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Impermanent Boundaries and the Secularization of the Jews

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Abstract
The composition and so the boundaries of the Jewish people have been continuously debated and changed over its long history. The past 150 years, in particular, has seen dramatic and rapid changes in the demography and geographical location of the Jews. These processes have transformed the group's socio-economic and religious profile and dynamics as recorded in social surveys.

Keywords Sklare award · Transformation · Boundaries · Legitimization · Secularization

The Jews are a unique transnational collectivity because they have been around longer and in more locations than any other population on the planet. They are also unique because they have undergone an unprecedented and dramatic transformation over the past century and a half due to migration, political change, and the devastating demographic losses of the *Shoah*. The result is that the vast majority of today's Jews live on a different continent and speak a different language than their great grandparents. Obviously we should expect this upheaval and dislocation to result in the undermining of cultural traditions and the traditional authority of rabbis and the *Halachah*.

Even more remarkable has been the political and socioeconomic transformation of the past seven decades. In 1945, the majority of world Jewry was an impoverished, powerless population. During my lifetime, the Zionist movement successfully revived the Hebrew language, established a prosperous, democratic sovereign state, reconquered Jerusalem, and accomplished the ancient dream of ingathering the exiles (*kibbutz galuyot*). All this has been accomplished by mere mortals (mainly secular Jews) apparently without divine intervention or the presence of a Messiah.

The surviving diaspora Jewish populations in the West have undergone socioeconomic mobility as a result of access to educational opportunities, particularly for

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women. The result has been increased integration, acculturation, and assimilation into the host societies. Jews have also benefited from the scientific, biomedical, and technological advances that have improved living standards and life expectancy for all populations. These modernizing changes have laid the groundwork for secularization by weakening religious ties and hegemony. All these changes and developments have provided amazing opportunities for social science research and analysis, and I have been privileged in my own career to be involved in this work on three continents, alongside distinguished colleagues such as Ariela Keysar, and inspired by my mentors Professors Roberto Bachi and Sidney Goldstein.

Nevertheless, despite the drastic transformation in Jewish life, there are some issues that we contend with as social scientists of the Jews that seem permanent questions: What are the Jews, and who is a Jew?

What are the Jews?

The Jewish collectivity has never been composed merely of adherents of a faith. The Hebrew Bible referred to the "The people of Israel" and the "Children of Israel" not just as followers of a tribal cult. The Israelites were also depicted as backsliders easily led astray, particularly in the Prophetic era. During the Classical period and the Second Temple, the Judeans were regarded by themselves and others as a territorial nation with their own culture and religion. Later, the newly emergent Rabbinical Judaism was heavy on these world rituals but light on theology. It was vague about personal salvation, heaven, and the role of the Messiah.This led to difficulty competing intellectually with Islam and Christianity on foundational beliefs. Saadia, Ibn Ezra, and Maimonides tried to remedy the situation, but Rambam's *13 Principles of Faith* and *The Guide for the Perplexed* were written in Arabic, which was surely an acknowledgment that there was a faith problem among the masses. The rabbis made no attempt to compete as a missionary world religion, but instead saw the Jews as a people in exile (viz. Yehudah Halevi). They maintained the fiction of harvest festivals and prayers for rain and dew focused on the Land of Israel. In the Middle Ages, Jewish powerlessness meant gentiles defined the Jewish collectivity. Both Christians and Muslims saw Jews as a pariah, religious community.

In the Modern period, outsiders continued to decide the definition and, thus, the fate of the Jews, but now outside of religion. Marxists saw Jews as a social class. Nazis saw Jews as a race—a biological group. Liberals defined Jews in Eastern Europe as a minority ethnic group, e.g., in the Versailles Minority Treaties of 1919. A vestige of this approach persists in Canadian multiculturalism and the Canada Census where Jews are recorded in separate questions as an ethnic group and as a religious group (Torczyner and Brotman, 1995). Emancipated and acculturated Western Jews defined themselves solely as a religious community, so as French, Germans, and British of the Hebrew/Mosaic persuasion.

In the age of nation states and linguistically based nationalism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, modernist Jews in Eastern Europe envisaged themselves as a nation. Simon Dubnow and the Bund defined the Jews as a nonterritorial nation on the basis of Yiddish language and culture (Pinson, 1948). A vestige of this

is the recognized legal situation today in Sweden, where the Jewish community is classified as an indigenous national minority alongside Sami (Lapps) and Finns, and Yiddish is an officially recognized minority language (Rogers and Nelson, 2003). Zionists envisaged Jews becoming a territorial sovereign nation on the basis of a revived Hebrew language in the historic homeland in the Levant. American Jews are heirs to all these competing definitions and ideological approaches. This led Mordecai Kaplan to offer Judaism as a civilization (Kaplan, 1934) as an all-encompassing definition of Jewishness.

In the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS), which I directed, we offered respondents the question *When you think of what it means to be a Jew in America, would you say it means being a member of a religious group, an ethnic group, or a nationality?* Multiple answers were accepted. The findings were significant. Jews of No Religion (JNR) mostly favored cultural group (80%), but that response also scored highest among Jews by Religion (JBR) at 70%. For both groups, the next most-favored choice was ethnic group at 68% and 57%. Unexpectedly, only 49% of religious Jews (JBR) considered American Jews to constitute a religious group (Kosmin et al.,1990, p. 28). These surprisingly consensual findings seem to vindicate the appeal of Kaplan's thesis on the nature of the Jewish collectivity in America.

Who is a Jew?

This, too, is not a new question. There has been continuous debate in Jewish history over inclusive and exclusive boundaries. There was a change by Ezra from the patrilineal to a matrilineal descent principle on the return from Babylon. In the Second Temple period, the status of communities and individuals was often questioned, e.g., the forced converts of the Hasmoneans, the Idumeans (Herod the Great), the Samaritans, and the Early Christians (Church of Jerusalem). Later debates involved Karaites, and "Lost Tribes," e.g., Beta Israel of Ethiopia and the B'nai Israel of India. There was also controversy over the status of returning apostates such as *Conversos* and the Falash Mura. Moreover, *Cherem* and conversion standards varied across local communities. A further complication was caused by Soviet (and Russian) identity cards that assigned Jewish nationality *(Evrei*) on the paternal line, thus creating social and halakhic challenges in contemporary Israel. In recent decades, the trend has been towards more inclusive definitions of Jewish status. The Israeli Rabbinate and Orthodox communities that follow a halakhic definition have accepted Ethiopians and Indians as legitimate Jews, but they maintain their rejection of the claims of Reform and Conservative converts as well as patrilineals.

In 1970, the State of Israel adopted the wide Nuremberg Laws definition of Jews for Law of Return purposes, which stated that one Jewish grandparent is sufficient. This decision became a major social and political challenge with the aliyah of over one million former Soviet Jews at the end of the twentieth century, including hundreds of thousands of non-halakhic Jews to Israel. This "Russian" immigration,

consisting of people long divorced from religion, helped to bolster the secular (*Hiloni*) Israeli population.

American Reform Judaism accepted patrilineal status in 1978. In part this was a reaction to rising rates of intermarriage in the USA. It was an attempt to counteract demographic losses. The most recent inclusionist policy has been to welcome non-Jewish partners as synagogue members. One outcome of the increased mixing of ethnic and religious populations in the USA is that national and local community studies now distinguish between the population in Jewish households and the actual number of Jews. The social reality in contemporary America is that lots of Jews have close family ties to gentiles. Another result of the liberalizing trend among Reform and Conservative synagogue movements has been to widen interdenominational conflict between the Orthodox and more liberal streams of Judaism. One outcome has been the rise of the "Just Jewish" identity response in social surveys and the creation of social space for a neutral or secular identity.

American Jewish Diversity in the Twenty-First Century

The constitutional separation of religion and state in the USA means that membership and identification with the Jewish community is purely a voluntary act. American Jews are unique in having no representative national body and a variety of rival Jewish religious denominations but no chief rabbi. This diversity means there is no general consensus on what the Jews are or who is a Jew.

In the mid-1980s, I took up the directorships of the Research Department of the Council of Jewish Federations and the newly established North American Jewish Data Bank. This provided me with considerable influence over national and local community surveys of Jews, which were largely sponsored by the then dominant federations. My own reading of the situation was that the mid-century profile and status of American Jews described by Will Herberg in *Protestant, Catholic Jew* (1955) was a temporary second-generation phenomenon, as was Sklare's "good Jew" in a suburban Conservative Jewish congregation (Sklare, 1955, 1958). These authors saw Jews imitating the religious profile of mainline Protestants whose own social, political, and religious ascendancy was in decline. My analysis was that diversity and differentiation was the societal trend of late twentieth-century America. Therefore, I maintained there were different Jewish populations for different purposes. Hence, the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey, which I directed, offered a set of questions that allowed identification as a Jew beyond a positive answer to *What is your religion?* Three other options offered were "being raised Jewish," "having a Jewish parent," and "considering yourself Jewish." Persons taking part in a Jewish survey but not self-identifying with any religion were deemed Jews of No Religion, the famous JNRs or Nones. The screening questions created a range of typologies (JBR, JNR, JOR, JBC, etc.) that offered scholars and leaders the opportunity to create their own identity constructs and their own Jewish population according to their preferred ideology (Kosmin, et al, 1991).

A subsequent national survey in 2001, replicating the methodology and questions of the 1990 NJPS (Mayer, et al. 2002)—the *American Jewish Identity Survey*

2001—showed that the JNR population was increasing. This growth was part of a general American national trend away from religion, which was in part a reaction to the triumphalism of the religious right—in the Jewish case, the increasing militancy of Orthodoxy. Another factor for American Jewry was the immigration of more than half a million Jews from the Soviet Union. As I knew from my visit to *Refuseniks* in the USSR in 1978, and my research on the "Russians" or, better, "New Americans," this population had a strong Jewish ethnic and cultural identity but was totally irreligious and disinterested in joining synagogues (Kosmin, 1990).

In 2021, none of this is news, thanks to the pioneering research undertaken by Ariela Keysar and myself at the Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture at Trinity College Hartford with the support of the Posen Foundation. There is now widespread acknowledgment of American and Jewish secularism. Secularity and secularization are evident all around us today in the USA, as is the decline in religious affiliation and practice (Kosmin and Keysar, 2006). Whether a specifically secular Jewish identity or culture, dependent on episodic and tangential involvements, is viable over a generation or two is a legitimate question. The lack of a common, separate Jewish language to express secular Judaism in the USA is a weakness culturally. On the other hand, the recent recurrence of antisemitism and hostility towards Jews and Israel on both political extremes may have social impact. As in twentieth-century Germany and Russia, many secular American Jews who might want to fully assimilate may find it difficult to shake off their Jewish connection or identity. Some, in reaction, might even decide to maintain or even intensify their cultural ties to the Jewish people and civilization (Kosmin and Keysar, 2013).

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