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Gender and Jewish Identity among Twenty-Somethings in the United States

Debra Renee Kaufman

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound
 That saved a wretch like me.
 I once was lost but now I'm found,
 Was blind but now I see.

"When I hear 'Amazing Grace' I think *Shabbos* (the Jewish Sabbath)," a twenty-five-year-old male said to me as we sat around a table with nine of his other friends and ate communally from the spread before us in the small booth in the Ethiopian restaurant where we had agreed to meet. Just how complicated identity in a pluralistic society can be is evident in the ways that "Amazing Grace," redolent with meaning of a different time and place for one community, can invoke identity for members of another community.

In this group interview drawn from a snowball sample of fifty students from ten colleges along the eastern seacoast of the United States and from twenty personal interviews among Boston based residents between the ages of twenty and thirty, this young man was explaining in response to the question, "What things do you do in your life that make you feel Jewish?" that he spends almost every Friday night in the celebration of the Sabbath with his friends.

We get together almost every Friday night, although we don't always go to *shule* [synagogue] and sometimes we don't even have Friday night dinner together or even light the candles or make the *kiddush* [prayer over wine] or *mozi* [prayer over the bread, challah], but we always folksing together. We bring our guitars and we sing. We sing Hebrew, Yiddish . . . songs from the sixties but we always, always end our evening by singing "Amazing Grace."

In this essay, I wish to contest the notion that there is a definable, easily recognized, monolithic and unambivalent complex set of emotions and attitudes

and/or content that make up our identities. Erickson once referred to identity as "a term for something unfathomable as it is all pervasive" (cited in Meyers 1990:56). Like other theorists, I do not believe that identities derive from "natural" qualities or divisions. Instead, they are continually being produced, disseminated and struggled over (Connolly 1991:64). Although I am interested in the dynamic processes whereby the many components of identity are produced, in this brief chapter I shall not be able to pursue this continuous play among and between culture, history, and power, but rather shall confine myself to a more descriptive analysis of identity among young adults in the United States. Several important theoretical issues emerge from these findings. Identity requires difference, and it is contextual. As Connolly (1991:64) suggests, "Identity requires difference in order to be" and "it converts difference into otherness in order to secure its own self-certainty." Moreover, we learn our identities within certain moments of history and within certain parameters of class, race, gender, and ethnicity.

One finding that I shall reveal before I even present the data is that for both the male and the female young adults in this study, except for the three subjects who are strictly orthodox,¹ Jewish identity, in general, constitutes what has been called an ethnic solidarity based on stereotypical understandings of peoplehood and the peculiar characteristics of those people, rather than on a religious understanding of Judaism. Feingold (1991) calls this the possibility of being Jewish, but not Judaic. While the majority of identified American Jews may not be very well informed about the content of Judaic thought or theology or even the history of their people, they do seem to be involved, as my data show, in the political process of carrying on the culture in a "separatist, distinctive communal style" (Feingold 1991:72) or in the ways that mark them as different from others, even if that difference has to be continually created. Therefore, since those under study are predominately middle to upper middle class, ethnically similar, and of the same race, gender will be my focus. Gender, like identity, of course, is dependent on or constituted by the intersection of class, race, and ethnicity as well.

Hall (cited in Silberstein 1994:4) writes, "Identities are the names we give to different ways we are positioned by and position ourselves within the narratives of the past." One such narrative that has *not* been explored among this age group is the Holocaust. How do these young adults, for whom memory is fast becoming history, position themselves within this past event? In what ways does this narrative become, if at all, a part of their Jewish identities?

The question for me is, does the Holocaust provide themes and metaphors around which Jewish identity is constructed and positioned? Before the Holocaust, American Jewish identity, for most Jews, according to Meyers, was either a religiously based morality or a loose bond of ethnic solidarity. A rise in awareness of the Holocaust has produced in many individuals a much more "determined" Jewishness (1990:56). In fact, claims Meyers, the Holocaust is a major factor in sustaining Jewish identity since World War II. Seidler-Feller (1991) argues that in the absence of a positive motivation, the Holocaust becomes critical in sustaining Jewish identity. He reasons that the steady diet of Holocaust films, novels, memorials, and museums constitutes the set of institutional ways in which young

adults of this generation create their identities. The focus then for most young people is on victimology, a political identity based on both perceived and real anti-Semitism and the historical reconstructions of being the victim.

Therefore, two issues are of particular concern to me: What part, if any, does the Holocaust play in the construction of Jewish identity; and are there gender differences in the ways in which Jewish identity is constructed for this population? For it is this generation of eighteen-to-thirty-year-olds who represent the future generation of Jews in the United States. Yet, despite the pivotal role it plays in understanding Jewish identity, this is a population for whom we have very little data. Several explanations may account for this neglect. For the most part, this generation is marrying later and bearing children later. In that Jewish identity has been measured, for the most part, through surveys aimed at those who are institutionally affiliated, we can see how a population that has yet to establish itself as members of the Jewish community might very well be overlooked. To date, our best measures of identity have come from activities identified through institutional participation (fundraising, synagogue attendance, Jewish Community Center activities). Since, typically, people of this age group live independently of their families of origin and are not yet involved in institutional Jewish life, we have seen very little in the literature reflecting their attitudes or opinions about Jewish identity.

Understanding Jewish identity is doubly confounded if it is measured through attitudinal surveys with only open-ended questions to touch upon the complexities of responses to such a manifold topic. Survey methods cannot plumb the depths of so pervasive a term as identity. To date, although several colleagues are concurrently engaged in qualitative research (Bethanie Horowitz, Arnold Eisen, and Steven Cohen), no in-depth interview studies have been published on Jewish identity among this age group. In this study, as in my book *Rachel's Daughters* (1991), I have engaged my sample in what I call "structured conversations," introducing a set of prepared questions that guide our recorded conversations.

THE STUDY

Just who are these young adults? They range from twenty to thirty years of age. The average age for the twenty personal interviews was twenty-six, for the group interviews twenty-one. They are in school, continuing with their education at the graduate or professional level, and/or currently employed. All have had some or are currently engaged in post-secondary education. Their estimated family-of-origin incomes range from \$65,000 to \$250,000 with almost all parents in professional and/or business careers. Those in the group interviews (fifty) came from all over the United States, heavily representing the Northeast, but also including Montana, Oregon, Texas, California, Illinois, Ohio, and Mississippi. Those in the individual interview sample were all from the Boston area, except for two (from New Jersey and California). Among the interviews there were eleven women and nine men. Among the group interviews there were thirty-seven men and thirty-three women.

Contrary to Seidler-Feller's (1991) and Meyer's expectations, the Holocaust, while present in the construction of Jewish identity in relation to their political identities, did not play as predominant a role in their overall Jewish identity. One thirty-year-old male puts it this way:

I think there are a lot of people whose Jewish identities are very structured by memories of the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel, and they are things I feel strongly about. Neither one is the primary event, however, that structures my Jewish life. . . . I really think . . . an emphasis on either of those two things really de-emphasizes the way in which one can, or sort of understand a Jewish experience that's in the present.

A twenty-eight-year-old female claims:

Judaism is not just about the past . . . the Holocaust is a *big problem* [emphasis hers]. I mean, it's *crucial*, that we remember it. I've been to Poland, and I studied it, and read books, and it's awful. It's the worst thing to happen to the Jewish people, or any people, and we have to remember it, and read books, and tape testimonies from people and make movies, and have it immortalized, but what we *can't* do is become a cult of the Holocaust, where our sole identity is based upon guilt that we survived, or determination that it will never happen again, or just rooted in the tragedy. . . . Judaism is much more than that. . . . It has an affirmative message which predated the Holocaust, and which will go forward from that and that has to do with the land, and Jerusalem, and the food, and the music, and the culture, and the way you live your life.

A twenty-year-old male put it this way: "I don't like to think of it as something where the Jews have suffered through history and we have to protect it. . . . I don't deny it happened, that Jews have suffered a lot throughout the ages, but I don't think that's the reason that I choose to go on being Jewish. . . . I don't want to think of myself as a victim of history." A twenty-two-year-old female stated: "I think there are a lot of people who do things Jewishly not to give Hitler a posthumous victory. I don't do things for that reason. I like it, that's why I do it."

Although anti-Semitism is certainly a component, the strongest issues emerging in the construction of Jewish identity were not couched in terms of perceived or real anti-Semitism but rather the need to belong to a group one could call "your own." When asked what was specifically Jewish about that kind of group identification, almost all believed that it had to do with belonging to a group of people who had a unique and long history and a distinctive culture. One twenty-six-year-old male put it this way: "I was born into this 5,000 year tradition, of which I am proud. . . . I feel an obligation to continue and perpetuate it." Another twenty-seven-year-old stated that the most comfortable part of being Jewish is that he identifies with "a community and a history and a tradition . . . notice I didn't bring up God. . . . Whether God exists, or doesn't . . . gave us the Torah or didn't, or brought us out of Egypt or didn't . . . it doesn't change our history or tradition, or all the great things about the Jewish people one way or another." "I don't buy into that 'we suffered, we suffered, we suffered, be Jewish' attitude," another twenty-

six-year-old male claimed. "I'm just proud about where I come from and I want to continue that." A twenty-two-year-old female stated: "For me, Judaism, being Jewish, has always been kind of unusual, in that people say they are Irish Catholic, but you say you are just *Jewish* [emphasis hers]. It's like, it's your heritage *and* your religion. . . . When you're Jewish, it seems like everything is all rolled up into one. So it's a little bit different." A twenty-two-year-old male put it this way: "History and heritage; that's what defines me."

One theme that emerged from both males and females and across the age spectrum was the need to be a part of a community or a group with which you have something in common. Commonality came from difference, whether it was expressed as a unique sense of humor, a specific history, a way of looking at the world, a particular way of looking, or having a "typical Jewish mother." It was the distinctive parts of the community that these respondents felt they had in common with one another. Many spoke of humor as a part of that commonality, with Woody Allen as a trademark, while others mentioned a long line of comedians who had been part of both Hollywood and the New York Greenwich Village scene. The humor, many claimed, derived from being the other, from looking at the world from a unique perspective. Others spoke of the many Jews who made important contributions to the world, from Sigmund Freud to Albert Einstein to Isaac Stern.

Except for the very religious, the distinction Feingold (1991) makes between Jewish and Judaic held for this population, for few mentioned religion as key to their Jewish identity. Except for the very religious, few practiced daily Jewish rituals (praying three times a day for the men or keeping kosher, for instance). However, almost half kept the *Shabbat* (Sabbath) or at least honored that day by not working. Almost three quarters of the sample claimed that most of their friends were Jewish, yet only a minority of the subjects of the twenty personal interviews belonged to an organized Jewish group or, if they did, were nominal members of a group, occasionally participating in a synagogue service or attending a social function. Of those interviewed on college campuses, most belonged to or identified with the Hillel House, but this did not necessarily mean active membership. Yet, despite the infrequency of day-to-day activities, the majority saw themselves as Jews first and Americans second. Most lived in neighborhoods with many other Jews, maintained close ties with other Jewish friends and family, took Jewish studies courses when available or history courses covering, for instance, the Holocaust, and/or worked in professions where there were many other Jews. Most found that when they read the papers or listened to the news that stories about Jewish notables and, most particularly, about Israel caught their interest first. Many felt most comfortable among other Jews, even if the activities were not specifically Jewish in content. There were no notable gender differences.

Although most began by stating they did not lose family in the Holocaust or know anyone personally who did, many felt that anti-Semitism was still a real possibility and something about which Jews needed to be vigilant. The destruction of the Jewish people, not Judaism, was at issue. None used the word Judaism in this discussion or even referred to religion, but rather specifically referred to a people and a shared culture and past. Although the impetus for discussion of anti-

Semitism is the Holocaust and the insurance that it never happen again to Jews, the social justice engagement, when it occurs, is often on behalf of others who are experiencing forms of genocide or threatened genocide. For those expressing their politics in relationship to the Holocaust specifically (not, for instance, engaged in charity work because they are required as practicing Jews to do so), "never again" meant "never again to any people." This was seen most clearly for those involved in what was formerly Yugoslavia. Others felt that their work with Oxfam was another expression of their obligation never to see a population die out. For still others, it was human rights activities directed at South America, Africa, or Asia. The impetus for such involvement stemmed from their sense of duty as Jews and their own history as an oppressed people. Sixty percent of the sample spontaneously referred to the Holocaust during the conversations about identity. For most of the respondents, the Holocaust was seen as one of many moments in the history of anti-Semitism.

While the themes and issues raised did not seem to differentiate between men and women, upon repeated listening to the taped conversations, different foci emerged. For women, there was the sense that their identity was embedded in their everyday lives, both as women and as Jews. Men never referred to gender as an issue in their Jewish identities, although five did identify with the feminist movement and the concern about women in such a patriarchal structure as Judaism. A twenty-year-old-female said, "I'm not a gung-ho feminist, but Jewish orthodoxy violates my female identity. I won't go to an orthodox service, but I do go to a traditional service where there is mixed seating. After all, I am at [woman's school] to enhance my identity as a woman."

There was no parallel among men for the following answer from a twenty-six-year-old female. In response to the question of why it is important, if at all, to call yourself a Jew, she answered, "It's extremely important. . . . In one way it's just so vital to who I am . . . it's how I identify myself. There's always the question, what are you first: "Are you a woman, are you a Jew, are you an American?" I think in different scenarios it changes. Another respondent recounted an incident in which she meant to answer by saying "I am a Jew" but said instead: "I'm Sara [fictitious name]." It was, she notes, "as if these things were identical." No male ever responded by saying, "I think of myself more as a male than a Jew," whereas a twenty-four-year-old female said, "I think of myself more as a woman. I pay more attention to women's issues than Jewish issues, 'cause I feel like . . . it has not affected me, my life, to date, being Jewish. Being a woman has."

One thirty-year-old spoke of her distress at being the only female in her Sunday school class and the fact that the congregation of which she was a part would not allow her to read from the Torah. It was not surprising that when asked about how larger changes in the society have affected her identity she responded by saying, "Well, . . . the whole women's movement. At some point, in the middle of junior high, it became extremely important to me, and that didn't fit with Judaism."

Another woman and the only one to mention bisexuality (although two men mentioned the importance of addressing gay and lesbian issues in Judaism, but not

as personal statements) expanded on her experiences as a woman praying and singing out loud at the Western Wall and having ultra-Orthodox men throw chairs at her:

I think there's something about being a woman and also being bisexual that are not dealt with. . . . That whole thing's being cast as a Jewish issue and as a religious issue, and as a . . . Orthodox issue. It's not. It's a feminist issue. It's a misogynist issue. It's an issue of control of women. It happens to be happening with a Jewish community and taking on the trappings of Jewish religious law. . . . But do I think that's authentically Judaism? No, I don't think that Judaism authentically prohibits women from singing . . . or from reading the Torah at the Wall. It's not my understanding of Judaism.

For men, there was a tendency to be more abstract in responses to the questions and in their conversations in general. For instance, when speaking about the relationship between their political and their Jewish identities, men more often spoke of the universal principles at stake, while women spoke specifically of the devastation to families and particularly to children. This was reiterated in the discussion of identity as well. Women talked of the day-to-day practical implications of the ways in which they did things as important to their Jewish identities, while men spoke of transcendence, of God, of theology, and of overarching principles and ethics of behavior, rarely grounding them in real-life examples.

But perhaps the most interesting differences came in the way in which women, compared to men, spoke about the consequences of difference, of separatism, and of a "distinctiveness" as Jews. Except for a few males who expressed concern about Israeli politics and the treatment of the Arabs by Israelis, only women seemed to connect their concerns about "others" with their own connectedness to the Jewish community. One twenty-two-year-old worried about not having non-Jewish friends. She said, "And I think that the healthy way of dealing, of being part of a minority group, is to have friends inside and outside the group. . . . I worry . . . that I'm not going to be able to maintain friendships with non-Jews." Another woman said, "Being involved with the Jewish community has made my social life much too homogeneous and that's something that I'm trying to do a little bit more outreach on and to try to cultivate some other relationships." Women were more likely to be concerned about the notion of a "chosen people" and its consequences for relationships. One twenty-four-year-old stated it this way:

I think being Jewish makes me special because it makes me feel special. . . . I think my values are pretty good . . . but that doesn't make me a better person . . . this kind of differentness. . . . I think that it is a dilemma. I have had privileges that have allowed me to have amazing opportunities, but I'm not a better person. I'm not more deserving. . . . I haven't worked harder than the next person . . . it's tough. . . . I have a non-Jewish boyfriend and it's very tough to say . . . "you and I are equal and I respect your opinions as much as I respect mine, but I think mine are right." . . . Why do I want my kids to be raised Jewish? . . . Why is it so important to me?

SOME CONCLUSIONS

Both men and women see identity as couched in a need to be a part of a unique historical experience, a tie to a people and a past with a particular culture. Religion plays a lesser part in this understanding of Jewish identity than do culture and history. The Holocaust, while certainly a part of Jewish identity, is best seen as a part of political identities whereby social justice is directed toward others as much as other Jews, if not more so. Gender differences are clearest in the ways in which each sex narrates their understanding of identity and the consequences of "unique" and "different" and the way in which women deal with being female in a society that still maintains stereotypical views of them and in an ethnic religious community that is still prototypically male.

NOTE

1. The Orthodox comprise approximately 10 to 12 percent of the U.S. Jewish population.

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7

Canadian Evangelical Church Women and Responses to Family Violence

Nancy Nason-Clark

The Voices of Women Victims

But when I became a Christian, I was thankful to the Lord because I had a pastor who . . . knew what I'd been through, and he didn't judge me. And he was the type of pastor who was working with women who had been through . . . abusive marriages.

How can I go to my friends in the church when . . . I tell them I'm a Christian and admit that stuff like this is going on? . . . a lot of Christians have this ideal thing . . . what they're supposed to live like and what they're supposed to be like and what they're supposed to dress like . . . you know you're put into that cocoon.

The Voices of Women Helping Women Victims

I think that the best way . . . is to help her understand somehow that she doesn't have to be there. She doesn't have to stay. It takes a long time. . . . But if somehow, just love her enough, 'cause she's not getting any love. . . . And it's just to love her right out of that house . . . the bottom line is to get them out!

A girl that went to our church. We helped her to move . . . I got my daughter's boyfriend. . . . I got his army buddies to come up so that they could handle the [abusive] boyfriend if he came back while we helped her move everything out in a truck . . . this girl was only 100 pounds soaking wringing wet.

From the rugged shores of Newfoundland to the timbered coastline of British Columbia, groups of Canadian men and women meet together in some form of Christian worship that is evangelical in perspective. The worship style is often characterized by enthusiastic singing and traditional expository preaching in churches that demand a high level of commitment from their members. Closely associated with the emphasis on conversion and a personal relationship with God is their celebration of family life and family values.

Mothers are heralded as the emotional guardians of the home, though both men and women are supposed to nurture their children in both practical and spiritual