

## Interview with Steven M. Cohen

# Changes in American Jewish Identities: From the Collective to the Personal, from Norms to Aesthetics

Steven M. Cohen observes: “When discussing ‘identity’ of Jews the term ‘identity’ is misleading. When applied to Jews, its connotations are too individual, too static, and too attitudinal. ‘Jewish identity’ is—or should be seen as—a social identity, referring not only to beliefs and attitudes but also to how Jews interact with others, and how Jews act and behave. Judaism and Jewishness place primary emphasis on interaction with other Jews and participation in community and society. There is no accurate word for the complex of Jewish belief, behavior, and belonging. As a result, we employ the term identity for lack of a better one.”

### **Jews Within**

He continues: “Critical to understanding how Jews’ identities have changed is the enormous change in the integration of Jews into the larger American society. In contrast with just fifty years ago, today’s Jews have far fewer Jewish spouses, friends, neighbors, and coworkers. Not surprisingly, they feel less attached to both Jewish peoplehood and Israel.

“This increasing integration certainly reflects several positive developments such as lower anti-Semitism, rising Jewish achievement, and greater acceptance of Jews by non-Jews. Not only do most young American Jews have loving relationships with non-Jews, but hundreds of thousands of non-Jews love Jews—a very common circumstance now, and a fairly rare occurrence just a few decades ago. At the same time, this integration has brought several adverse consequences for Judaism and Jewishness.

“The other major development is the rise of the Jewish Sovereign Self, as Arnold Eisen and I argued in *The Jew Within*.<sup>1</sup> Jews feel far more ready to assert whether, when, where, and how they will express their Jewish identities, shifting from normative constructions of being Jewish to aesthetic understandings. A normative approach argues that Jewish involvement is good and right, and that certain ways of being Jewish are better than others. An aesthetic approach is less judgmental and directive. It sees being Jewish as a matter of beauty and culture, as a resource for meaning rather than as an ethical or moral imperative.

“In the 1960s there was still largely a consensus that being Jewish was a matter of obligations. Such norms can derive from God, parents, nostalgia, tradition, *halachah* [Jewish law], and/or belonging to the Jewish people. One could violate these, but then one felt guilty about it. Fewer people today regard being Jewish as a matter of norms and obligations.<sup>2</sup>

“The combination of these two shifts of increasing integration into American society on the one hand, and decreasing emphasis on Judaism as a normative system on the other, has led to both substantial changes and increasing diversity in what it means to be a Jew in America, as defined and experienced by the American Jewish public.”

### **The Major Denominational Labels**

“The major labels that American Jews use to define their ways of being Jewish remain Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform, albeit with other possibilities—such as Reconstructionist and Jewish Renewal—and the growth in nondenominational and postdenominational tendencies as well. The Jewish Community Centers [JCC] movement is, however, the largest institutionally based association in American Jewish life, with about a million Jewish members. It even outnumbers Reform Judaism, the largest denominational movement in American Judaism.

“Few observers, however, think of the two hundred JCCs as constituting a movement within Judaism, notwithstanding an impressive organizational range and complexity that embraces early childhood education, day camps, youth groups, continentally based sports events, adult Jewish education, cultural events, communitywide organizing, and engagement with Israel.

“The denominational nomenclature is so prevalent in the United States because American society defines being Jewish as primarily a religious option: it’s Protestant-Catholic-Jew-and now Muslim, Hindu, and so on—rather than Italian, Irish, Hispanic, Jewish.<sup>3</sup> In other regions of the Diaspora, where being Jewish is more overtly ethnic, denominational labels are far less compelling. It is thus worth reviewing each denominational camp.”

### **Growing Larger and Sliding Right**

“In broad strokes, Orthodoxy has been demographically growing.<sup>4</sup> Its population, by all standard sociological measures, scores highest in terms of Jewish commitment, education, activity, and social ties. On average, on a person-for-person basis, Orthodox Jews undertake more hours of Jewish education, perform more rituals, give more charity, have more Jewish friends, more often visit and move to Israel, more readily claim to be Jewishly committed, and on and on.

“At the same time, Orthodoxy has gradually become more separatist and sectarian with respect to other Jews.<sup>5</sup> This ‘sliding to the Right’ is partly due to a triumphalist conviction that only Orthodoxy will survive, and in part a reaction to what Orthodoxy sees as the failure and immorality of non-Orthodox versions of Judaism. This attitude expresses itself in many ways such as the refusal of Orthodox rabbis to lend legitimacy in any way to non-Orthodox rabbis, even as many Orthodox bodies make a massive investment and commitment to reach and educate non-Orthodox Jews as individuals. Many of the most traditional Orthodox figures say, in effect, ‘To non-Orthodox denominations, nothing; to non-Orthodox Jews as individuals, everything.’”

### **Ethnic Decline and Conservative Shrinkage**

“The Conservative movement has traditionally reflected the underlying ethnicity of Jewish America.<sup>6</sup> Marshall Sklare referred to the Conservative synagogue as an ‘ethnic church,’ drawing its strength from the ties of family, community, and peoplehood that once widely characterized American Jews.<sup>7</sup>

“As Jewish ethnicity has weakened, with the decline of Jewish marriages, friendships, and neighborhoods,<sup>8</sup> so too has Conservative Judaism. In the 1950s and 1960s it was the major affiliation of synagogue Jews, about two-thirds of whom belonged to Conservative congregations. Now it has declined to about one-third, and is rapidly shrinking demographically.

“Yet Conservative Judaism still occupies a very critical place—ideologically, socially, and philosophically—between Orthodoxy and Reform. The movement offers a model of intensive Jewish living that is both modern and accessible to large numbers of American Jews. It boasts an institutional infrastructure that embraces congregations, day schools, camps, youth movements, Israel-based institutions, publications, and informal networks, to say nothing of its thousands of professionals and lay leaders. Those who care about a healthy American Jewry should worry about how to help the Conservative moment revive itself and become again a strong pillar of American Jewry.”

### **Jews (and Others) Choosing Judaism**

“The Reform movement, for its part, has made a signal contribution to American Judaism by strongly advancing and developing the notion of ‘Judaism by choice.’<sup>9</sup> In effect, its leaders have taught that for Judaism to be compelling and sustainable, Jews must make their own choices, which are informed by teaching that is Judaically authentic and at the same time relevant to the contemporary, modern context.

“This approach has attracted and sustained the involvement of hundreds of

thousands of Jews, including many with minimal exposure to Jewish education and social networks. And, under the leadership of Rabbi Eric Yoffie of the Union for Reform Judaism [URJ], the movement has grown to over eight hundred congregations, many of an extraordinary level of energy and vibrancy. With four campuses in the United States and Israel, the Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion, led by Rabbi David Ellenson, has been training scores of rabbis, cantors, educators, and communal professionals annually for an expanding movement.

“At the same time, perhaps half of the couples joining Reform temples have a partner who was not born Jewish, only a minority of whom have converted to Judaism. Because the Reform movement attracts these people, it has a population of congregants that, on average, is not highly educated in Jewish terms, at least when compared to their Orthodox or Conservative counterparts in the aggregate.

“Not coincidentally, the Reform movement is often blamed for serving as the primary home for apparently ‘weak’ Jews in their midst. In response, we can do a thought experiment and assume that the Reform movement decided to close shop. What would happen to all these Jews, particularly those who are intermarried, or had weak childhood education in Judaism, or both—as is often the case? Certainly some would join Conservative synagogues, but probably the vast majority would not be attached to Jewish life. Nonetheless, over the years the movement’s official policies have placed more emphasis on ritual practice, Jewish learning, Zionism, prayer, and Hebrew, thus engaging with and struggling to engage with their population, some of whom are among the most marginally involved in conventional Jewish life.

“This struggle is to their credit. Sometimes they succeed. On other occasions they fail, as is manifest in the large number of congregants who leave their temples upon the *bar/bat mitzvah* [coming-of-age ceremony] of their youngest child; perhaps about half do so. Even more worrying are the large numbers of children raised in Reform Judaism who marry out, more by far than in the other two major movements. But, with that said, Reform is now the largest Jewish denominational movement in the United States, holding steady in recent years.”

### **The Orthodox Struggle with *Clal Yisrael***

“All three major religious movements are standing at a variety of crossroads. One of today’s major struggles within Orthodoxy concerns whether an Orthodox person can be part of the real *Am Yisrael* [the Jewish people] in America—not the Jews they want, but the Jews we have. That translates into ‘Can one have common educational, intellectual, or communal relationships, not only with non-Orthodox Jews but also with non-Orthodox rabbis? How does one maintain dialogue and genuine collaboration with them?’

“The isolation of Orthodoxy from the wider precincts of American Jewry means that those outside it who are arguing for placing Jewish interests first, seeing Israel as central, and stressing the importance of Jewish learning and observance are now viewed as more extreme and parochial in their movements. When Orthodoxy was more a part of the overall Jewish mix, these people were seen as more moderate.

“Yet despite these concerns, a number of notable efforts seek to promote more openness and engagement with all of Jewry. One finds an internal struggle at Yeshiva University over which way the institution will go under the leadership of Richard Joel as its president, either in the direction of greater sectarianism or greater engagement with all of Jewry. The newly established Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, headed by Rabbi Avi Weiss, is producing rabbis committed to the unity of the Jewish people.”

### **Conservative Turnaround?**

“The population of the Conservative Movement is shrinking. Reflecting trends that date back to 1960 or so, there are probably twice as many Conservative senior citizens as there are Conservative children.

“The newly emerging Conservative leadership will be addressing the critical demographic challenges of shrinkage and aging. Any transition from great leaders of the older generation to younger persons of great talent raises hopes for change. With Arnold Eisen as the chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary [JTS], there is a widespread expectation of revival in the movement, notwithstanding that JTS is just one important element in the Conservative institutional array.

“The emerging generation of prominent rabbis, congregational leaders, thinkers, and others will need to reconfigure the Conservative Movement so that it regains the attachment of its erstwhile natural constituency. These are young-adult Jews who are socially progressive, religiously liberal and, at the same time, religiously and textually serious, and committed to high-quality spiritual experiences. In the recent past, the exodus of such individuals to Orthodoxy or to nonaffiliated communities has deprived Conservative congregations of their highest-caliber potential leadership.”

### **“Who Lost BJ?”**

“Over the years, the Conservative Movement has been extraordinarily productive, and has created important endeavors many of which, however, are no longer associated with it. It is American Judaism’s biggest exporter of home-grown talent, people, ideas, and institutions. Conservatism just cannot seem to hold on to some of its finest creations.

“The Reconstructionist movement is but one example of this tendency, as is the *havurah* [small religious fellowships] movement of the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>10</sup> Probably the best-known synagogue in the United States is B’nai Yeshurun [‘BJ’] on New York’s Upper West Side, which was formerly Conservative but disaffiliated some years ago. Just as some conservative American politicians used to ask, ‘Who lost Red China?’ there must be some Conservative Jewish leaders who ask—or should ask—‘Who lost BJ?’ This innovative congregation is one more formerly Conservative export.

“So too are the many independent *minyanim* [prayer groups] that have been started by people trained in the Conservative movement.<sup>11</sup> These leaders were, and are capable, of being leaders in the Conservative movement, yet have decided—at least for now—to build their communities outside the formal boundaries of Conservatism.

“One might thus conclude that Jewish intensification often means leaving Conservative Judaism. The question then becomes how does one create a space where these people will have a sense of belonging? How can they remain within the Conservative orbit even if they operate with no formal affiliation with the usual Conservative institutions?”

### **The Intermarriage Challenge**

“The Reform movement, in the forefront of efforts to engage intermarried Jews in congregational life, is tackling the question of how to keep the intermarried and their children attached to Judaism in an authentic way. More and more, Reform temples consist of growing numbers of well-groomed alumni of North American Federation of Temple Youth [NFTY], religious schools, and URJ camps alongside Jewish and non-Jewish congregants with minimal Jewish social and educational capital.

“The growth of both sorts of populations propels seemingly contradictory tendencies. For example, more alternative services have been springing up in Reform temples’ chapels and basements. At the same, the larger sanctuaries on Shabbat mornings are filled with one-Shabbat-a-year worshippers celebrating bar and bat mitzvahs. And a good fraction of these families will soon leave the congregation (a troubling event to say the least).

“Both intermarried Jews and their non-Jewish spouses function as full members of Reform congregations, serve as temple board members, and officers, albeit with frequent limitations on the leadership opportunities available to the non-Jewish partner. Their needs and values shape temple practices, policies, and personnel, underscoring the challenges posed by the presence of so many non-Jews and their intermarried spouses. For example, how does the rabbi clearly promote the conversion of non-Jewish spouses to Judaism without undermining the attempt to welcome mixed married couples? Even more pointedly, how does

one teach a confirmation class of adolescents that Jews should marry Jews when half the sixteen-year-olds are the children of Jewish and non-Jewish parents? Although these dilemmas are most keenly felt in Reform temples, they emerge in Conservative and Reconstructionist congregations as well.”<sup>12</sup>

### **Multiple Modes of Jewish Engagement**

“There are many other ways outside of congregational life in which American Jews are Jewishly engaged. Many still live in such Jewish neighborhoods as New York’s Upper West Side, Squirrel Hill (Pittsburgh), and Silver Spring (Maryland). Jews in areas of greater residential concentration, largely in the Northeast and Midwest, not only have more Jewish neighbors; they also report more Jewish spouses, more Jewish friends, and more Jewish institutional ties than those in other sparsely-settled Jewish environs. Jews in the older areas of settlement often still have an ethnic style; many manifest Jewishness through domestic political concerns or with regard to Israel.

“On another plane, the JCC movement, as mentioned earlier, is widely overlooked as a locus of Jewish community-building, to say nothing of its great strides in informal Jewish education. Furthermore, American Jews have a very rich cultural life in music, art, literature, scholarship, journalism, dance, museums of various kinds, and also now on the internet.

“Indeed, there are hundreds of millions of pages on the internet on Jewish matters. Obviously, none existed fifteen years ago. There is a documented increase in Jewish involvement in social-justice activism, of which Ruth Messinger and the American Jewish World Service [AJWS] is the most visible phenomenon.<sup>13</sup>

“There is thus a plethora of Jewish life that is being led by people in their twenties and thirties outside the traditional network. Perhaps most exciting is the work of this younger generation who are involved in self-initiated acts of Jewish communal creation.<sup>14</sup> The newly established independent minyanim and rabbi-led emergent spiritual communities are particularly impressive. About eighty of these have sprung up all over the United States, several of them outside the major Jewish centers. Some such communities report upward of three thousand people on their mailing lists, while other communities number as few as sixty or seventy participants.

“These minyanim and rabbi-led communities keep costs very low. They may get a Torah scroll donated and rent a church on a Shabbat morning. To their credit, some local federations and foundations have made grants to some of these startup communities. Although most manage to get by on the passion of volunteer or underpaid leadership, at least fifteen such groups over the last ten years have emerged and then stopped functioning.”

## **Extended Singlehood**

Cohen says: “The question is: how fast will the American Jewish community recognize the value of the endeavors by younger people outside the traditional institutional framework and support them in view of the major demographic shift that has just taken place: the vast expansion of singlehood among non-Orthodox younger adults?”

“Today, reflecting a worldwide pattern, most non-Orthodox Jewish adults under the age of forty are not married. In the recent past Jews used to marry five to seven years after leaving university. This now happens after ten to fifteen years, if at all. There are also somewhat higher divorce rates than at mid-century. All this means that among non-Orthodox Jews there is a large percentage of unmarried people, almost always without children. In the past, childrearing has brought Jews to congregations and JCCs.

“Since this younger generation is spending many more years unmarried and without children, the Jewish community must develop institutions they can use. Few will come to JCCs, synagogues, or federations as currently constructed. There they would find mainly married people, most of them to Jews, and often with young children of their own, or middle-aged and older empty-nesters.”

## **Strengthening the Jewish Collective**

“If I had to point to one issue, I’d say that our primary challenge is to strengthen the Jewish collective. The decline in commitment of many Jews to the Jewish people, Israel, and the Jewish community is deeply worrying. Fewer Jews see themselves as obligated to support the collective interests of the Jewish people, or even to relate personally to the very notion of the Jewish people at all.<sup>15</sup>

“The extent of intermarriage and intergroup friendship is truly significant. About two-thirds of older American Jews have mostly Jewish friends. In contrast, two-thirds of the under-thirty generation have mostly non-Jewish friends. Most young Jews today who have a partner are either married or romantically involved with non-Jews. I can say with relative certitude that none of my grandparents ever dated a non-Jew; and I can say with equal certitude that the vast majority of Jews my children’s ages have had intimate and loving relationships with non-Jews. Personal experiences inexorably affect collective identities.

“The interpersonal integration of Jews with non-Jews poses major questions as to how one can strengthen, preserve, or make meaningful the Jewish commitment to the collective, without seeming or being racist. How does one argue for and promote Jewish marriage and friendship in this world without appearing bigoted and insular? Causes such as Israel, building the Jewish community, or caring about Jews locally and all over the world demand the establishment and nurturing of strong Jewish networks of friends and family. Yet to many Jews, younger

somewhat more than older, teaching to forge and pursue such in-group ties seems so un-postmodern and un-American.”

### **Taking Hold of Torah**

“If Judaism is a matter of norms, of right and wrong, one can teach one’s children that Jewish involvement is right, and distancing from Jewish life is wrong. But if to be Jewish is a matter of aesthetics, then one can only teach that Jewish engagement is akin to the love of music and art—lending purpose and meaning and spiritual enrichment, but by no means a moral decision. In fact, many Jews now see being Jewish this way—a good thing to do, but not a matter of right or wrong. They have no sense that for a Jew to be Jewish is the right way to be, akin to one’s patriotic duty as an American or other nationality.

“Such morally laden language and concepts, while Judaically authentic, are admittedly not the most immediately compelling way to reach indifferent contemporary Jews. We need to develop a way of speaking, modeling, and teaching, one that combines the normative and aesthetic approaches. This approach should appeal to Jews so that they find it meaningful to be obligated, or, to quote the title of Arnold Eisen’s book, that they engage in *Taking Hold of Torah*.<sup>16</sup> We need both individual autonomy—‘taking hold’—and a turn to Torah, in the broadest sense.

“Rabbis and other leaders in all three movements and beyond are struggling to bridge the longstanding gap between the Judaic mission to which they are committed and the reality of the American Jewish marketplace in which they work. To the extent that they succeed, the future of American Jews and Judaism will be assured. Fortunately and unfortunately, the diversity of American Jews, and the inevitability and rapidity of change makes the task of bridging Judaic mission and Jewish market an ongoing and never-finished challenge.”

### **Notes**

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