

The Dilemma of American Jewish Identity

By Jerry Klinger



American-Russian Immigration
New Year's Card 1901

“Chandler –come over here. Join me and Grandma. We are lighting the Shabbat Candles.”

“I don't want to be Jewish.” He sat stubbornly staring at the T.V.

“What do you want to be?” I asked

“I don’t want to be anything,” he answered in a childish pique.”

“America is an amazing place. You can be anything you want to be.

Would you rather be a something or a nothing?” I asked pointedly.

“What’s in it for me to be Jewish?” Chandler shot back.

Before I could answer, Sheila glared at me. I knew to shut up. It was ketubah rights night.

William Rabinowitz

“Who is a Jew – ask any anti-Semite. They know. Only the Jews are not sure.”

Judith Rice

The Jewish American experience is extraordinary. There has never been anything like it even in ancient times when there was a Jewish Kingdom and the Temple stood in Jerusalem. Jews speak with inspired colored memories of the Golden Age of Spain. But, the Golden Age of Spain pales in its brilliance next to the freedom of the Jewish American story. The Jews of Spain were born in Spain. They lived in Spain for a thousand years but they were still considered a foreign nation living on Spanish soil. They were not Spaniards. They could never be Spaniards. They refused to become Catholics. Even if they did convert by choice or force, the Church did not trust that the Jews were real Christians. They might still be secret Jews. The Inquisition was established to find the lapsed Christians, the secret Jews, and keep them on the true path. The Spanish Inquisition did not formally end until the 20th century.

American Jews are Americans by birth. They define their Jewishness by what they do or do not do. They are not Americans because they are Jewish culturally, gastronomically, religiously or even more vaguely ethnically. Some American Jews identify themselves as part of the Jewish nation in Galut. In Israel the distinctions are moot, actually silly. A Jew is a Jew, perhaps misguided, but still a Jew.

American Jews are confused. They have a very difficult time agreeing on who and what is a Jew. Are they Jews by faith, nationality, culture, tradition or the fatty corned beef on rye at the local deli with a diet Coke and a twist of lemon? Is an American child bar or bat mitzvahed a Jew if the mother was not Jewish? Are they American Jews or Jewish Americans?

American anti-Semites, their mongrel pedigrees aside, have no problem knowing who a Jew is. They prefer not to believe American Jews are Americans. They have no problem recognizing Jews, mother’s background or otherwise. Jews are a foreign entity of dubious, duplicitous and insidious loyalty.

The first Jews came to North America in 1654 by the assumed misfortune of fate. They were refugees from Brazil when the Dutch colony fell to the Portuguese. The conquering Portuguese brought to Brazil the Inquisition, the fiery stake and a choice, leave, convert or die. The Jews chose to leave. One small group of impoverished Jewish refugees arrived in Dutch New Amsterdam, present day New York, September, 1654. They arrived just in time to celebrate the Jewish New Year.

The Jews were not welcome at first but permitted to remain provided they did not become burdens upon the young colony. A special tax was imposed upon the Jews in lieu of their being soldiers, to man New Amsterdam's stockade walls against Indian attack. The Jews refused to pay the tax. They demanded the right to stand on the walls, stand shoulder to shoulder with their Christian neighbors and risk their lives in common defense of their mutual new homes. The tax was dropped. The Jews mounted the stockade walls of common defense. A special Jew tax never returned in American history. Legislatively, Jews in America were never singled out for "special" attention again.

The American *frontier* necessitated a different experience for American Jews. When the Indians were coming over the hill, no one ever cried out "give everyone a gun but the Jew." Without the establishment of a formal state church or official religion, without a State imposed Chief Rabbi with legal authority, the American Jew suddenly was free to be Jewish or not. In America, no Rabbi or Jewish community could compel a Jew to observe the Sabbath or support the synagogue. No Rabbi or Jewish community could go to the local government demanding the State enforce who was a Jew and what their obligations were. Being a Jewish American was a personal choice.

For some Jews it was an incredibly freeing experience being able to choose their relationship to God, their Jewish identity and their Jewish community and not having it chosen for them. They could associate with Jews if they wished. They could choose if being Jewish was to their advantage or not. To be successful in America, being Jewish and having the support of fellow Jews was not required. Being less Jewish, less separatist, frequently did help.

For other American Jews, not needing to be part of Klal Yisrael was an incredibly destructive dilemma. Who were they? Were they a people, a religion, a culture? How would they know? How would they recognize who was a Jew or what was a Jew? Financially, how would the community be supported? What would happen to being Jewish in America?

Jews have been part of the American experience for 360 years, twice a hundred times Chai. The Jewish American or the American Jew are no closer to a resolution. If anything they are more confused even alarmed, and both at the same time.

American Jews are always laying down on the proverbial psychiatric couch of self-examination and introspection trying to figure out the obvious. Jews, self-identified or otherwise, are a diminishing group in American life. Their numbers are diminishing not so much from conversion out as from intermarriage, distancing from traditional Jewish religious life, assimilation, general toleration and acceptance. Acceptance into the mainstream of American culture is as long as one is not "too" Jewish.

Institutional Jewry insists on commissioning more reports, studies, analysis, dissertations, thesis, year after year. They have too much money on their hands as they pound their chests, mimicking the Al Chet prayer of Jewish self-abnegation annually on Yom Kippur, bemoaning what is happening to Jewish life and identity in America. The obvious handwriting on the wall requires special academic studies to interpret what common sense refuses to see. American Jewish life and identity is changing rapidly. It changing from what has been to something new and not necessarily good.

From 1880-1920, Jewish America had been infused with fresh life from a massive wave of Eastern European “Russian” Jewish refugee flood. Millions of Jews, traditional in religious outlook, with the searing memory of vicious anti-Semitism welled in scarred lashes on their backs and seared into their minds, came to America. They knew they were Jews. They did not have any choice but to be Jews. Being Jewish was something the “State” chose for them. They wanted to become Jewish Americans. The second and third generation of that enormous reviving wave of Jewish humanity demanded their rights as Jewish Americans especially after World War II. Over 500,000 of their sons and daughters had served in the American armies.

Traditional Jewish religious life was already decaying in the face of American freedom from the strictures of religion before the War and dramatically beginning by the 1950’s. A New Jewish Religious paradigm, a new religious center outside of Judaism lite, as some called Reform Judaism, was needed. Three new Jewish replacement *religions* emerged to define Jewish identity. The first was Tikkun Olam. God had dispersed the Jews in the Diaspora to be a light unto the world. God obligated Jews to fix the social fabric of humanity by example and deed. The second was the rebirth, or the restoration, of Israel. After two thousand years of homeless rejection, no matter how hard the Jew tried to be a patriotic citizen of their anti-Semitic birth-lands, the Jewish nation was returning home. The third emerged later beginning in the 1960’s, a major force of negative self-awareness cached with the phrase *never again* – Holocaust Memorialization.

September, 2013, a major research poll was published by the Pew organization on the character of American Jewish identity. The results of the poll confirmed a dramatically changing future for American Jews.

The Pew survey reported that 22%, more than one in five, of American Jews admit they have no religious identity. Only 46% of American Jews felt that being Jewish or identifying as Jewish was important to them.

For 62% of respondents, being Jewish was a function of ancestry and or culture. Only 15% said being Jewish is defined by religion.

75% defined Jewish as remembering the Holocaust while caring about Israel is almost the same as having a good sense of humor, 43% vs. 42%. Intellectual curiosity and working for social justice and equality defined what is Jewish even higher, 49% and 56%. Being part of the Jewish community and observing Jewish religious law fell abysmally to 28% and 19%. Financial support for the Jewish community by American Jews is seriously threatened.

Professor Jack Wertheimer, a professor of American Jewish history at the Jewish Theological Seminary, was an advisor to the Pew study, commented. “I don’t know how to spin this report as being a good news story. It’s a story of a community that’s contracting.”

Since 2000, non-Orthodox Jewish intermarriage rates have risen to 71%. Non-religious Jewish birth rates have fallen below replacement levels. Orthodox Jewish birth rates are much higher. The problem is Orthodox American Jewry is only a small percentage of American Jewry.

The Pew study confirmed that religious or otherwise, American Jewry takes great pride in American Jewish historical identity and American Jewish contributions to American society. A frequently cited example of pride is the number of Jewish Nobel Laureates. Without a question, of all the Nobel Laureates, the number that are Jewish or who have Jewish backgrounds is vastly disproportional to the percentage of the world that is Jewish. A little more than 20% of the Nobel Laureates are Jewish or have some Jewish connection. The problem is a small but a significant number of those Laureates are not “Halachically” recognized as Jews. Their mothers were not Jewish.

The need for Jews to take pride and identify with Jewish accomplishments is further strained when one considers that a number of Jewish Nobel Laureates converted out. Some were born of Jewish parents who converted out, or were even baptized as infants by their formerly Jewish parents. Some simply do not want to be identified as Jews preferring to identify as agnostics, atheists or humanists.

In American culture, individuals who were born as Jews, such as Admiral Hyman Rickover, *the Father of the U.S. Nuclear Navy*, Rickover chose to become a Protestant when he was a young naval officer for unknown reasons, remain identified as Jews by Jews. There is a strong argument that due to anti-Semitism in the U.S. military, being Jewish was a hindrance to career advancement. The highest ranking Jew during World War II, Major General Maurice Rose, though the child and grandchild of Rabbis, kept his Jewish identity secret. His second wife, a non-Jew, controversially claimed he converted. General Rose is buried under a cross. Former Secretary of Defense William Cohen, raised as a Jew by his Jewish father and non-Jewish mother, was denied a bar-mitzvah because his mother was not Jewish. He kept his Jewish name but chose the religion of his mother instead.

American Jews are quick to include as Jews those who bring star appeal to being Jews such as Elizabeth Taylor, Sammy Davis Junior, Tom Arnold, Connie Chung, Marilyn Monroe and others. Most of their conversions would not be recognized by the Orthodox American community and most certainly not in Israel where the Rabbinic determines who is a Jew.

American Jews honor with pride Jews who have not converted but Jews who have intermarried. Jews such as Irving Berlin, Mel Brooks, Lauren Bacall, Woody Allen are wonderful entertainers. They are not Jewish role models for Jewish continuity and survival.

The issue of matrilineal descent is controversial in American Jewish society. The American Reform movement has long accepted either parent’s Jewish background as sufficient to include a child of that union as being Jewish. The Conservative movement at first rejected patrilineal descent and now blinks at it to be inclusive of as many Jews as wish to remain Jewish. The Orthodox Jewish community steadfastly refuses to consider anybody born of a non-Jewish mother as being Jewish no matter how Jewish they follow Jewish religious practice. Until the second century A.D. and in particular the Mishnaic times of the late or post Second Temple period, Jewish identity was primarily patrilineally transmitted. The influence of Roman law on Jewish Rabbinic views was considerable. ¹The mythology of knowing who

¹ For further discussion see: *The Beginnings of Jewishness, Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties*, by Dr. Shaye J.D. Cohen, University of California Press, Berkley, 1999, *The Matrilineal Principle*, pages 263-307.

the mother was but not the father because Jewish women were regularly raped by Roman soldiers is fundamentally and conveniently a bubba meisa.

The Chabbad community further complicated the definition of who is a Jew by including individuals born of a Jewish mother but who had freely converted to Christianity or some other religion as still being Jews. They were misguided Jews but they still were Jews in Chabbad's view. Converting out does not deter the Chabbad Rabbis for seeking to include the convert out back in as Jews.

For Chabbad, a Jew is a unity, a combination of Jewish national identity and Jewish religious identity. They are inseparable.

The Reform and the Conservative Rabbis are more conflicted. On the one hand converting out is separating the individual from the Jewish religious community and cutting oneself off from their relationship to the Jewish people. They are no longer considered Jews. But on the other hand should they lose that person entirely?

Chabbad says a Jew is a Jew is a Jew and can never separate themselves from their identity, their God given Neshamas, or their very DNA as Jews, even though they may have converted. The convert is still an American Jew, who is a member of the Jewish people. They are not concerned with the anti-Semites canard that Jews are disloyal Americans. Being part of the Jewish people has nothing to do with being a loyal American citizen.

The American Reform and the Conservatives are much more tentative, even painfully sensitive to the direct anti-Semitic accusation of dual loyalty.

The issue is swept under the table if the converted out Jew brings naches upon the Jewish people later.

Interestingly, Jews who remained Jews all their lives such as Bugsy Siegel, Myer Lansky and Bernard Madoff are mentioned in hushed tones. David Berkowitz, the *Son of Sam* serial killer, is explained away. He was only half Jewish and adopted. He was not really a Jew even if his mother was Jewish and he was raised as a Jew. Better they had not been Jews, Jews say.

Yet it was Myer Lansky who organized the physical attacks on the growing pro-Nazi Bund organizations in New York and New Jersey. The Nazi ran like frightened terrified chickens once a few brass knuckles dented a few thick skulls. Lansky and other Jewish underworld types gave heavily to support Israel with money and then aided in weapon shipments to desperate Jewish State during the War of Independence. They are not honored or remembered today. Lansky sought to spend his last few ill years dying in peace in Israel as a Jew but he was wanted by the American government. Israel threw him out. Lansky died quietly in Miami Beach, Fl. He never went to prison. He beat the raps. His last few years were spent arthritically walking his dog along Biscayne Boulevard, another obscure, small, old Jewish man. His gravesite near the Miami International airport, under the flight paths that the El-Al Jets come in on, is only visited by the curious.

The Dilemma of American Jewish identity is a function of demographics, culture, faith and insecurity. Over the years American society has become far more accepting of the Rainbow, the multi-cultural mix

of the America's changing racial, cultural and religious profile. Clearly something is lacking in American Jewish life that does not attract a significant number of American Jews to want to remain and identify as Jews. Messianic Chosenness is not differentiated in the Jewish world as unique. The place of religious surrogate Jewish faiths, Israel, Holocaust Memory, Tikkun Olam are declining reasons to be Jewish.

Tikkun Olam, the responsibility of the individual and community to better society and the world, is not uniquely or particularly Jewish. It never was. American Protestantism had developed their form of Tikkun Olam as a central tenet of Christian theology a hundred years before American Jewry picked up on it at a Jewish youth summer camp. One does not need to be Jewish to try and bring social justice to the world.

Fundamentalist Christians support Israel at a much higher percentage than do religiously identified Jews. Holocaust Memorialization and Memory as a theology is passing. Observing the declining attendance and aging population of Holocaust Yom HaShoah ceremonies is very telling. Support for Israel by American Jewish youth, no matter how many trips they take to Israel with Birthright, is not significantly improving American Jewish future support for Israel. Messianic Chosenness is politically incorrect for the vast majority of American Jews because it inherently conflicts with their desire to be inclusive of all Americans and respectful of their different paths to God. Being Jewish is not taught as better.

There is a growing dark gulf in American Jewish life that time will inevitably confirm. If being Jewish does not offer something that is unique, special and desirable for more and more American Jews and children of interfaith parentage, why be Jewish? America offers many other choices and with much less pain and far fewer obstacles.

The challenge and need is not for another Federation funded study. It is a problem of survival for American Jews of all persuasions, including the Orthodox. The words of the Torah are true. God will redeem a surviving remnant of his people when the Messiah comes. The Torah is not clear on how many Jews make up that remnant. How many will be that remnant is a Jewish choice.

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