American Jews and Community: A Spectrum of Possibilities

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Who are the Jews?

In their unending effort to forge a Jewish state and combine the old and the new Jews into one indestructible whole, Israelis have argued seemingly endlessly over exactly who and what is a Jew, and who has the right to decide the issue. In America, the matter of Jewish identity is no less difficult to define. If we cannot come to a consensus about who to count as Jews in America, how are we to decide the nature of the community of Jews? Accordingly, any consideration of the latter issue must begin with a clear understanding of who the Jews of America are.

American Jews may be determined from at least four perspectives: ethnicity, culture, religion, and personal choice. These are not mutually exclusive, and for many Jews all four are determinant. Yet as we have learned, not every person identified as Jewish necessarily is ready to check off each of these categories as relevant to his or her sense of Jewish identity. To begin with, let us briefly consider the meaning of each of these categories.

Ethnicity probably is the most difficult to define, even though it is among the most popular choices for many Jews (perhaps precisely because of its ambiguity). Normally, ethnicity refers to a sense of origins. People who share common origins, often of a national character, are defined as having a common ethnicity or ethnic heritage. This is simple enough when we are talking about groups like the Irish or Italians: People who trace their origins to the nation attached to that particular identity are members of the same ethnic group. But while Jews presumably can be traced back to the ancient Land of Israel, the vicissitudes of Jewish history, two millennia of diaspora, and the absorption of ethnic elements from the wide variety of places that Jews lived during that diaspora have confounded the nature of Jewish ethnicity. Is a Jew who can trace roots to generations of life in Poland a Jew or a Pole? Is an American Jew of several generations ethnically an American or a Jew? The answer, of course, depends on whom one asks and where the question is asked. In America, the Polish or American Jew may both be viewed as ethnically Jewish, while in Israel their ethnic identity becomes Pole and American. Often, ethnicity is associated with language choice and origins; hence, Hispanic ethnicity includes all those who speak Spanish, whether they come from cosmopolitan Argentina or rural Cuba. This, too, does not quite work for Jews, because the Jews do not have a single language. Race also has

been associated with ethnicity. True, there was a time when Jews were considered a racial group. But today one would be hard-pressed to find anyone still taking racialist definitions of Jews seriously.

Ethnicity also has been associated with people who share a common culture and religion. For Jews, this is complicated as well. While the primal experience of the Exodus from Egypt served as a common Jewish cultural and religious event, Jews since have not shared common cultures in part because they have been dispersed all over the globe and among a diversity of cultures. Although the Passover *seder*, at which the Exodus is recalled, continues to be the most commonly celebrated Jewish event among all American Jews (around 80 percent), it might be hard to use this commonalty as the essential basis of Jewish ethnic identity. One would be hard-pressed today to argue that only those who consider themselves as having been brought out of Egypt by Divine intervention and led by Moses and Aaron are Jews; surely there are those who do not share this theology but find themselves identified and identifying as Jews. Moreover, using the Exodus and identification with it as a basis of Jewish identity conflates ethnicity, culture and religion with ancestry and collective consciousness in ways that blur rather than clarifies terms. In any event, those who define themselves as ethnically Jewish tend to do so in order not to define themselves as religiously or culturally Jewish. Hence, there is no good purpose in defining ethnicity by association with culture or religion.

Sometimes, ethnicity is defined by those who share a common group name. This appears to be the conception that Jews who define themselves ethnically have in mind. I suggest this because those who commonly select "ethnic" as a way of characterizing their Jewish identity in America usually are people who have great difficulty agreeing upon what they all mean by this label—except to agree on the label itself. So there are people who are "ethnically Jewish" and who, accordingly, consider the Jewish community an ethnic community. These are individuals who believe that somehow they share common origins and ethnic traits with other members of the Jewish community, but not necessarily common interests.

Finally, there are the people whose ethnicity is largely symbolic. By "symbolic ethnicity," Herbert Gans, who coined the term, means an ethnicity that does not require functioning groups and networks, that does not need a practiced culture.[1] It is "a self-conscious effort to 'feel ethnic' to the exclusion of being ethnic."[2] The common example given is of the person who identifies as Irish, participates in annual Irish Holidays like St. Patrick's Day, yet does not participate in Irish American organizations, live in Irish neighborhoods, work in Irish jobs or marry other Irish.[3] There are such Jews as well. They are the ones who have no problem identifying themselves as Jews, and perhaps light

Chanukah candles (most surveys find three-quarters of American Jews do), attend a Passover *seder*, or go to a synagogue at least once a year (about 88 percent make this claim).[4] But beyond that, they are not active participants in Jewish organizations or involved in Jewish institutions, know little if anything about Jewish history or the workings of the Jewish community, and are not much more likely to marry a Jew than a non-Jew or engage in Jewish ritual or religion.

If ethnicity is among the weakest of links to Jewish identity, then symbolic ethnicity is the weakest of ethnic links both to Jewish identity and the Jewish community. In a 1990 survey, when 57 percent of respondents answered that what makes one Jewish in America was to be part of a Jewish ethnic community, this ethnic identity, in all its possibilities, may be what they had in mind.

In some ways, culture or cultural identity is no easier to define. After all, culture can refer to shared cognitive perspectives or what Clifford Geertz has called "socially established structures of meaning."[5] It can also refer to common patterns of behavior, a kind of controlling program that accounts for the actions of all those who share a common culture. Those who share a cultural identity share recipes, rules, instructions and more that govern and order their activities. Sometimes they do this via a common language or other significant symbols. Sometimes this is expressed in shared common-sense notions or perceptions of social reality. At other times a common cultural identity emerges out of a shared history, sense of destiny, ideology or even a common religion—for what is religion but a form of culture? But, in fact, while sociologists and anthropologists have debated endlessly the nature and controlling character of culture, it remains far less clear in the common imagination while also feeling profoundly encompassing. Perhaps this is why today, when the meaning of being a "Jew" likewise is a matter of debate and fuzziness, the response of most Jews in that same 1990 survey to the question of what makes one Jewish in America was being in a common "cultural group." Fully 70 percent chose that reply. In fact, 69 percent of respondents in the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (and even more of those who defined themselves as "Jews by choice" or "born Jews who claimed no religion" at the time of the survey) identified themselves as a national group—a culture.

Let us suggest that a sense of Jewish cultural identity denotes a somewhat stronger tie than ethnicity, for it refers to an embracing structure in which the sense of attachment is voluntary and more engaged and self-conscious than is the case with ethnicity. If ethnic ties are tribal and primordial—a matter of fate, even in their attenuated symbolic form—cultural ones are social and deliberate. They are a matter of choice.[6]

Those who identify themselves both through culture and ethnicity are Jews I have elsewhere termed as those who define themselves as having "Jewish heritage," which seems to me the dominant type of American Judaism.[7] Those who stress such heritage are more powerfully attached to the Jewish community than those who are either ethnic or cultural Jews.

The popularity of these identity tags—either by themselves or in combination—suggest that for many if not most American Jews, Jewish identity no longer is something associated exclusively with religion, long the most common way American Jews had characterized themselves. These identity choices suggest, moreover, that Jewish identity seems to have moved increasingly toward ethnicity or heritage and culture, while being a "good Jew" has been defined in vaguely moral terms. This seems to be a new emerging option for Jewish identification.

Yet however popular ethnicity and culture have become as bases for Jewish identity, for many Jews religion continues to serve as the basis of their attachment to being Jewish. Throughout history, as the Jewish people moved from place to place and culture to culture, merging their ethnicity with those around them, religion remained a key element of their sense of distinctiveness, unity and continuity. That religion primarily was expressed through religious practices. This was probably what the Hebrew writer Achad Ha-Am had in mind when he famously said that more than the Jewish people kept the Sabbath, the Sabbath kept the Jewish people.[8] Yet as the restraints of religion, its rituals and traditions, loosened with the full-fledged exodus of Jews from enforced ghettos, the definition of what constituted religion became increasingly loosened as well.

All this underwent even more changes in a melting-pot-oriented America that tacitly demanded as a ticket of admission from all immigrants and newcomers that they abandon or at least attenuate their attachment to their origins and engage in a kind of cultural and ethnic blending into the dominant white, Anglo-Saxon, Christian American society. For those Jews who wanted to maintain a distinctive identity in this sort of mono-cultural environment, which by law separated religion from state, the best if not the only legitimate way of expressing identity turned out to be in religious terms. Perhaps this was the reason that the synagogue became the single-most important Jewish communal institution in this country.

Yet melting-pot America often allowed for a religion that was not all that distinct. In America, where Christmas was a national holiday and Sunday the Sabbath, it was hard to be distinctively Jewish even in the synagogue. In the so-called Judeo-Christian culture of America, the accent always was more emphatically on the latter than on the former.

This, too, prompted the religion of American Jews to move away from those aspects of the religion that were at odds with local expectations and norms. Not surprisingly, Orthodox Judaism found this an inhospitable atmosphere, and for a long time its adherents either avoided America or else abandoned Orthodoxy not long after coming here.

America had changed by the late 20th century. This was marked by the rise of increasingly unmeltable ethnic groups that would not make their peace with a monochromatic melting-pot America. The civil rights movement, the changing patterns of immigration, and the decline of the Protestant establishment all combined to bring about the end of the melting-pot ideal in favor of the salad-bowl model of American multiculturalism. To be sure, the American salad bowl, which allowed for greater cultural, ethnic and religious variations, still covered American ethnic groups with a heavy dollop of American salad-dressing; hence, the emergence of symbolic ethnicity, attenuated cultural distinctions, and symbolic religion.[9] It remained the case that for most Jews religion was constituted by the consumption of religious symbols—apart from regular participation in a religious culture or organization—for the purpose of expressing feelings of religiosity and religious identification.[10]

Yet the rise of multiculturalism also allowed for those Jews who wanted the full-fledged expression of more distinctive identities. For the Orthodox, whose communities were establishing themselves in greater numbers in America during this same period, this led to a far more visible and self-confident Jewish ethnic, cultural and, above all, religious identity. Now they could more openly express themselves via their religious beliefs, their particular sacred symbols and practices, and the Jewish traditions that for generations had been at the heart of what many understood as essential to being a member of the Jewish people. Some—most prominently, but by no means only, Lubavitcher Hasidim—even went on the offensive, trying to "convert" all sorts of Jews to this sort of public and exposed Orthodox religious identity. Wearing their Jewish identities openly, they went out on the streets, into malls, airports and college campuses looking unmistakably like Jews. The Lubavitchers in particular went out seeking Jews whom they could convince to engage in Jewish religious and ritual life. They even set up Chanukah menorahs in the public square and sidewalk booths to persuade men to don *tefillin* and pray, hoping with these religious symbols to revitalize Jewish identity.

But even without the influence of this triumphalist and more aggressive Orthodox religious identity that found a home in multicultural America, American Jews have looked to religion as a common way of identifying themselves and thus as a key element in the

organization of their communities. This, I suspect, is at least one reason that why almost half (49 percent) of the respondents in the 1990 survey said that religion was what made one Jewish in America.

Jews in America, however, do not necessarily agree on what it means to be religious. On the one extreme we find the traditionalist Orthodox who, like the Lubavitchers, take the view that "Israel, the Torah, and the Holy One Blessed be He, are one," as the Zohar puts it. That is to say that being Jewish and a part of the Jewish community requires an irrevocable attachment to the Torah, its mandated observances and interpretations, and God. On the other end of the spectrum, there are the far more numerous Jews whose view of religion is far less traditional or restrictive. For most American Jews for whom religion is an essential element of their identity, to be truly religious means no more or less than leading a moral and ethical life. Indeed, in another survey carried out during the last decade of the 20th century, 90 percent of American Jews thought a Jew could be "religious" even if he or she is not very observant.[11]

One final point with regard to Jewish identity is in order. In addition to the religious, cultural and ethnic elements that form a basis of attachment to the Jewish community in America, some Jews in America may draw from all of these at different points in their lives. That is, they have a fluid and changing basis of identity in which they exercise their personal choices and preferences rather than a single, unalterable identity. Beginning with an ethnic identity, they may, for example, in the course of their 30s become more culturally Jewish. For some Jews, parenthood may intensify this identity and focus them on their Jewish heritage. It may also lead to their becoming more religiously identified. In turn, these changing identities may lead to or emerge out of attachments to different aspects of the Jewish community. All this can get extremely complicated, particularly since the serial pattern I have suggested here is by no means the only one. American Jews, like hyphenated Americans in general, share multiple identity narratives and attachments. In the domain of religion, this is no less true as intermarriage has become increasingly normative in America.[12] This complex reality was precisely what confronted the 2000-01 National Jewish Population Survey. In that study, in addition to the common sources of self-identification as a Jew, the following questions were asked in order to explain why a respondent thought he or she ought to be identified as a Jew:

1) Because I was raised Jewish
2) Because I consider myself Jewish
3) Because I have a Jewish spouse
4) Because I am in the process of converting to Judaism

5) Because I have a Jewish grandparent
6) Because Jesus was a Jew and I have a personal relationship to Jesus

Yet for all this, we discover that two-thirds of those surveyed considered that being Jewish did not make them any different from other Americans. All this is a necessary prologue to understanding the Jewish community in America.

The Nature of Jewish Community Attachments in America

For several decades, there has been a widening concern among many observers that community is in decline. They have described a growing sense of insecurity and communal disintegration, matched by increasing individualism, social dislocation, alienation and loneliness—what in the 1950s Harvard's David Riesman immortalized in the notion of the "lonely crowd" and in the 1990s another Harvard social scientist, Robert D. Putnam, referred to when he wrote about "bowling alone."[13] Putnam argued that in the last 25 years there has been a 58 percent decline in the number of people who join clubs, a 33 percent decline in family dinners, and a 45 percent decline in having friends over to one's home. Putnam saw this as part of the larger process of civic disengagement and decline in association within American society.[14]

The same trends in American life that Putnam found, and before him Riesman et al. hinted at, we also find reflected in the Jewish domain. Here this is seen, as Steven M. Cohen reported in his 1989 national survey of Jews, in that only 46 percent of respondents said they currently belonged to any Jewish organizations other than a synagogue, 80 percent said they were not serving on a board or committee of a Jewish organization, and 53 percent said that since the age of 21 they had never served in such a capacity. Only 33 percent felt in any way attached to a local Jewish Community Center or Y. To some extent, one might suggest that this civic decline and disengagement in Jewish life reflects the diminished attachments of those American Jews whose identities largely are matters of heritage, symbolic but not requiring active engagement in Jewish association.

On the other hand, even as many American Jews (particularly those under 35) have attenuated their association with the Jewish community and dropped their memberships in many Jewish organizations, there have been others who have expressed powerful concerns about this decline. This might be characterized as a new Jewish quest for community. From the growth of the *Havurah* movement to the increased interest in various forms of full-time Jewish education, this has led to some Jews becoming even more attached to the Jewish community than were their forbears.

This tendency has been most pronounced among certain groups of American Jews who understand themselves as having once been part of a distinctive people, tribe, ethnic group, or community. These often are Jews who are sensitive to Jewish history and tradition and therefore not persuaded that all change always has been in the best interests of the Jewish people, or that today's America and the Jewish identity that has emerged in it are ideal. This attitude, which in some sense is tribalist and traditionalist, indeed may put such Jews at odds with the American ethos that places the individual's life, liberties, and pursuits of personal happiness above all else.

For many of these Jews, the emergence of multiculturalism has created the conditions where they believe it now has become possible for Jews to be fully a part of America yet remain bonded to and part of a distinct Jewish community. Indeed, they see the test of America's commitment to multiculturalism in how well it encourages (or at least does not sanction) those Jews who choose to emphasize their tribal identities. One might even suggest that the emergence of a Joseph Lieberman Presidential candidacy, in which an observant Jew not only does not have to camouflage his Jewish identity and associations, but may actually turn them into an advantage of electability, are precisely the sort of proof that the Jews and others who embrace multiculturalism demand.

So just as we saw in the case of Jewish identity, we find in the case of Jewish community a range of alternatives. On the one side are those that are open, flexible and often symbolic. These are perhaps communities of spirit, where only the most minimal of engagements is required for community attachments. These are Jews who are dispersed geographically and by occupation, are less likely to need and want other Jews as friends, and thus are less likely to need institutions that provide them with a place to be with other Jews.[15] These are Jews for whom the primary association is what Steven Cohen and Arnold Eisen have termed "the sovereign self."[16]

While the "bowling alone" ethos undoubtedly is part of the reason for the emergence of this model of Jewish association—or lack thereof—there is probably another explanation, too. After several generations of having been embraced by an open American society and the idea of the melting pot, and after a period of draining of the content of Jewish identity, the conception of what it means to be a Jew has become increasingly difficult for many Jews to clearly articulate. Even when the melting pot gave way to the salad bowl, many Jews simply no longer knew where or how to connect to the Jewish community. They had left it behind or never recreated it in their present circumstances. For some this led to symbolic ethnicity, religion and Jewish communal attachments. For others this led to their becoming attached to traditional

Judaism with the fervor of converts—these were the sorts of people Lubavitchers and others like them managed to attract.

Consequently, we discover that Jews once again have begun to articulate both in words and in actions what they mean by the "Jewish community" not in one way but in many ways, through a spectrum of possibilities.

In what follows, I will try to outline this spectrum with a few illustrations. Which of these dominate or likely will dominate Jewish life in the years ahead may or may not become clear herein, yet that question stands behind this paper. I do not make claims for the exhaustiveness of my list; I mean it only as a starting point. Moreover, not all these Jewish community alternatives are mutually exclusive. Like the identities they mirror, these community options may be experienced in multiple ways. In fact, one might argue that the more ways a person experiences the Jewish community as a reality in his or her life, the more bonded to it such a person is, and the greater the role it can play in his or her life.

The Moral Community

For some Jews—particularly those who understand their Jewish identity essentially as a matter of vague "heritage," are not looking for something that requires too much in the way of activity and concrete commitments, and who are satisfied with symbolic attachments—the Jewish community constitutes above all else a kind of "moral community." This is constituted by a set of moral codes and certainties that offer guidance as to what is the right way to act or believe. However, the problem with defining the Jewish community this way is that its codes and certainties may morph with those of the surrounding dominant society and culture. This is the Judeo-Christianity we characterized earlier.

For others who are not quite that vaguely attached to Judaism and who still concentrate on the moral elements of its community, there may be an effort to redraw the lines between the Judeo and the Christian, with an emphasis on the former. These are Jews who may speak generally of *tikkun olam*, repair of the world (use of the Hebrew term itself suggests a closer attachment to things Jewish). The effort is to perceive humanistic ethics as based loosely upon the ethos of Jewish rabbinic tradition and history. For these Jews, the Jewish community is made up of those who share this same moral compass, whose direction was set by Jewish history. They are the ones who still harbor the hope that Israel can and should be a "light unto the nations." In other words, the Jewish community is for them a community of values.

Many of these American Jews have argued that the most distinctive of these values is the liberalism that for a long time has been

characteristic of a majority of American Jewry. This attitude, which resulted in Jews often being the guardians of liberal America, was based on the assumption that a society is measured by how it treats its most vulnerable members. For many Jews, this attitude emerged from their consciousness of Jewish history and its lachrymose experience of exploitation, persecution and expulsion. The Jewish experience in Europe during much of the last 200 years established even more emphatically that the political right was at best conservative, avowedly Christian and committed to the preservation of ancient privileges. It could, and often did, become reactionary and even anti-Semitic, Jews had learned. This experience reminded them that for most of its history the Jewish community was among the most vulnerable. Citizens with that sort of a Jewish historical consciousness could not help but care about the unfortunate—the "orphan and the widow," as Scripture put it.

For others, as Marc Dollinger argues, Jewish liberalism and the community that supported it was driven by the hope of many Jews to end their status as a pariah people by transforming America into a more tolerant, pluralistic, and egalitarian nation that thereby would accede to the abiding Jewish desires for inclusion in the larger non-Jewish society.[17] In this view, when Jews found that liberalism stood in the way of that assimilation, they abandoned it.

The Jewish moral community, however, is not simply defined by its approach toward local, American concerns. For many, it involves a concern for human rights in general.[18] Indeed, for many early American Zionists, the establishment of a Jewish state represented a continuing expression of the effort to guarantee universal human rights for Jews. And to this day, those who view the Jewish community primarily as a moral community focus their attention on Israel and its success or failure in serving as a moral "light unto the nations."

In a sense, the argument made here is that one cannot separate moral values from the cultural and behavioral context of being Jewish. That is to say, only by acting in a Jewish way with other Jews, remaining within the boundaries of Jewish life, can one truly absorb these Jewish moral values.

Often, this stance is associated with the more liberal denominations of American Jewry; the Reform movement has made *tikkun olam* a key feature of its agenda. Many of the so-called secular Jewish organizations are even more closely associated with this moral community.[19]

Yet there are ritually observant Orthodox Jews, those who guide themselves by the rabbinic codes and *talmudic* dicta, who may also see themselves as part of this moral community. These Jews argue that the rabbis believed that living on the Jewish street and organizing one's life by the time-honored codes of Jewish law created one's moral compass.

To be sure, in practice the human-rights concerns of the Orthodox tend to be more parochial. The International Jewish Women's Human Rights Watch is a good example. This is a group committed both to strict Orthodox observance of Jewish law and human rights, but its primary purpose is to document the human-rights violations of women in Jewish communities all over the world. This is generally the point of view of a Jewry that emphasizes the tribalist nature of the Jewish moral community.

The Caring Community

For other Jews, the Jewish community constitutes a "caring community." Closely connected to the idea of the moral community, the caring community is defined by the network of concern that connects Jews to one another. Based loosely on the rabbinic concept that "*kol yisrael araivin zeh ba zeh*"—all Jews are responsible for one another—this Jewish community is made up of those who feel a responsibility toward other Jews based on some sense of kinship and attachment. These ties are tribalist or familial.

"Community," as sociologist Herman Schmalenbach long ago noted, "develops on the basis of natural interdependence."[20] Among Jews who view the community this way comes the conviction that, "If I need help, I know that I can turn to my fellow Jews and I will get it, and if they need it they can turn to me and expect it—from the giving of *tzedakah* to joining the *chevrah kaddishah* (burial society) or other Jewish 'clubs.'" In this conception, the family comes first, but the entire Jewish community is viewed as an extended family.

This is the community as refuge and shelter, the group that will care about you and take you in even if no one else will. The philanthropic community emerges out of this sense of community; for many, the imperative to take care of the Jewish needy emerges out of this sense of community. However, this does not include many of the general philanthropic endeavors that of late have become a part of American Jewish giving, such as endowing a symphony orchestra or museum. That sort of giving comes from the liberalism that Dollinger describes, the desire to demonstrate a tie to the general community rather than the Jewish one, a motive that has symbolized the acceptance of American Jews into mainstream America.[21]

The philanthropic efforts to support Jews and Jewish causes—*g'machs*, for example—are reflections of this sense of community. A *g'mach* is a *chesed* (kindness) foundation, private or public, set up to supply various goods or services to those in need. This can include things as small as loaning folding chairs and as large as providing interest-free loans.[22] Although by no means exclusively the province of

the Orthodox world, the *g'mach* is a common aspect of the caring community there.

Another aspect of the caring community can be seen in the emotional, institutional and instrumental connections among Jews in the various diasporas to one another, as well as between them and Jews in Israel. The Jew who feels that "when a Jew is in need elsewhere, I feel his need; when a Jew is hurt elsewhere, I feel his pain; when a Jew is hated elsewhere, I feel that hatred," is one who shares membership in the Jewish community as a "caring community."

The Ethnic Community

Most of what I have wanted to say about this community already has been sketched above. This is a community that for many Jews is defined essentially as a point of origin, connected with a hazy sense of peoplehood to which one maintains some sort of vague attachment, often only symbolic. As noted earlier, this is the loosest community in terms of commitments and activities, nor does it require much in the way of Jewish collective- or self-consciousness. At the same time, it remains among the most popular of community alternatives among American Jews when they are asked in what sense they feel attached to other Jews. It is essentially a community of ascription rather than of achievement, because being a member of an ethnic community does not require one to do much but simply to be who one is by virtue of birth, background and heritage.

Sometimes, this ethnic tie to community is conflated with a tie to some country of origin: Morocco, Israel, Germany and so on. Hence, the ethnic attachment is to a *landsmanshaft* or expatriate community, whose members are in fact actually all Jews, but Jews of a particularly ethnic connection. The sub-community of Israeli Jews in America experiences itself this way. At times this tie attaches to sub-communities of choice and of memory. Sometimes it refers to linguistic or regional symbolic attachments. These ethnic elements and the Jewish one may become conflated and blurred, as earlier noted. So, for example, Moroccan or Russian may be confused with Jewish. In such ethnic terms, couscous or become quintessentially Jewish.

Members of Jewish ethnic communities who want to enhance their sense of ethnic communal belonging may do so by moving from a passive to an active expression of ethnicity. The Israelis who insist on speaking Hebrew in America or listening to Israeli radio stations online, but whose interests only marginally are concerned with Jewish cultural or religious life, are an example of this.

On the other hand, the Jew who makes public expressions of Jewish ethnic pride also qualifies for inclusion here. The Jew who feels a particular thrill when Jews succeed in popular culture or in the eyes of

America may thereby be expressing a kind of ethnic communal solidarity. In yet another expression of the same impulses, some Jews may decide to play in a Jewish football league or join a Jewish scout troop. For these Jews, joining the health club at the local Jewish Community Center or Y constitutes an active expression of ethnic pride and belonging to the Jewish ethnic community. As one woman in a synagogue study explained to me, her religious ties to the synagogue really were secondary. In her words, "the one thing that kept my kids here [at the synagogue] was the basketball."[23]

The Cultural Community

As noted earlier, the cultural community, in many was similar to the ethnic one, is also a popular choice for American Jews. In contradistinction, however, belonging to the cultural community requires both more competence and more commitment than being in the ethnic one. Those Jews who choose this option may attach themselves to elements of Jewish high culture, such as becoming members of Jewish museums, or to Jewish popular culture, such as embracing *klezmer* music and championing its place in the multicultural American musical landscape.

For some Jews, the Jewish cultural community is experienced as a set of interlinked cultural or social institutions. This is the organizational aspect of Jewish cultural community, and perhaps the one most widely recognized by the American political establishment. The person who feels tied to the UJA, federation, B'nai B'rith, or Jewish Community Center is expressing this sort of community attachment. Similarly, this community attachment may manifest itself in membership or affiliation with groups like Jewish singles, Jewish divorced parents or Jewish professionals.

The sense of Jews as a religious community may be subsumed under this category. As I already have noted, religion is a form of culture. Of course, the religious community makes varying demands on those who turn to it depending very much on how they understand their religious identity. To be sure, there are those who might argue that the religious community is better placed within the framework of the moral community.

The Community as a Response to Attack

For some, the Jewish community is shaped as a response to attacks from the outside. Collective consciousness, or memory of persecution and *pogrom*, becomes the essential collective glue that brings together such Jews into a sense of community. This reminds the assimilated no less than the tribalists that Jews are tied inextricably to one another and their

pasts by those who would attack them regardless of their personal viewpoints or sense of Jewishness.

Most prominent here are those associations whose *raison d'etre* is to combat anti-Semitism. Often, the people who are attracted to these activities are those who need some common enemy to make them feel they are part of the Jewish community. These days, they often are sustained by the Palestinian-Israeli conflict or by anti-Semitism in the Jewish diaspora. For years, this was part of the struggle for Soviet Jewry, for Syrian Jewry, or against the growing anti-Semitism among American blacks. One sees it again nowadays as Jews and synagogues are attacked in France, Belgium, and, perhaps in the days ahead, in New York.

This community is characterized by the collective feelings of fear, anger, concern, and pain. For many of these Jews, the numerous memorials to the Holocaust that have sprung up all over America are, in a sense, key symbols of their Jewish religious expression.

The Community of Friends

For many Jews, the most important Jewish community of all is the one rooted in a sense of connection to a particular place and people. This is the community that celebrates localism and parochialism. Commonly, this sort of localism is based on continuing ties and regular interaction. When that interaction occurs within a framework of Jewish life, it arouses a feeling of attachment to Judaism that is interwoven with a sense of communal belonging and solidarity.

In America, this commonly is experienced through the synagogue. A sense of community often is an extension of a synagogue tie, particularly among those who attend regularly. People who share ties with one another through the synagogue often perceive these not simply as particularistic ties but specifically Jewish ones. Friends from the synagogue become Jewish friends, and occasions for meeting with them often are perceived directly or indirectly as Jewish occasions.

Connected to this is a sense of a community of people linked together via the giving, receiving and repaying of gifts or the creation of mutual obligations: the tradition of philanthropy wherein one engages in helping out a friend.[24] The *g'mach's*, mentioned earlier, often become extensions of this community.

Connected too to this type of Jewish community is the sense that it is a place in which one marks the important benchmarks of one's life. This is where and with whom one celebrates the important rites of passage of births, comings of age, weddings and funerals.

This sense of community is particularly powerful among the Orthodox and those who live in small Jewish population centers. Indeed, it is one of the most appealing elements of small-town Jewish

life, and from the perspective of the non-Orthodox it is among the more appealing aspects of Orthodoxy. The emergence of the *Havurah* concept had at its core the desire to create this kind of community without Orthodox restrictions and religious baggage.

This also can be the community that provides help and company as members climb the ladder of religious observance. This is an aspect of community that religious outreach workers (like Lubavitcher Hasidim) invoke in their efforts, and in it individuals commonly overcome the loneliness that often accompanies our highly mobile, impermanent contemporary American society. This is the Jewish community as a place of intimacy, the antidote to the lonely crowd and the America that 'bowls alone.'

To be sure, this kind of community demands activity and engagement. As the community of ongoing linkage, it is the most intimate and intensive. Jews who are part of it associate profoundly with a sense of place and home, and the local community of friends often is where it is most explicitly experienced.[25]

Problems Confronting the Jewish Community

Before concluding, I want to sketch briefly some of the problems that confront varying Jewish communities. This is meant not to close on a pessimistic note, but rather to suggest that the sense of Jewish community cannot be sustained without hard work, even in the case of the loosest of community connections. Identifying the problems is the first step toward resolving them.

One key problem that has emerged for the Jewish community is determining the place that non-Jews can play within it. This is exacerbated by the fact that many non-Jews now are part of the family. As the NJPS has shown, the non-Jewish members of the Jewish family enlarge Jewish population by about 35 percent. They are not going to disappear, nor are the Jews connected with them necessarily going to force them to convert. The question then becomes in which aspects of the Jewish community can they be most comfortably included?

Does their presence requiring downplaying sectarian, distinctive, and particularistic aspects of Jewish communal life in favor of shared and universalistic ones that blur the boundaries between Jews and others? Will this growing population require that Jews stress the moral and the spiritual universals of their faith community over the particularities of their rituals and historic traditions? Will it require the increasing mixing of Jewish symbols and content with non-Jewish ones, diluting and disguising distinctively Jewish heritage? It is hard to imagine that the exclusivist elements of Jewish community life will be able to remain intact in the face of these new realities, except in those

Jewish populations not touched by intermarriage (an increasingly shrinking group).

Another problem is that, except among the Orthodox, the ties felt by younger Jews toward any aspect of the Jewish community are increasingly tenuous. This is not the place to offer evidence of this fact; it is a matter beyond debate. In a community that historically has been group-oriented rather than individualistic, this is a particularly acute problem. While young people are committed to peer relationships and participate greatly in group life, particularly during adolescence, young Jews in America are making those connections with people who share their educational background, generational experiences, social class, status or cultural interests, not Jewishness. Being a Jew seldom enters into this mix. Such programs as Birthright Israel and Israel-experience trips aim to counter this reality among young people.[26]

Finally, in his study of the partnership between families and the synagogue community, Paul Ritterband has found that, "As a general rule, strict denominations/religious communities generate greater loyalty and participation."[27] Since these denominations are shrinking in number relative to the larger Jewish population, does this mean that the Jewish community will be able to count on less loyalty and participation?

Conclusion

From its inception, Judaism has had specific regulations that define membership for individuals and has set limits beyond which one is considered outside of the Jewish community. Over time, these obviously have undergone change. Moreover, as I have tried to show here, the definition of community is multifaceted, just as are the Jewish identities associated with the notion of community. The real challenge in the years ahead is to find a way to maintain a living and vital Jewish community—whatever its character and whomever the Jews are who choose to be part of it. In an article quoted in many places among those who study communities, Laurence Iannaccone has argued that for a religious group to retain its vitality and maintain its discrete existence, "a certain amount of tension with secular society is essential to success—the trick is finding and maintaining the right amount."[28]

We might conclude the same is true for the Jewish community in America. For it to maintain itself (in whatever form it is manifest) and its hold over its members, we shall have to find the right amount of tension with the larger American society. Without that tension, the community ties will slacken and loosen; with too much, they will break. The future will tell if American Jews have been able to get it right.

NOTES

[1] For a full discussion of the concept of symbolic ethnicity, see Herbert Gans, "Symbolic Ethnicity: The Future of Ethnic Groups in America," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 2 no. 1 (c1979).

[2] Richard D. Alba, *Ethnic Identity: The Transformation of White America.* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), p.75.

[3] Mary C. Waters, *Ethnic Options: Choosing Identities in America.* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990).

[4] These numbers come from the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey.

[5] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (NY: Basic Books, 1973) p.12.

[6] To be sure, symbolic ethnicity also is largely a matter of choice. In that sense, it lies on the border between culture and ethnicity, which is why it is *symbolic* rather than the real ethnicity.

[7] Samuel Heilman, *Portrait of American Jews: The Last Half of the Twentieth Century* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1996).

[8] Achad Ha-Am was the pen name of Asher Ginsberg.

[9] Herbert J. Gans, "Symbolic Ethnicity and Symbolic Religiosity: Towards a Comparison of Ethnic and Religious Acculturation," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 1994, 17, 4, Oct, pp.577-592.

[10] Indeed, in his elaboration of this concept of symbolic religion, which he modeled on the earlier notion of symbolic ethnicity, Herbert Gans drew on his illustrative data from studies and observations about Jewry.

[11] S. M. Cohen, "Content or Continuity?: The 1989 National Survey of American Jews," *American Jewish Committee*, 1991, p.70.

[12] The 2000 U.S. Census shows, for example, that twice as many people under the age of 18 are multi-racial as those above that age. Of course, race also is the strongest barrier to intermarriage in American society. See also Richard Alba, "Assimilations Quiet Tide," *Public Interest* (Spring 1995), pp.3-18 and Richard Alba, "Intermarriage and Ethnicity among European Americans," *Contemporary Jewry* (1991), pp.3-19.

[13] David Riesman, Nathan Glazer, Reuel Denney *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of* the *Changing American Character,* Abridged and revised edition (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001) and Robert D. Putnam *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

[14] Robert Putnam, "Civic Disengagement in Contemporary America," in *Government and Opposition*, 2001, 36, 2, spring, pp.135-156.

[15] See Gerald B. Bubis and Steven M. Cohen. "American Jewish Leaders View Board-Staff Relations" (JCPA, 1998) p.48.

[16] Steven M. Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen, "The Sovereign Self: Jewish Identity in Post-Modern America" *Jerusalem Letter / Viewpoints* No. 453 8 Iyar 5761 / 1 May 2001.

[17] Marc Dollinger, *Quest for Inclusion: Jews and Liberalism in Modern America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

[18] Daniel F. Polish, "Judaism and Human Rights," in *Human Rights in Religious Traditions* (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1982).

[19] Lowell W. Livezey notes that the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (now called the Union for Reform Judaism) "is the only major Jewish denomination that is active in the international human rights movement, and even its work in the human rights field is considerably less that that undertaken by cultural or 'secular' Jewish agencies such as the American Jewish Committee, the American Jewish Congress, B'nai B'rith International, and the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith" (Livezey, "US Religious Organizations and the International Human Rights Movement," *Human Rights Quarterly* 11, no. 1 (February 1989):42.

[20] Herman Schmalenbach, "The Sociological Category of Communion," in Parsons et. al. *Theories of Society* (Glencoe: Free Press).

[21] This seems to be the philanthropy of choice among increasing numbers of American Jews. According to the 1999 "Philanthropy 400," the list of 400 top charities published in the biweekly Chronicle of Philanthropy, the nation's 15 most successful Jewish federations increased their private support by only 4.3 percent, compared to a 16 percent average for the 400 as a whole. (See Nacha Cattan "In A Charity Boom, Federation Gifts Lag," *Forward* July 22, 2000).

[22] For an example of one such community, see the listing of the Los Angeles *G'mach* at http://www.lajewishguide.com/html/community/gmach.htm. For another example in the Atlanta Jewish community, see http://www.toll-free.com/bethjacob/communit.html. For one in Florida's Century Village, look at http://www.yicc.org/chesed.html

[23] "Holding Firmly with an Open Hand: Life in Two Conservative Synagogues," in Jack Wertheimer, ed. *Jews in the Center* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2000), pp.95-196.

[24] Marcel Mauss, *The Gift* (New York: Norton, 2000).

[25] See Zali Gurevitch and Gideon Aran, "Never in Place: Eliade and Judaic Sacred Space" *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* 39:87 (July-September 1994): pp.135-152.

[26] Samuel Heilman, Harvey Goldberg and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *The Israel Experience: Studies in Jewish Identity and Youth Culture* (NY & Jerusalem: Bronfman Foundation, 2002).

[27] Paul Ritterband, "Public Worship: The Partnership Between Families and Synagogues," in Jack Wertheimer, ed. *Jews in the Center* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2000), p.201.
[28] Laurence Iannaccone, "Why Strict Churches are Strong." *American Journal of Sociology* 99, #5 (1994) p.1203.