

**ETHNOGRAPHY AND BIOGRAPHY, OR WHAT HAPPENED
WHEN I ASKED PEOPLE TO TELL ME THE STORY OF
THEIR LIVES AS JEWS**

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The Connection Between Ethnography and Biography

In his classic exposition of the “several ways in which the organized life of man can be viewed and understood,” anthropologist Robert Redfield has suggested that one useful approach involves the examination of a “typical biography.”¹ This approach recognizes that while “particular men and women come and go, and make life’s passage in varying ways,” nevertheless, “in any stable community there is a characteristic passage.”² Accordingly, the ethnographer’s role is often therefore to try, by means of looking at particular individual’s passages, to discover “what is general and characteristic about these life experiences.” In doing this, ethnography goes beyond telling those particular stories but actually uses these individual narratives to see that general character of the community and in turn make it visible and comprehensible even as the emphasis may appear to be on specific people’s lives.³ Put simply, the character of the community, something very difficult to articulate, emerges within the patterns of life of its members.

Faced with the sometimes overwhelming task of trying to discover and articulate the character of contemporary American Conservative synagogue life, I decided to find it using this Redfield perspective. I consequently chose to look ethnographically at two large synagogues, congregations known to be what people in the Conservative movement called “successful.” Underlying this research decision was the realization that the synagogues I observed were not simply places of worship but were—at least for most of their core membership (those who participate in its activities on some sort of regular basis) and as well for a good many in the periphery (those who come relatively less often but still feel a sense of sufficient affiliation to pay their dues)—enduring little communities. As such, moreover, the Redfield conception of examining “typical biographies” seemed a particularly fruitful research strategy. I would gather biographical sketches of synagogue members and construct out of them a “typical biography” that could in turn help me discover the features of the general Conservative Jewish face.

Asking members to provide a narrative account of how their lives brought them to these specific synagogues, I was able to explore (both in individual interviews and as part focus groups of six or seven people, sometimes in the synagogue and sometimes at people’s homes) the

meaning that both the synagogue and Conservative Judaism had for them, how and why both attracted them, and what about both or either continued to hold their allegiance, and how powerfully. Often, the narratives revealed how the synagogue-- and its related community and ideology--either nurture and further individuals' religious commitments or how they undermine them. In some accounts these understandings remained implicit while in others they became an explicit aspect of people's re-telling of the Jewish story of their lives--a story that always ended with their current affiliations, and sometimes a word or two about how they expected them to develop.

Part of the research task was of course to decide whom to interview and subsequently to select among the many narratives collected. In general, a familiarity with the basic nature of contemporary American synagogue life--what in social anthropology is called "cultural competence"--made it possible for me to know the basic synagogue member types I was seeking. These included finding those who were actively involved (core) members and those who were passive (peripheral) members. It also included exploring the backgrounds of some of the young and especially those who were just beginning new families as well as those in their middle age who were into the most intense years of raising children and creating a home. I also looked for the so-called "empty-nesters," people who, having completed those years, were now reassessing what their ties to the synagogue and Jewish life should be. I looked at people who related to the synagogue and their Judaism in a variety of ways--from those who saw it as a spiritual experience to those who saw it as a social one, from those who focused on the school to those who went only to house of worship.

Exploring these various biographies, moreover, I concerned myself always not only with individual stories, but I looked for themes and patterns which enabled me to fit the details I learned into the mosaic of the particular synagogue's life. This gathering of personal stories also offered a way of discovering and demonstrating how over the course of a lifetime people could change their relationships to the synagogue and Judaism, how they might move from one to another synagogue category and how that movement could be bi-directional. In the congregations I studied, people slipped into and out of their synagogue lives sometimes more than once in their experience.

Sitting down with these people I asked them simply to tell me how they had become members of their particular synagogue and some of what they considered to be the salient facts of the Jewish biography that helped them in this personal journey. In reply, people talked about how they were raised, about the kind of Jewish education they received, their camp and school experiences, trips to Israel, as well as synagogues and rabbis they had been exposed to in their lifetimes. They reflected on how all this had led them to their current level of

synagogue and Jewish involvement and why and how that involvement could be articulated in their Conservative Judaism, a denomination that each one of them agreed was for them a matter of choice rather than default. They talked about the current nature of their Jewish lives and how it compared to what they once were when they were younger and where they thought they might be in the future. In this they also tried to articulate their reasons for having become the kind of members they were as well as accounting for their current level of involvement. Many seemed to genuinely see this as a chance to reflect seriously about their Jewish commitments and concerns in ways they had not done in a long time. For some this look at themselves as Jews and synagogue members was a wholly new experience. They were asked to articulate what they found rewarding and what troubled them about Conservative synagogue life.

They were asked whether the fact that the synagogue to which they belonged was formally affiliated with the Conservative movement was important to them and why or why not. This often led to their talking about how they understood Judaism in general and Conservative Judaism in particular, in the process also placing those opinions into the contexts of their lives. They were asked about the nature of their ties both to the synagogue and Judaism. They were asked how their own experiences and points of view compared with those of others in their family and community.

Because these were people who were generally well-educated and reasonably articulate, they were quite animated by many of these queries and quite ready and able to answer them as they tried to weave a coherent narrative of their Jewish lives. And sometimes, they lingered over or explored the points raised by some of these questions in far greater depth than they would have had they been asked only to tell a kind of stripped-down story of their lives.

To be sure, there are some risks in this approach. As Redfield has reminded us, "if the native is induced to sit and reflect, if he finds it interesting to arrange his thoughts so as to communicate them to someone, perhaps an ethnologist, the structure of the world view grows and develops."⁴ Or, as James Clifford explains, this process can also lead to "the construction [or maybe a kind of re-construction] of self."⁵ Certainly that sometimes seemed to happen here. Indeed, now and then the conversations I had with members served to make explicit for them certain matters which until then had remained largely implicit or even hidden. As such, my curiosity and questions often gave me more to "observe" than those I interviewed might have believed was there at first. This is evidence that, as anthropologist Renato Rosaldo has correctly observed, "stories often shape, rather than simply reflect, human conduct."⁶ Some people, a bit reticent to talk at first—"Why would you be interested in me? I hardly ever come to the

synagogue?”—ended up going on and on, stretching the interview to twice or even three times its projected length. Others, after reflection, called me up at home to add to what they had told me. Still others, at the end of a long evening of talk, followed me out to my car or cornered me in the parking lot of the synagogue and revealed more of themselves in the privacy of darkness. The very act of such review, many claimed to find, as one man put it, “moving and fascinating.”

Moreover, when people shared their stories as part of a focus group of six or seven—a device I had originally used to enable me to collect more narratives in a more efficient way—they became so engaged by the narratives of their fellow congregants’ lives and their outlooks (often people whom they never knew that well before), that the sessions together went on late into the night. The story of one person’s life was often useful for another’s narrative development. Indeed, in the telling of and listening to one another’s tales, people often displayed some of the communal features of the synagogue—so much so that in one case a participant suggested these sorts of gatherings as a new synagogue program, one that would help knit together the membership in what he often felt was too large and impersonal a congregation.

Yet while the anthropologist in me worried a bit about the methodological impurities of this focus group approach, the researcher interested in discovering as much as possible about the character of Conservative synagogue life was exhilarated. I had managed to find a way to get people to reveal much about themselves to me, as they revealed it to one another as well. The focus groups became not only a mirror of Conservative Judaism but a mirror for it, an opportunity for people to show and see and the same time. In my method, I had created an opportunity for a kind of “cultural performance,” where people discovered who and what they were part of and projected that discovery onto a canvas for all to see.

By choosing a variety of narratives: those of the young and those of the old, those who have grown up in the movement and those who have come to it (or even Judaism itself) later in life, those who are actively engaged in synagogue life and those who are not, those who are men and those who are women, those who have raised their children and those who are about to do so, one perceives and discovers the synagogue from a variety of perspectives and layers. That is altogether necessary, for the synagogue is not any one thing; it is many things. It is as diverse as those who are its members.

Some of these meanings that the synagogue and Conservative Jewry had for the people I talked to changed over the course of their lives. Sometimes they changed because the people changed: what may have been a motive force or vague aspiration in childhood was transformed when people married or became parents and changed yet again after their children were grown or out of the house. Sometimes

they were recast because the synagogue or the character of Conservative Judaism changed: congregational feuds were ended, a new rabbi hired, ideological changes occurred in the movement, women were religiously enfranchised or the nature of Jewish education re-defined. That change is part of these narratives should come as no surprise. As Redfield reminds us: "To tell of a human life and its development it is necessary to tell of the changing states of mind of the person who lives that life."⁷ In fact, one of the secondary goals of this study was to details these changes which are part of the fabric of contemporary Conservative Judaism and which become most visible in the narratives of synagogue members.

Those changing states of mind encompass what Redfield called "an outlook on life." Hence the pages that follow do not only offer the "objective details" of typical biographies; they also present the "subjective details" of a variety of outlooks on Conservative Judaism and its synagogue life. Taken together, these narratives then offer not only a sense of the individuals' outlooks on life; they no less give a sense of the changing Conservative Jewish "outlook on life." "The outlook on life," Redfield concludes, "is one dimension of the common human;" the biography is a sort nodal point in the group personality.⁸

In their book on American religious congregations, James Wind and James Lewis apply this insight when they assert that among other things, "congregations should be viewed as human...entities," breathing with "memory, interpretation, understanding, belief, and action."⁹ One might go further and argue that it is the individual members of those congregations whose memories, interpretations, understandings, beliefs and actions make the congregation the human entity it is. What better way to discover this than through their biographies and outlooks which offer an opportunity to discover, in Stephen Warner's words, "the personal element that gives congregations their rich, many-layered, and emotion-laden texture."¹⁰

Arguing for the ethnographic significance of an examination of such states of mind or outlooks on life, Redfield suggested that only after one has seen life "from the native's point of view may the investigator change his viewpoint" and then observe and understand "according to the demands of a more detached and abstract understanding."¹¹ In other words, an understanding of the insider or native's point of view precedes and is necessary for a more informed understanding by the outsider. That is not to say that the ethnographer should become completely absorbed by the insider's perspective, go native, but that he should allow it expression as part of the documentation of people's lives.

The aim in the bio-sketches that make up a large part of my Conservative synagogue ethnography is to provide for that opportunity

to understand. Yet, both by the way these accounts--as well as the world view and ethos they imply--are framed and edited, by their juxtaposition and the attendant glosses, they become more than repetitions of conversations; they become ethnographically descriptive. They become Conservative Judaism, "as felt," experienced, "good or bad, desirable or not to be desired" by the people of the congregations studied.¹²

To be sure, when I was in the midst of carrying on the field work and collecting these personal accounts, I did not always see the way that they fit together to reveal the face and character of today's Conservative Jewish synagogue life. Narrative analysis, the capacity to build some sort of analytic framework out of a set of stories, as Rosaldo reminds us, "makes sense only after the fact."¹³ Hence the patterns and themes that emerge from all these biographies and associated outlooks on Conservative Jewish life only became discernible for me in the course of the actual writing of my ethnography.

So what did the stories reveal? A full answer obviously requires one to read the entire ethnography, which is on its way to the publisher. But several highlights can be offered, albeit only telegraphically here. One axiom is that for many of the people I spoke to--perhaps because I observed and interviewed only synagogue members--was that their congregation and the essentials of Conservative Judaism were largely identical. What they had to say about the one, could easily be said about the other. What they saw was, in the words of one member but really in between the words of many if not most of the others, was the capacity of both the synagogue and Conservative Judaism for "holding firmly with an open hand." This was an expression that articulated the special character of a Judaism and synagogue that on the one hand provided people with a strong sense of their being held to something concrete (over 60 percent of these Jews believed that Conservative Judaism and their synagogue required a commitment to halacha) while at the same time allowing them a great deal of freedom to move away and broadly interpret the nature of their attachments and commitments (over 60 percent also believed that this same Judaism and synagogue allowed them personal latitude in choosing what to observe). Put differently, they created an environment where people could feel "comfortable"--a word that came up repeatedly--rather than constrained about the way they did or did not practice being Jewish, even if their actions did not quite square with the formal ideological or behavioral demands of the movement or even their rabbi's interpretation of it. This allowed them to be inconsistent in their Jewish lives--if they wanted to be. It allowed them, for example, with pleasure and no feeling of discomfort or guilt, to greet their rabbi with a "Shabbat Shalom," even as they drove past on their way to a soccer game while the rabbi was on the way to the synagogue services

they would not be attending. It offered them opportunity for Jewish growth-- even if that happened in irregular spurts--and permitted them to feel good about their level of commitments--without regard to the level of those commitments. Finally, this was a Jewish environment that gave them no grief about those things they did not do while encouraging them in whatever they did choose to do. And however they chose, their affiliation and belonging were never questioned.

I also saw how closely related synagogue life was to its members' life cycles. How much people connected their coming in and going out, activity and passivity, concern with and lassitude toward their Judaism and synagogue involvement with their changing relationship toward their families of orientation and procreation. I discovered how much joining a congregation had become--for many of those I talked to--a part of their becoming active parents. The same people who had allowed their Jewish involvement to become dormant during adolescence, became active as their life-situations changed. Thus for example, one woman, Beth, reflecting on her life described a common path:

Beth's encounter with Conservative synagogue life began long ago, through some childhood friends who were affiliated with Conservative Judaism and who she sometimes accompanied to their synagogue. She "liked" what she found there, and the ambiance of the place also "felt right."

But her parents did not share this interest or perception. Not only did they not switch their denominational affiliation to match their daughter's interests, they also refused to send her to the Conservative Hebrew school she wanted to attend but enrolled her instead in a one-day-a-week Reform Sunday school. They did not celebrate her bat mitzvah. And when she expressed an interest in learning Hebrew, (which she has as an adult learned to read a little bit in the Central Synagogue) her parents "flat out refused," because they said they knew nothing about it.

As a teen, Beth wanted to join the United Synagogue Youth at her friend's Conservative synagogue, but the local rabbi there sat her down and gently informed her that her parents had to join the congregation in order for her to be able to be a member of its youth group. He then tried briefly to nurture her Judaism, but his synagogue was just too busy for a youngster whose parents were not interested in joining. Beth's reaction was to be angry at her parents (and although she did not say so, one suspects that her feelings toward this rabbi were at best mixed).

In the meantime, she went to a summer camp that was ethnically Jewish but that lacked Jewish content. In time, she learned to still her interests in Conservative Judaism. Life went on.

During high school, she joined a B'nai B'rith sponsored summer tour of Israel. It was her only trip to the Jewish homeland, and as she recollected it years later her face lit up. "It was wonderful; I recall

wanting to move there," she said laughing. But, in spite of those once-powerful feelings, until now she had never returned to Israel. At first, there were monetary obstacles: "My parents were not in a financial position to send me back, and then I was in college." Later, life got more complicated.

The trip left her with a general feeling of attachment to Israel, made her interested in following the politics and news there. These days, however, she had lost her once burning desire to go back there. Too many years had passed by since then. Now, as an adult, she felt responsibilities that she believed precluded her going to Israel, a place she now perceived as most Americans did, as a war-torn region:

"At this point, I think, 'I'm a mother and I have three small children;' the danger of going there is what I see most." In college, except for the trip to Israel, her Jewish life had remained largely dormant. She had used the time to pursue other concerns and interests. But her marriage, and in particular her husband, changed all that. He'd celebrated his bar mitzvah at Central Synagogue and so when they married, he naturally brought his new wife to that synagogue. After a while, her husband, now a physician, moved his family to the neighborhood and re-established a personal connection to the synagogue that was independent of his parents'. All this was fairly recent; their new house was still being decorated.

Like so many other young parents, Beth had been moved to intensify her Jewish engagement because of the birth of those children. When their first child was eighteen months old, they began the search for a synagogue with which to permanently affiliate. And as the children grew older, Beth believed she would continue to feel moved to do more. Thus, before the children were in school, she would go to an occasional Sabbath service, light Sabbath candles about twice a month --"if we were home and weren't working," and attend synagogue on holidays. But once the children reached school age, Beth and her husband took additional Jewish steps. Half a year ago, when their oldest child reached six, they made their home kosher.

Another member, Eliot, described how synagogue involvement led in turn to his family inserting increasing levels of Jewish ritual life at home like singing the grace over the meals at home on Shabbat "And that became our routine; we've kept it up. We've done it on boats in New York harbor; we've done it at the ski place, wherever we go." Still another member, talking about the Jewish involvement that came from their joining the synagogue concluded that the involvement that she had begun because she was trying to be a better parent had become part of her own way of living: "I just feel comfortable with it now, to me it makes sense and it feels right. I think we've imbued our children's lives with it, and I can't imagine anything else." Or as another member put it: "At first it was as good parents doing this

[Jewish activity] because this is something you do for your child. And then it just woke up something inside of me.”

For yet others, the end of parenting led to a diminished Jewish engagement, but yet an association with Jewish life that remained positive, albeit tinged more with nostalgia than a set of concrete commitments. Thus for Charlotte, her Judaism, she said, “relates also to the past, so it brings back a lot of memories.” Speaking for her husband as well, she added that since their children had married, “we have moved away from the temple as any kind of central focus.” Still, this diminished role did not disturb her and her husband. As they saw it, their synagogue affiliation had done the job they required of it, and the proof of this was: “Our children have married and are in temples in their own communities, and their children are in Hebrew schools.” This fact alone allowed Charlotte to be certain that, “Judaism has a very basic meaning to all of us.”

The empty nest could also become a period of openness to the synagogue and Judaism. In fact, this new stage of life represented for some people an opportunity for realizing a new Jewish identity and involvement. Which choice people made was largely a matter of fitting the institutions to their life experiences. This could be a time of religious personal awakening for some while for others it became a time to let their Judaism and synagogue affiliations die—“we used to do it when the kids were young and still at home.”

These narratives also revealed the continuing attraction of the “center.” In many ways, these were people who although attracted to tradition, were discomfited by the restrictions of Orthodoxy. And they wanted to be liberal but were put off by what they viewed as the laxity of Reform Judaism. Moreover, even when they were in practice hard to distinguish from those at the margins of both those other movements, they still had made a decision to embrace Conservative Judaism. Yet, more often than not, that decision came not purely out of ideology but more so out of their connection to their particular synagogue, a congregation that they may have selected to join for reasons only partially connected to ideological concerns. A need for community, propinquity, the appeal of the rabbi as a spiritual guide or the friendliness of the congregation—all could be no less of a gateway. Often it was a simple as preferring one nursery school over another or the need for a place to recite kaddish.

There was much more that space and time do not permit me to repeat. Suffice it to say, the biographies that revealed not only the meditations of their Jewish hearts but also the habits of their Jewish lives presented a very rich way to see what remains still today the largest movement of those who are synagogue affiliated.

Of course, some will argue that this ethnographic perspective is as much a reflection of the observer as the observed. That even as I asked

questions and selected narratives, I have shown my own particular biases and capacities for seeing. But that is, I believe, as it should be, for ethnography is meant to give readers a chance to look over the researcher's shoulder and seeing who he is, look even further into the field.

NOTES

¹ Robert Redfield, *The Little Community* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1956), p. 11, p.1.

² Redfield p. 52.

³ Redfield, p. 52.

⁴ Redfield, p. 91.

⁵ James Clifford, *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1986), p. 23.

⁶ Renato Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), p. 129.

⁷ Redfield p. 59.

⁸ Redfield, pp.93-94.

⁹ James P. Wind and James W. Lewis, eds, *American Congregations* vol. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 6

¹⁰ R. Stephen Warner, "The Place of the Congregation in the Contemporary American Religious Configuration," in James P. Wind and James W. Lewis, editors, *American Congregations* vol. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 60.

¹¹ Redfield, p. 81.

¹² Redfield, p. 85.

¹³ Rosaldo, p. 132.