

THE LIBERAL JEWISH DAY SCHOOL AS LABORATORY  
FOR DISSONANCE IN AMERICAN JEWISH  
IDENTITY-FORMATION

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Chapter One, Pages 8-11:

Why Dissonance?

If schools are sites of identity-building in general, then liberal Jewish day schools are rich sites for observing and analyzing Jewish identity-building. In fact, at least since 1976, a long sociological tradition of “impact studies” exists<sup>1</sup> that has attempted to relate the effect of Jewish education in childhood to levels of Jewish identification in adulthood. Since the 1970s, mirroring the sociological tradition of impact studies in the public education sphere, which sought to shed light on the great achievement gaps between various groups in this country, a sociological literature within Jewish education research

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<sup>1</sup> These include, for example, Geoffrey Bock’s *The Jewish Schooling of American Jews: A Study of Non-Cognitive Educational Effect*, 1976; Steven M. Cohen’s “The Impact of Jewish Education on Religious Identification and Practice,” (Jewish Social Studies) 1974; Steven M. Cohen and Laurence Kotler-Berkowitz’s, *The Impact of Childhood Jewish Education Upon Adults’ Jewish Identity: Schooling, Israel, Travel, Camping, and Youth Groups* (United Jewish Communities Report Series on the National Jewish Population Survey 2000-01, Report 3), 2004; and Steven M. Cohen’s forthcoming “Jewish Education and Its Differential Impact on Adult Jewish Identity,” in Jack Wertheimer (ed.), *Family Matters: Jewish Education in an Age of Choice* (University Press of New England); Harold Himmelfarb’s *Impact of Religious Schooling: Effects of Jewish Education*, 1974; Mordechai Rimor & Elihu Katz’s *Jewish Involvement of the Baby Boom Generation: Interrogating the 1990 National Jewish Populations Survey*, 1993; Amy Sales and Leonard Saxe’s *Limud [learning] by the Lake: Fulfilling the Educational Potential of Jewish Summer Camps* (Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, Brandeis University), 2002; Leonard Saxe et al’s recent study called “A Mega-Experiment in Jewish Education: The Impact of birthright Israel” (Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, Brandeis University), 2001.

has sought to assess the impact of various forms of Jewish education upon subsequent Jewish identity patterns. Instead of analyzing achievement gaps, though, these Jewish educational impact studies evaluate which experiences hold the most promise for ensuring Jewish continuity.

Consequently, community leaders and educators look to these studies to determine which forms of Jewish education could be, as Jewish educational leader Jonathan Woocher put it, “the guarantor of Jewish survival” (foreword to Reimer, 1997, p.xi). The field of Jewish identity research has been governed by a master narrative that regards Jewishness as fragmented and broken in pieces ever since its arrival to America from its putatively natural home in Europe, which is associated with wholeness. Fraught with anxiety, motivated almost exclusively by securing the qualitative and quantitative survival and continuity of Jewish life in America, this survivalist master narrative has acted like a filter, delimiting what constitutes legitimate and fruitful lines of inquiry into Jewish identity-formation.

Questions regarding dissonance in Jewish identity-formation have remained largely outside the realm of what leaders in the field have considered useful research because it is regarded as an enemy of survival and an ultimate danger leading to disengagement from Jewish life.<sup>2</sup> By looking almost exclusively through the survivalist lens, the field of Jewish identity research has predominantly emphasized the need for consonance, harmony, clarity, resolution, ultimately the freezing of identity in the hopes

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<sup>2</sup> For a most transparent example of this anxiety, see Charles Liebman’s essay, “Some Research Proposals for the Study of American Jews,” in which he urged researchers to establish rigorous standards of measurement for Jewish religious and ethnic practice and attitudes, fearing deeply the shift away from essentialist constructions of Jewish identity (Liebman, 2001, p. 108).” Liebman, the late sociologist who had been a leader in the field of Jewish identity research since the 1970s, was guided predominantly by a survivalist ideology.

of guaranteeing Jewish continuity. Functioning primarily within a stance of scarcity and the fear of loss, both scholars and educators have competing definitions of what constitutes a “Jewishness” that will be generative. That is, academically and communally, they have pursued normative, ideologically driven, essentialist-based templates for a “Jewish identity” that could hold the best chances for survival, according to one set of criteria or another.

Scholars and educators have made little or no room for dissonance in this scenario, because that sense of being continually in flux or filled with paradoxes threatens the main goal of guaranteeing qualitative and quantitative Jewish continuity. With narrow conceptions of identity formation filtered through their survivalist lenses, Jewish identity scholars and communal leaders have, unwittingly, been more threatened than inspired by dissonance. However, identity is not an outcome or a product, but an on-going activity (Miedema & Wardekker, 1999, p.76).

Even so, research on Jewish identity-formation has emphasized how to reduce or eliminate dissonance. However, we still know very little about these complex identity navigations, or to what extent negotiating the tensions may or may not be contributing to the suspected quantitative and qualitative decline of American Jewish life that the impact studies emphasize. With academic and communal attention bent solely on discovering what “works” (guided by survivalist criteria), the field still lacks systematic and empirical data about the ways American Jews are navigating their multiple and competing identities. This study’s direct and explicit focus on dissonance in Jewish identity-formation will expand the range of questions that are considered “askable” and fruitful beyond the field’s master narrative.

Chapter Two, Pages 68-71:

Defining Culture and Its Relationship to Identity Formation

Serious and sustained discourse with the field of cultural studies such as Stuart Hall, Siebren Miedema and Willem Wardekker, and Kenneth Gergen, provides rich theoretical possibilities to empower research on the *flux* inherent in contemporary Jewish identity-formation, and expand the research paradigms which have focused on *states* of Jewishness. Pamela Perry's ethnography *Shades of White: White Kids and Racial Identities in High School* (2002), for example, demonstrated that "race, culture, and identity are not static, immutable *things*, but are social *processes* that are created and recreated by people in their daily lives and social interactions" (Perry, 2002, p. 3, emphasis in original). Perry further asserted that the contradictions, inconsistencies, and conflicts that she finds "need not be seen as nefarious;" in fact, she viewed them as "potential inlets" for change (Perry, 2002, p.3). To explain how this might be so, let me distinguish between conventional notions of culture and the technical definition of culture that I will be using in this study.

Popular associations with culture include activities or products that can be churned simply and harmoniously out of museums and concert halls. They are considered good, highly esteemed, and are often elite and uncontested. Typically, this has been the notion of culture evoked in modernist studies of American Jewish identity. "Culture" becomes tantamount to the ethnic dimension of one set of Jewish identity criteria or another, or it refers to Ashkenazic versus Sephardic practices,<sup>3</sup> or it is used in

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<sup>3</sup> Regrettably, there has been a tremendous bias. The default is generally to Ashkenazic (Western and Eastern European) narratives of Jewish history and practice. As such, scholarship theorizing Jewish identity does not often address the identity patterns of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews, from Spain/North Africa and Middle Eastern countries, respectively.

contradistinction to that which is “religious,” and therefore includes food, art, music, and therefore is equated with secular expressions of Jewish identity. Let us now expand this connotative notion of culture, in order to be able to consider Jewish identity-formation in more dynamic ways that do not tend to be rooted in political hierarchies and idiosyncratic taxonomies.

In her essay “Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies,” sociologist Ann Swidler (1986) helps us add “informal cultural practices such as language, gossip, stories, and rituals of daily life” to the popular definition of culture that tends to include only “symbolic vehicles of meaning, including beliefs, ritual practices, art forms, and ceremonies” (Swidler, 1986, p. 273). Culture, therefore, can be a painting or a song or a building or a menu, but it can also “happen” in a hallway of a workplace, get “announced” over a loudspeaker, or be “whispered” in the formal and informal rules of an institution or group. But what really sets Swidler’s notion of how culture works apart from many studies of Jewish identity is her notion of culture as a dynamic tool-kit in motion. Whereas Jewish identity research has traditionally seized upon the fixed and static elements of identity, Swidler provides an opposite image. These identity tool-kits are filled with “symbols, stories, rituals, and world-views, which people may use in varying configurations to solve different kinds of problems” (Swidler, 1986, p. 273). Unlike the models of Jewish identity-formation that dominated the twentieth century, Swidler’s conception, like Horowitz’s, is non-normative and accounts for the radical variability of contexts.

Moreover, Swidler’s active tool-kit metaphor explains why the same people might behave differently at different times and places, irrespective of, or even in outright

opposition to their espoused, stated values. For example, in the context of Jewish identity-formation, these are people who describe high levels of connection to Jewish community and Jewish values, but who also do not, for example, affiliate with any Jewish organizations, attend a synagogue, or participate in any of the normative practices or ceremonies associated with Jewish life. Conversely, these may also be the people who describe their relationship with being Jewish in resentful, alienated terms, but who are members of a synagogue, attend various events in the Jewish community, and choose to give their children formal Jewish education of one sort or another. For Jewish communal leaders and researchers who quest for panaceas to the problem of Jewish continuity, the inability to predict people's behavior throughout their life course renders it extraordinarily difficult and expensive to anticipate the needs and desires of American Jews, make policy recommendations, or develop educational responses given these complex realities.

Swidler sheds some light on the conundrum. She interrogated the centrality of the role of "values" as a causal factor in how cultures develop, get maintained, and change, and concluded that culture was not the product of the simple equation of people acting upon their cherished and shared values. This is because people's philosophies (i.e., what they want and value) do not often help to explain their actions (Swidler, 1986, p.274). Instead, Swidler challenges us sociologically to consider an array of mediating contextual factors other than values, such as what options and resources are *actually* available to people in a given moment or setting. Swidler called these options and resources "strategies of action," which become "unconscious or conscious persistent ways of ordering action through time" (Swidler, 1986, p. 273). In stark contrast, the majority of

researchers of Jewish identity endeavored to establish a canon of behaviors and attitudes that could somehow hold true and still across time and space. Swidler's metaphor of an always open identity tool-kit that individuals use actively and in myriad ways diverges from a very linear, "black box" model that has largely been the default in the field of Jewish identity research.

Chapter Two, Pages 74-76:

Jewish identity-formation, like identity formation in general, unfolds as an utterly dynamic and complex process.

In fact, cultural studies theorists Siebren Miedema and Willem Wardekker (1999) conceived of identity not as a noun at all, but as an *activity* (Miedema and Wardekker, 1999, p. 76). In their argument for a notion of "emergent identity" over "consistent identity," they asserted that "[i]dentity presupposes distance from the self, and being able to handle different, mutually inconsistent roles. The individual in contemporary society must learn not to play a role, but to play *with* roles" (Miedema and Wardekker, 1999, p. 76, emphasis in original). Further underscoring the flux inherent in identity formation, they argued that

[i]ndividual identity is created again and again, for a short period, in a specific situation, and before a specific public. *Identity is not a given, but an activity, the result of which is always only a local stability...*If we are to understand identity in a different way, we also need a new theory of the development of identity. (1999, p.79, emphasis in original)

Like Miedema and Wardekker, cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall (1996) also emphasized the need to study the development of identity as a moving target. For Hall, identities are the "points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us (Hall, 1996, p.6), and "the concept of identity does not signal that stable core of the self (Hall, 1996, p.3), or what many have called "home."

Slowly, the field of Jewish identity research is beginning to take the postmodern turn and to consider new theoretical and methodological approaches to the study of Jewish identity. Horowitz's paradigm shift in the late 1990s marked the first move away from the premise that Jewish identity-formation can be reduced to and studied as a static, ontological reality. Similarly, I argue for a shift towards studying Jewish identity as a "moving target." Rather than developing distinct indicators of Jewish practice and behavior using classic survey questions such as, "How often do you light Sabbath candles?" "Do you keep milk from meat separate in your home?" "Have you been to Israel?" or, "Do you give money to Jewish organizations?" in this study, I sought to measure contemporary strategies, conscious or unconscious, that American Jews employ to navigate identity tensions related to being Jewish in America today. Theoretically and methodologically, I sought to acknowledge and account for mutability, instability, and incoherence in the cultural processes of identity formation.