



## Concept Paper

### **The Jewish People between Unity and Diversity**

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#### The Thesis

There is a lot of diversity within the Jewish people concerning questions of Jewish identity and the nature of Judaism today. Some claim that this diversity in itself means that there is no single Jewish collective, or at least that the diversity threatens to undermine a sense of belonging to such a unified collective, which is itself critical for the Jewish people to flourish. Others suggest that the 'real' enemy of the Jewish people is not this diversity, but the fact that many Jews do not value the Jewish element in their identity and do not want to cultivate it and especially to transmit it to their children.

I argue that these two seemingly different positions are related in complex ways. Many Jews do not value their Jewish heritage because they do not know enough about it, and do not see why maintaining this identity is of value to them. Others know enough about it to reject the part they know. Some struggle with the part they reject but insist on maintaining other parts that they value. Others quit in anger or indifference. Still others just do not do what is required to maintain and transmit a rich distinct cultural identity. They and their children simply move away from the Jewish elements in their lives.

Allowing diversity full reign may indeed weaken the bonds of belonging. Imposing unity may mean an immediate 'departure' of all of those who cannot or will not endorse the unitary sense. Facing the dual challenge I have described requires, I argue, finding ways to make Jews understand why and how their Jewishness may be a valuable part of their existence. To do this we must maintain the diversity of attitudes and emphases concerning the modern meaning of Judaism, while at the same time reinforcing elements that connect different groups within the Jewish collectives to a shared sense of history, culture, tradition, values, mission and solidarity. This shared sense is related to the reasons why Jewish identity is valuable to Jews: Membership in a distinct cultural community, with a heritage of thousands of years, with a rich body of varied and different contributions to the

world, gives people a deeper sense of meaning and significance than 'thin' civic identities, important as these are. Most civic identities presuppose that citizens are also members of 'thicker' cultures, and that the totality of their cultural and emotional lives is inspired by more than civic virtues and cosmopolitanism. Jews who give up the Jewish components of their identities are impoverished by this step. Cultural affiliations are not easy to create and establish. And these cultural affiliations do require familiarity with, and some willingness to accept the limitations of, the tradition that makes the culture distinct.

A continued dynamic dialogue among Jews about the nature of Judaism and how it exists between unity and diversity may thus be not just an inevitable necessity, but also part of the solution: It may form the basis for making Judaism a live option for Jews who at present do not see its significance in their lives – as well as guaranteeing a balance between change and tradition within Judaism.

### Some Basic Questions

In this paper, I present a 'second-order analysis' of the tension between unity and diversity. It takes the variety of attitudes to Judaism as a sociological fact, and does not seek to adjudicate among them on some normative, ideological or historical merits. I want to illustrate how this kind of an approach may structure thinking about some of the central questions debated among Jews today.

#### 1. Who is a Jew?

There is a clear *halakhic* answer to this question (with some intense internal orthodox debates about conversion). Nonetheless, many see Jewish identity as not dictated solely by birth to a Jewish mother. This is clearly one of the central topics of debate among Jews. Yet for most purposes it is not required and not wise to seek one definitive and authoritative answer to this question and claim 'truth' or 'superiority' for it.

Freedom of religion requires that within a religion itself we respect the answer given by the religion and not seek to change it in ways not acceptable to religious Judaism itself. This applies to all the streams within Judaism, despite the fact that orthodoxy claims a monopoly over religious Judaism. We cannot 'coerce' religious people to



accept alternative definitions of membership. Yet in social life, the question of membership is not necessarily a religious question.

In the Diaspora, social criteria are frequently used, and there is no need for an enforceable single answer shared by all Jewish communities. In Israel, an operative decision has to be made in contexts such as that of the Law of Return, registration and personal status. It is very unwise for the state to adopt answers that might enhance deep ideological divisions within the population in Israel and abroad. But the official adoption of religious answers to this question, as well as basing Jewishness on a mere *bona-fide* declaration by the individual concerned, may do just that if it seems to aspire to provide an authoritative answer to the question of membership. The debate here is not only about membership in a collective, but also about the identity of those who are the authoritative interpreters of the essence of that collective and thus its official gate keepers.

In the context of the enforcement of the laws of Israel, answers to the question of 'Who is a Jew' given in different contexts need not be the same. Thus, for the purposes of return, the law may refrain from an attempt to define who is a Jew; rather, it may (and must) determine who should be eligible for the benefit of encouragement by the state to join in the efforts of Jewish self-determination. In the context of registration, the basis could be *bona fide* self-declaration with transparency, so that those interested in knowing the basis for one's declaration of Jewishness could do so. In the context of personal status, eligibility would be determined by the relevant officials responsible for these matters. In the context of marriage and divorce – so long as Israel maintains an orthodox monopoly over these matters, determination of Jewishness will naturally be made under *halakha*.

Israel has in fact not succeeded in avoiding a seemingly essentialist, almost orthodox answer to the question, and the consequence is endless debates and confrontations among parts of the population, who also involve the courts in the debate thus making this also an institutional issue.

## 2. The role of religion in contemporary Jewish identities



Another major debate concerns whether Judaism is a religion or an ethnic and cultural collective, a 'people.' Can one be a member of the Jewish people without being also Jewish in one's religion? Clearly, membership in an observant religious community was the way Jewish individual and collective identity was maintained over the many years of exile. There is also no denying that modernity reflects a pervasive wish by many to maintain a Jewish identity that is not reserved to religion – or that does not even include it. Some people argue that a non-religious or a cultural, ethnic Jewish identity is incoherent and fragile and cannot endure. Others had hoped that with modernity, "old fashioned" Orthodox Judaism would disappear.

None of these hopes, predictions or fears will materialize in the immediate future. A number of religious definitions of Jewishness will have to co-exist with cultural and ethnic characterizations. There will be no knock-out among these groups.

Yet there is no symmetry here. Non-religious Jewish identities do have to maintain connections with Jewish culture and civilization which, for many generations, were only or primarily religious. Moreover, while a religious framework, especially the orthodox one, provides one with a rich cultural identity, there is need for active creativity and cultural attention to produce such a full Jewish identity without the binding force and traditional interpretation of religious elements. This is true both in Israel and in other Jewish communities.

The reality is, in both Israel and the Diaspora, that many non-religious homes, and to some extent non-orthodox homes, do not succeed in transmitting Jewish identities to their children. Individuals, who have no familiarity with, or attachment to the distinct cultural heritage of Judaism, are unlikely to understand why these elements are valuable, and why one should resist assimilation in order to maintain them. Israel provides some defense against assimilation because of its Jewish majority and the Jewish public culture in Israel. Yet, young Jews in Israel are often even less aware of the content and meaning of their Jewishness than affiliated non-observant youngsters abroad, because the latter at least may make some deliberate effort to maintain their Jewish identity, and this effort means at least a basic familiarity with religious Jewish rituals and practices.

At the same time, it should be clear that no religious interpretation of Judaism should be granted a legal monopoly over the lives of Israeli citizens, Jewish and non-Jewish alike. Whatever the role of religion in Jewish identities and the solidarity of Jews – the state owes all its citizens a protection of their human rights, including the rights to freedom of and from religion and the right to equality.

Moreover: limiting Jewish life to learning and familiarity with Jewish texts is also a form of impoverishment. Fortunately, most modern Jewish lifestyles, including Orthodox ones, are not committed to dedicating one's life exclusively to religious studies. Limiting one's knowledge to religious Jewish texts is neither necessary nor a very powerful way to develop modern Jewish identities.

### 3. The role of Israel in contemporary Jewish identities

The role of Israel in contemporary Jewish identities is complex and ever- changing. For many, concern about Israel is an important part of being Jewish. Consequently, many see projects such as Birthright as paradigms for connecting young Jews in the Diaspora to their Jewishness. For others, only in Israel can one lead a full Jewish life, and all other forms of Jewish life outside "the Land" are incomplete.

Others see both these attitudes as misguided and possibly dangerous. They say Israel and connections to it should not and cannot be the sum total of Jewish identity. At the same time, a growing number of young Jews in the Diaspora feel more comfortable keeping their distance from Israel. They are less attached to it, less proud of its achievements, and they care less about its fate than their parents.

Israel does indeed exemplify a powerful mode of Jewish life. It is the one place in the world where Jews are a majority, where the public culture is Jewish, the language is Hebrew. Birthright is an important project. It may well use the reality of a Jewish state as a very powerful and moving connector between Jewish youngsters and their cultural heritage. Yet it is a mistake to think that ties with Israel are sufficient to create a strong Jewish identity, or that such ties can be the essence of Jewish identity in any way. Some Jews may in fact be deterred by the identification, because they are very critical of the State of Israel as an idea or of some of its policies.



Secondly, while Jewish life in Israel is special and in some senses fuller than a Jewish life elsewhere – it is wrong to entertain the idea that Jewish life in Israel is the only meaningful way of being Jewish. In fact, the Jewish element in the lives of many Israelis is much weaker than that element in the lives of Jews outside of Israel.

Thirdly, making Israel central to one's Jewish identity when one is a citizen of another country may create tensions between Jewish membership and civic commitment to one's country.

Fourthly, the emphasis on Israel as central to Judaism in Israel itself may actually exacerbate the tendency to impoverish familiarity and critical engagement with Jewish culture and sources.

Finally, Jews used to feel that Israel was very important for the Jews outside it, because it gave them a homeland to which they belonged. Today, some feel that the existence of Israel makes Jews outside it more vulnerable to hostility that is generated by objection to its politics.

In conclusion: Israel is important, but is neither sufficient nor necessary for a strong Jewish commitment.

Moreover, the possible centrality of Israel in the Jewish identity of many Jews should not be taken as implying that Jews should endorse Israel's policies.

Another side of the same coin is that non-Israeli Jews should not see themselves as direct stakeholders who should have a veto power over Israeli decisions. This applies to state and religion issues as well as to foreign policy issues. While discussions and taking interests and concerns into account are of course legitimate and important – all and only Israeli citizens are the ones who should make the decisions concerning their future. (For a more detailed discussion of this issue compare the comments in Ephraim Halevy's Concept Paper)

#### 4. The role of the Holocaust



For many individuals, especially those whose families originated in Europe, the Holocaust is one of the most powerful reminders in modern history of the inevitability of Jewish solidarity and the deep sense of a shared fate of individuals and communities despite the huge diversity among them in their attitude to Judaism – religious or ethnic – and Zionism.

One cannot and should not deny this powerful lesson. However, there are many reasons for questioning the role the Holocaust has taken in the statements and curricula of Jewish institutions, in Israel as well as abroad.

In terms of articulating an identity, it is not a sign of a healthy Jewish identity if too much of it is based on the memory of the Holocaust. One should want to be Jewish and remain Jewish not because of the Holocaust but because of a positive wish to maintain this part of one's identity and cultivate it. Basing one's Jewish identity on the Holocaust alone may also suggest an attitude ruled by a sense of suspicion, of existential fear, and a sense of entitlement and moral superiority. These are not very sound bases for forming an identity that should deal with challenges that are very different from those of the Holocaust. Often, the memory of the Holocaust and a commitment not to forget are designed to imbue Jewish feelings in people who do not have a very strong sense of their Jewish identity. This method of upholding Jewish identity is very superficial. It will not endure nor does it address the ignorance and even rejection of many young Jews towards the life of many European Jews.

Stressing the Holocaust as **the** paradigmatic element of Jewish identity and history has problematic implications for many aspects of contemporary Jewish lives, including the very legitimacy of the state of Israel. Those who think that the main justification for Israel is the Holocaust may find support for the rejection of this legitimacy in either Holocaust denial or – more plausibly – by the powerful argument that Arabs should not pay the political price of European atrocities.

The case for Jewish self-determination in Israel is not a simple one. It must rest on the fact that Jews had political independence in the land of Israel many years ago; that they did not have any other land in which they were a majority; and that since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century they have succeeded in creating a critical mass

in that country, recreating the material basis for a right to self-determination. The combination of all these facts created a powerful argument for a Jewish state in part of the land of Israel **before** WW2 and the Holocaust, as exemplified by the Mandate over Palestine and especially the Peel report of 1937. Anyone basing the legitimacy of Israel **only** on the holocaust (some said Obama did that in his Cairo speech) in fact reinforces this dangerous tendency.

The genocide of European Jews is, and will continue to be, a major crime against humanity. We should not allow thousands of years of Jewish existence to be epitomized or even remembered by that terrible event alone.

To sum up:

A unified Jewish people, centered in one territory, speaking one language, and sharing a history as well as a set of beliefs and practices, might have been a collective less rifted by debates about its own essence. This is not the Jewish people we have. It is useless to lament this fact and seek to change it. We had better recognize it and live with it. We may even find it is a cause for celebration. The fact that committed Jews debate heatedly about the role of Zionism, the State of Israel, the land of Israel, and the meaning of religion in Judaism today is not a sign of a weakness of Jewish civilization. Rather, it reflects the fact that many people see the Jewish element of their life as sufficiently important to them not to allow other Jews to exclude them from their Judaism. The richness of Jewish identities that is created is in fact the basis of the hope that we can attract less committed Jews to their Judaism, and that Jewish civilization and the state of Israel can dynamically address the many complex challenges they are now facing.