

The Elusive Character of American Jewish Identity

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Abstract

When it comes to the classification and definition of the subject of identity, the Jews are probably the most difficult group to be put in the usual categories. Traditional representations of Jewish identity have been gradually replaced by the new cultural identifications. The third and the fourth generation of American Jewish writers are addressing the issue of identity in contemporary America from diverse perspectives. Our paper explores these various representations and it aims to find their common elements. With the use of sociological, psychological identity theories and Kallen's view on identity construct, we aim to explore what defines "Jewishness" in contemporary America.

The study of identity has become a crucial object of research within the modern thought. Primarily, sociologists focused on examining how interpersonal communication form individual "self", however the research of the past decades has focused more on the definition of "collective identity". Various sociological constructs have attempted to address the notion of "we" and the notion of "ness". Jewish people in general have been a rather difficult group to fall within any usual categories. Our paper explores various representations of identity of American Jews in an attempt to show how the process of transformation of identity results in the writings of the last generation.

Generally accepted definition that a person is a Jew if he/she was born to a Jewish mother or converted to Judaism has become inaccurate with the increasing rate of intermarriages and the decline in synagogue attendance. According to Lemish, all attempts to categorize or identify Jews as an ethnic, religious, or national group are simply inadequate and incomplete. Perhaps the closest any identification can come is to view the Jews holistically as a culture. (Lemish: 1981). Dilemmas about precise definition of Jewish identity have been present since the traditional identifications started to fall apart. Martin Buber, the prominent Jewish thinker correctly predicted the elusiveness of Jewish identity:

Jews elude all classification ... (this) uniqueness was discernible only by the inner eye of faith and could be borne only as the yoke of the Kingdom of God." (Buber: 1963)

Buber's reference to faith was obviously unquestionable when the belief system, sacred texts and own language were firm representations of Jewish identity. On the other hand, another prominent Jew Sigmund Freud considered religion to play little role in determining his own Jewishness. His attraction to Judaism was merely on account of:

many dark emotional forces, all the more potent for being so hard to grasp in words, as well as the clear consciousness of an inner identity, the intimacy (Heimlichkeit) that comes from the same psychic structure". (Freud:1946)

Buber's sacred and Freud's secular point of view on Jewishness at the end of the 19th century was a sort of prophecy of the same dilemma in the postmodern world. According to Kallen the place and function of Judaism in Jewish life is like the place of any religion in any national life. Kallen considers religion to be just an item in that life; only an item, no matter how important (Kallen: 1915).

Dilemma or duality is central to Jewish identity in America. Research conducted by Friedman, Friedlander and Blustein concluded that the majority of the participants in their study described themselves as having two cultural identities, Jewish and American (Friedman: 2005). Such bipolarity is reflected in a famous last paragraph of Abraham Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky*, where Levinsky achieves a new American identity superficially but stays truly Jewish inside:

I don't seem to be able to get accustomed to my luxurious life. I am always more or less conscious of my good clothes, of the high quality of my office furniture; of the power I yield over the men in my pay...I can never forget the days of my misery. I cannot escape from my former self. My past and present do not comport well. David, the poor lad swinging over a Talmud volume at the Preacher's synagogue, seems to have more in common with my inner identity than David Levinsky, the well-known cloak manufacturer. (Cahan: 1917).

The second predicament central to determination of Jewish identity is the question of autochthony; how do Jews identify themselves if their biological place of origin is constructed? The theme of home preoccupied the writers of the first generation who felt nostalgia over an enclosed life in shtetls back in Europe. The second and the third generation which was too busy in the process of assimilation did not feel yearning for their place of origin at all. Nevertheless, the theme of homecoming is very present in the writings of the last generation of American Jewish writers.

Language as the very centre of a group differentiation is another issue in terms of identity. Yiddish, a language that the majority of Jews used to speak is now spoken very randomly and usually in a mocking way. Yiddish has been replaced by New English that only Jewish people can understand. (Kugelmass: 2003) This can be well demonstrated by an introductory anecdote to Katz's book called "Jewish as a Second language" which is written for non-Jews wanting to marry into Jewish families:

I am Jewish. My husband Bill is not. One day my mother had to get her blood pressure checked. She didn't need a ride, she said: she'd call a cab. Bill said, "Okay". Of course she stopped speaking to us." (Kugelmass: 2003)

As Kugelmass comments, non-Jews cannot learn Yiddish and they should not even try. Instead they ought to learn the true language of the Jews, which is according to Katz, not Yiddish, but the complex twists and somersaults of everyday behavior. (Kugelmass:2003)

Even if we narrow our scope of interest to American Jews we still have to be careful in making any firm classifications. Indeed, in America there are various representations of Jewish identity. According to Zenner, the north part of America and New York State obviously contain the largest group of East European Ashkenazi Jews. However, Ladino speaking or Yemenites are not seen as Jews and must not prove themselves. The Yemenites, because of their skin color, are not seen as Jews, who in the contemporary New York City context are perceived a relatively fair-skinned. The problems faced by the Yemenites, a fairly traditional community, resembles that of other small groups who stand between black and white in this racially dichotomous society. (Zenner: 1988) Such variety in perception of Jewishness makes the determination of identity even more difficult.

If Jewish identity cannot be labeled as religious, ethnic or racial, what is it then? Or to put it in simpler words if you don't belong to a synagogue, keep kosher, or marry another Jew, then what exactly does it mean to be Jewish? In order to find at least some answers it is necessary to reduce the extent of our interest to American Jews who have European (Ashkenazi) origin. The theoretical background for Americans whose ethnic identities are

based on their European origin is represented by two sociological points of view. The first is by Richard Alba who argues that ethnic identity is no longer anchored in strongly ethnic social structures (Cerulo: 1997). Furthermore, Alba presents ethnicity as a symbolic entity “concerned with the symbols of ethnic cultures rather than with the cultures themselves” (Alba: 1990).

If we go back to the traditional representations of Jewishness in premodern times we can discover that it used to be very firm, set within strict boundaries. Despite the fact that Jewish people have always lived in Diaspora and there have always been certain differences between their particular representations, the main transition of “identity” managed to be preserved. Continuity of traditions was passed on from one generation to another and thus secured the preservation of heritage. In the modern times such continuation was interrupted due to various historical, sociological, economical changes. The fact that most of the Jews after the first and Second World War immigrated to the United States only accelerated the process of assimilation and the disappearance of the previous typical representations of identity. From today’s view we can see a very exciting evolution of four very distinct generations of writers who have shaped and reshaped Jewish identity in America. The “bridging” generation represented by writings of Isaac Bashevis Singer or Shalom Aleichem was the transition between the old and the new world. Singer’s shtetl stories or Aleichem’s fiddlers brought some of the old world nostalgia into the New America.

Abraham Cahan, Anna Yeziarska, Henry Roth are now classic representatives of the period spanning from 1880 until 1920, who portray the world of the Jewish-American immigrants. P. Roth, B. Malamud or S. Below represent a completely new generation of American Jewish writers not only in a sense that their writing became more profane, moreover they seem to have abandoned their Jewish origins and hoped to get established more as “American writers”. Most of the writers of that generation did not feel the urge to emphasize their Jewish origin as in the course of assimilation the borders between what was American and Jewish in literature started to disappear.

Apparently, Philip Roth represented those writers who felt that the process of assimilation was completed and there was no urgency to label their writing. However, even within this generation of American-Jewish writers there was a different degree of assimilation. Interestingly, Bellow or Roth write about assimilated Jews and their ability or inability to cope with life in America whereas there are writers such as Chaim Potok who focuses on conflicts between Orthodox Judaism and the secular world. Many of Potok's characters want the American Jewry to remain isolated from the mainstream American culture:

The world kills us! The world flays our skin from our bodies and throws us into the flames! The world laughs at Torah! And if it does not kill us, it tempts us! It misleads us! It contaminates us! It asks us to join in its ugliness, its abominations! (Potok: 1967)

Roth’s and Potok’s novels only demonstrate how disintegrated the concept of American-Jewish literature was in the late 70s.

When the 70s dismantled all possible themes appearing in American-Jewish fiction, Irvin Howe said that „Jewish fiction had probably moved past its highpoint. “ (Howe: 1977). Howe’s unfulfilled prediction has been repeated so many times that it has become notorious or better to say notoriously denied. Even though, from today’s point of view the atmosphere of those years indicated that most common themes related to American Jews such as immigration and assimilation had been exhausted. As we have already mentioned, with the last generation of writers sometimes we see that the search for identity continues.

The second sociological theory which deals with ethnic identity is by Mary Waters who comes to understand ethnic identity as the product of personal choice - social category individuals actively decide to adopt or stress (Cerulo: 1997). What is more interesting is that Waters point out at the "reinvention" of ethnicity in generation of the grandchildren and great grandchildren of European immigrants and discovers a great sense of ethnicity among people who could reasonably label themselves simply "American." The same trend can be observed in the writings of the fourth generation of American Jews who were born as Americans, most of them are not what we would call „performing Jews“, they seemingly do not have any particular reason to search back for their roots three generations back. However, Jonathan Safran Foer or Nicole Kraus just to name a few do not only confirm Water’s “reinvention” of ethnicity but also Marcus Lee Hansen’s theory of the “third (actually presently the fourth) generation return”.

The last generation of writers fit these two theories perfectly as they revive themes such as east European shtetls, myths and legends, pogroms, persecution and the Holocaust. What is interesting is that all of these writers go back also geographically and they set their stories in Eastern Europe or Russia and bring them across the Atlantic back to contemporary America. The theme of homecoming is present in Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Everything is Illuminated* where the presence of three generations is the backbone of his narrative, and he uses it to show how vital it can be in the reinvention of one’s memory, past and identity.

The second author who deals with generation return and also confronts American and Jewish culture is Lara Vapnyar in her collection of short stories *There are Jews in my house*. Vapnyar offers a good balance when it comes to a setting of these stories as some of them take place in Moscow and some of them in contemporary Brooklyn. The characters in her stories that again range from grandchildren through parents to grandparents give a unique overview on bridging two different worlds. The old – represented by grandparents, whose most life took place in Russia and the New- the grandchildren who start new life in America. Vapnyar’s themes are very similar to her Canadian contemporary David Bezmozgis in his book of short stories called *Natasha* or American contemporary Gary Shteyngart and his *The Russian Debutante’s Handbook*. These writers are just a small sample of other contemporary American Jews who are trying to reinvent their new identities by returning back to their parents or grandparents Jewish past.

The question is what makes these writers return a few decades back and send their characters back to their grandparents’ shtetls? Where did this increased search for identity suddenly come from? Dara Horn considers 9/11 to have emerged a heightened sense of Jewish identity (Saxs: 2009). Perhaps this and also the disappearance of the traditional representations as we have already mentioned are the main motifs for contemporary writers to take a look back and want to understand what it means to be a Jew in the modern world. It only confirms Kallen’s definition of Jewish identity which had come to mean memory reshaped daily:

Once having identified as a Jew, one constantly reshaped that identity through the sifting of memory and the interaction with other people, Jews and non-Jews alike.
(Kallen: 1915)

To conclude, David Hollinger argues that in the kind of post-ethnic world that characterizes America, the notion of affiliation (i.e., a community of consent in which one chooses one or more of many possible selves) replaces the concept of identity something fixed and given. (Kugelmass: 2003). For American Jews it means that they are able to choose more than a single identity reflected in their kind of affiliation. (Kugelmass: 2003). The choice of identity is reflected in the writings of the last generation of American Jews who

despite refusing to be labeled Jewish return to purely Jewish themes and thus reinvent their identities. I would like to conclude with the quotation from Abraham Cahan's *Rise of David Levinsky*:

I cannot escape from my old self" says Levinsky and he realizes that "the attempt to escape Jewishness" is bound to failure and that "the search for inner identity demands some sort of return. (Cahan: 1917)

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