us feels about us, whether others consider an individual Jewish or not bears importantly on this own Jewish identification. In most cases, however, the individual's feelings in the matter are reflected in those of his society, and vice versa, so that both point in the same direction. Patai p.24.
10. See Arthur Hertzberg and Aron Hirt-Manheimer, *Jews: The Essence and Character of a People* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998), pp.282-286, and Jack Wertheimer, *A People Divided: Judaism in Contemporary America* (New York: BasicBooks, 1993), pp.114-136.
11. Two recent examples of this phenomena can be found in Leon Wieseltier's *Kaddish* (Knopf, 1998) and David Klinghoffer's *The Lord Will*

Who Am I? Jacob's (Post) Modern Identity Crisis (Patrick O'Brien)

- Gather Me In: My Journey to Jewish Orthodoxy* (Free Press, 1998).
12. *A People Divided*, p.171; also chapters 5-9 *passim*.
 13. Albert Lindemann, *Esau's Tears: Modern Anti-Semitism and the Rise of the Jews* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997) pp.48-49. See also Paul Johnson, *A History of the Jews* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), pp.309-310.
 14. Charles Silberman, *A Certain People: American Jews and Their Lives Today* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985), p.69.
 15. *A Certain People*, p.70.
 16. *A Certain People*, p.68.
 17. *No Offense*, p.109.
 18. *The Jewish Mind*, p.27.
 19. Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made* (New York: Bantam Books, 1976), p.626.
 20. "Joe College: Memories of a fifties education," *Atlantic Monthly*, December, 1987, p.46.
 21. Quoted in Gelya Frank, *Franz Boas and Anthropology*, p.6.
 22. Gordis, *Does the World Need Jews?*, *Jewso: Rethinking Chosenness and American Jewish Identity* (New York; Seribner's, 1997), pp.179-180. Jacob Neusner also notes the connection between holiness and separateness: "Holiness meant separateness. Separateness meant life." *Self-Fulfilling Prophecy: Exile and Return in the HHistory of Judaism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), p.43, in Kevin MacDonald *A People That Shall Dwell Alone*, p.44
 23. *Jews: The Essence and Character of a People*, p.49.
 24. MacDonald, *A People That Shall Dwell Alone*, p.85.
 25. Charles Liebman, *The Ambivalent American Jew: Politics, Religion, and Family in American Jewish Life* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America), p.vii.
 26. In John Murray Cuddihy, *The Ordeal of Civility: Freud, Marx, Levi-Strauss and the Jewish Struggle with Modernity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987, 1974), p.86.
 27. Eugene Borowitz, *The Masks Jews Wear: The Self-Deception of Amer-*

- ican Jewry* (Port Washington, NY: Sh'ma, 1973), p.119.
28. *The Masks Jews Wear*, p.136.
 29. *A Certain People*, p.75.
 30. *The Ordeal of Civility*, pp.86-87.
 31. In MacDonald, *The Culture of Critique: An Evolutionary Analysis of Jewish Involvement in Twentieth-Century Intellectual and Political Movements* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998), p.224.
 32. *A Certain People*, p.36.
 33. David Biale, "The Melting Pot and Beyond: Jews and the Politics of American Identity," in *Insider/Outsider: American Jews and Multiculturalism*, ed. David Biale, Michael Galchinsky, and Susannah Heschel (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), pp.17-18.
 34. Biale, "The Melting Pot," pp.18-26.
 35. *No Offense*, p.119.
 36. *The Ordeal of Civility*, p.87.
 37. *The Ordeal of Civility*, p.87.
 38. Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, p.609.
 39. Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998), p.8.
 40. David Biale, *Power and Powerlessness in Jewish History* (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), p.202.
 41. Edward S. Shapiro, *A Time for Healing: American Jewry since World War II* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), p.216.
 42. In *A Time for Healing*, p.216.
 43. Judith Miller, *One, by One, by One: Facing the Holocaust* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), pp.222-223.
 44. In *A Time for Healing*, p.217.
 45. In *A Time for Healing*, pp.216-17.
 46. In Judith Miller, *One, by One*, pp.226-227. Miller is ambivalent about the uses to which American Jews have put the Holocaust: "Yes, the genocide in Europe has relevance for all Americans, but aren't too many Jews, young ones in particular, already obsessed with the Holocaust?" Going on to address the concerns of other American Jews, she writes:

In the possession of the most politically oriented Jews, has the Holocaust not become a blunt, aggressive weapon wielded to secure unquestioned support for Israel or special sympathy at home? The repeated use of the Holocaust to shame non-Jews into feeling guilt had become so much a part of popular Jewish culture by the end of the 1980s that it led one exasperated commentator to complain that “a Jew gets a parking ticket and he starts screaming about the Holocaust.”

In an article written almost a decade ago that remains controversial to this day, Robert Alter warned that “serious distortions of the Holocaust itself and, what is worse, of Jewish life occur when the Holocaust is commercialized, politicized, theologized, and academicized.” Making the Holocaust a fundamental touchstone of Jewish values, he argued, was bound to lead to distortions of emphasis and priority. . . .

The Holocaust industry has created a new vocabulary and way to measure time. . . . pp.230-231.

Miller points to a survey that shows the effect of this distortion: “The American Jewish Committee survey in 1988 reflected the pivotal place in Jewish consciousness that the Holocaust has come to occupy. When asked whether they agreed with the statement that the ‘Exodus from Egypt and the giving of the Torah [the basic laws and commandments] to the Jewish people means more to me as a Jew than do the Holocaust and the founding of the State of Israel,’ only 14 percent said they agreed. Sixty-nine percent said they disagreed; 18 percent were uncertain” p.231.

Like Hertzberg and others, Miller questions the way some Jewish groups use the Holocaust, particularly “the intersection of Hollywood and the Holocaust” (she was writing before the huge success of Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List*). Was this, as Miller quotes one cynical Jewish activist, evidence that “There is no business like *Shoah* business”?

47. Howe, of course, chronicles the challenges to Jewish solidarity at the end of *World of Our Fathers*; Silberman notes the following accounts of fear of assimilation in America: Elihu Bergman’s 1977 “disaster in the making” study which claimed that by the year 2076 “there would be no

more than 944,000 Jews in the United States — down from 5.7 million — and there might be as few as 10,420.” Leonard Fein of *Moment* magazine more feared “the curse of friendship,” the “seduction, not rape” of assimilation than “pogroms and persecutions.” Arthur Hertzberg answers the question “Will the Jews continue to exist in America?” “. . . in the negative. History, sociology, and the emptiness of contemporary Jewish religion all point in the same direction.” This is not, Silberman observes, a new phenomenon in Jewish history. Quoting historian Simon Rawidowicz’s allusion to the Jews as “the ever-dying people,” Silberman repeats, “The world makes many images of Israel, but Israel makes only one image of itself — that of being constantly on the verge of ceasing to be, of disappearing. . . . there was hardly a generation in the Diaspora period which did not consider itself the final link in Israel’s chain.” In *A Certain People*, pp.159-166:

48. Silberman’s entire description of this “rediscovery of Jewish particularism” is perhaps the best concise account that can be found. See *A Certain People*, pp.181-220.
49. *A Certain People*, p.178.
50. *A Certain People*, pp.179-181.
51. Philadelphia and New York: Jewish Publication Society of America/ Reconstructionist Press, 1981; originally published 1934), p. xiv, in Silberman, *A Certain People*, p.181.
52. Earlier, Jews had gained a high degree of acceptance in American society, as was witnessed by Will Herberg’s 1955 book *Protestant-Catholic-Jew*. This tripartite religious division of Americans has remained in force for over fifty years.
53. Seymour Martin Lipset and Earl Raab note that while fear for Israel’s survival was certainly a factor in American Jews’ reaction to news of the war, guilt may also have played a role, in that American Jews may not have done enough to prevent the Holocaust. *Jews and the New American Scene* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), p.118.
54. J.J. Goldberg writes that what happened “was that Israel won the war handily. Though the public was astounded by the speed and decisiveness of the Israeli victory, intelligence analysts in Israel and America were not.

Who Am I? Jacob's (Post) Modern Identity Crisis (Patrick O'Brien)

They knew Israel's strength, and its enemies' weakness." *Jewish Power: Inside the American Jewish Establishment* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1996), p.136.

55. *American Space, Jewish Time*, (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1996).
56. *A Certain People*, pp.183-184.
57. *A Certain People*, p.184.
58. *Jewish Power*, p.135.
59. In Silberman, *A Certain People*, pp.200-201.
60. Lipset and Raab, *Jews and the New American Scene*, p.118.
61. Lipset and Raab, *Jews and the New American Scene*, p.117; See also Biale, *Power*, pp.200-203.
62. *Power*, p.188.
63. Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg, "How Jews Use Antisemitism," in *Antisemitism in America Today: Outspoken Experts Explode the Myths*, ed. Jerome A. Chanes, (New York: Birch Lane Press, 1995), pp.338-341.
64. *American Space, Jewish Time*, p.20.