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The “New Jews”: Reflections on Emerging Cultural Practices

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Those concerned with the future of American Jewish communal life and its established institutions are looking to the “next generation” of Jewish young adults for clues to their own future. While Jewish young adults are diverse, a particular cohort of them has recently attracted both philanthropic and research interest. I have had the privilege of consulting on two research projects--Steven M. Cohen and Ari Kelman’s exploration of the role of culture and the arts in the lives of unaffiliated Jewish young adults (sponsored by the National Foundation for Jewish Culture and funded by UJA-Federation of New York) and Reboot’s study of religion, identity, and community among Jewish young adults--and co-convening, with Jeffrey Shandler, the Jewish Working Group on Jews, Media, and Religion at New York University’s Center for Religion and Media (funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts).¹ I was also fortunate to participate in Rejewvenation: The Futures of Jewish Culture, a recent conference at the University of Toronto. My remarks today grow out of these collaborations.

The two research projects, while different from one another--the Reboot Poll focuses on the role of faith, while the NFJC/UJA-Federation study focuses on the role of culture and the arts--address the following concerns and observations:

• young Jews are unaffiliated, which has serious implications for the future of Jewish institutions;
• intermarriage is on the rise and the children of the intermarried are less like to be involved in Jewish communal life and more likely to intermarry;
• the Holocaust (and anti-Semitism), Israel, and religious observance may not be as important for this generation in defining what it means to be a Jew as they once were, given how comfortable and accepted these Jews feel within the larger society;
• culture and the arts are playing a significant role in the lives of unaffiliated Jewish young adults

Whether what we see here is a passing phase in the life cycle of this cohort of American Jews--when they “grow up,” get married (or form other kinds of committed relationships), and have children will they see the light, join Jewish organizations, and strongly identify as Jews?--or a trend with long term consequences remains to be seen.

What is clear, particularly from the NFJC/UJA-Federation study, is that Jewish youth subcultures are a laboratory where new kinds of community are being formed, aided by the latest technologies, and participants are engaging in innovative cultural and artistic expression--and

¹ I would especially like to acknowledge Judah Cohen, Edward Portnoy, David Koffman, and Rachel Kranson, who developed the unit on Radical Jewish Culture for Modiya, http://modiya.nyu.edu, a project of the Working Group on Jews, Media, and Culture.
forming a distinctive sense of themselves in the process. What might be called experimental philanthropy has been underwriting several projects that are part of this subculture--JDub records, Heeb Magazine, the various Reboot undertakings--as well supporting research on them. While the groups being studied may not be representative, they are seismographic. Understanding them and what they signify is of particular interest for policy, planning, and philanthropy--particularly because the target population is not only unaffiliated, but also includes the disaffected, indeed, they are the hardest to define, find, and reach.

This phenomenon, which emerges from a combination of grass-roots developments, philanthropic underwriting, and articulation by researchers and others, has been dubbed the “New Jews,” the “un-movement,” the Heebsters or the “Heeb generation,” the Rejewvenators, Radical Jewish Culture or radical Jewish culture, alternative Jewish culture, Jewish fringe, or Jewish counterculture, with Queer Yiddishkeit a variation on the theme. There is a sense that projects that address the needs and interests of these Jews represent the last hope for reaching those long considered unreachable, namely Jews between the ages of 18 and 35 who are outside the Jewish mainstream, but attracted to the ethos, aesthetics, sensibility, sociality of youthful expressive edgy and diverse Jewish subcultures. On the one hand, anything goes for a lost cause (this might account for why a rebellious magazine such as Heeb is underwritten by mainstream Jewish philanthropy and does not hesitate to bite the hand that feeds it); on the other hand, aspects of the new Jew phenomenon are indicative of wider trends.

I will focus here on three aspects of this phenomenon:

• Finding the edge
• Connection and attachment
• Open source Jewishness

Finding the edge

In a recent article, “Benefits of Diaspora,” in London Review of Books, Eric Hobsbawm, the distinguished British historian (and also a Jew who was raised in Vienna and Berlin) made the case that diaspora was good for the Jews and the world because it stimulated Jewish achievement: “the times of maximum stimulus for Jewish talent may have been those when the Jews became conscious of the limits of assimilation.” Those times seem to have past and with them the stimulus for the kinds of achievements that he chronicles. In contrast, our era is characterized, in his view, by a shrinking of the Jewish diaspora, especially in Islamic territories, unprecedented public acceptance of Jews, and at the same time “the old segregation of religious ultra-Orthodoxy and the new segregation of a separate ethnic-genetic state-community.” Assimilation and segregation are the opposite of the conditions of diaspora that he values. A similar point was made recently by Leon Botstein, president of Bard College: “I’m no demographer, but I think what’s happened in the U.S. is the normalization of the Jew…They’ve become as complacent and

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culturally undistinguished as the average, suburban, white middle-class American,” or, in the words of the journalist who interviewed him, “the sense of otherness, which for so long has served as a kind of incentive to strive and achieve, may be dissipating.” In other words, diaspora as an historical condition has value, and, I would add, a value that is not limited to singular individual achievements, which is what Hobsbawm and others celebrate. That value can be defined as edge.

The New Jews are new by virtue of the edge that they define and occupy. If the historical edge, the outsider and marginal status of diaspora Jews has dissipated, the New Jews have turned elsewhere for the energy--the stimulus--that comes from the margin: they have turned to subculture and counterculture, and to experimental contemporary art. They may have been born Jewish, but they consider themselves native to Hip Hop or reggae or punk, among others. They espouse an ethics and aesthetics of edge, which, it should be noted, is not the same as margin or periphery, both of which suggest an involuntary disadvantage among those striving for the center. Rather, this is about the cutting edge, an edge in constant need of sharpening, a moving--a leading, even a bleeding--edge that resists the center. This is what artist Melissa Shiff calls “kicking the habit,” in her efforts to reinvent and reformat Jewish rituals. Citing Jonathan Sarna’s essay “A Great Awakening: The Transformation that Shaped Twentieth Century American Judaism and Its Implications for Today,” the Reboot project finds historical precedent for the principle that “continuity may depend on discontinuity” and for the idea that creative ideas flow from the bottom up and from outsiders, that is, from those “not wedded to the community's central assumptions.” Jeffrey Shandler makes a similar argument: “Queer Yiddishkeit suggests that Yiddish may thrive not through a resilient commitment to Jewish continuity as it is conventionally understood, but through a tenacious discontinuity that, far from resisting disruption, thrives on it.” This is Jewish by dissent, rather than by descent or even consent. The rebellious energies of subcultures of various kinds as well as avant-garde art offer an attractive model for what might be called an edgy Jewishness, though they are not the only sources.

What distinguishes this cohort is the way that they make Jewishness uncomfortable. They often focus on its embarrassing aspects, whether taking up stigmatized epithets (Heeb, Kike) or assertive designations (Jewschool, Jewcy). They are often irreverent, ironic, or nostalgic with attitude (as in Bar Mitzvah Disco, a website and book), irreverent and impolite (“in your face”), and transgressive, iconoclastic, and profane (Yarmulkebra). In the inimitable words of Rebbetzin Hadassah Gross (Amichai Lau-Lavie), the “First Lady of Judeo-Kitsch,” according to Heeb Magazine, “A little bit of irreverence is very good for battling irrelevance.” Irreverence should

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7 See the distinctions that Raymond Williams makes between oppositional, alternative, emergent, and residual culture in “Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory,” New Left Review 82 (November/December 1982) and in Marxism and Literature (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975).


not, however, be confused with indifference or hostility. Rather, irreverence is one of the forms that engagement takes, and effective parody requires considerable knowledge of its target. Paradoxically, then, making Jewishness uncomfortable--creative estrangement--is what makes it “comfortable” for this group, offering it a way to say yes and no at the same time. The result is a particular sensibility, a distinctive “structure of feeling,” in a word, a coalescence of what Jewish feels like for this cohort.10

Connection and Attachment

Rebelliousness and counterculture have long Jewish histories and youth have played important roles in them, whether as part of larger Jewish movements (Hasidism, Zionism) or as part of other movements (Civil Rights, student movements). Even as this generation distances itself from the mainstream and the past, it is also writing itself into that history and rewriting that history so as to create a genealogy for its own present. Thus, for Dan 'Mobius' Sieradski, creator of the website jewschool.com, Hasidic reggae star Matisyahu, “who is dazzling Jewish and non-Jewish audiences alike with his unique fusion of hip-hop, reggae and jamband music,” is part of a “renaissance of Hasidism's revolutionary romance,” which was “pure counterculture” from the outset.11 As Jeffrey Shandler noted in conversation, this is a case of “Have your rebellion and have your hemshekh at the same time.”12

This generation is noteworthy for several reasons. First, they are not only highly literate in popular culture, but, as already noted, many consider themselves “native” to particular expressive subcultures such as punk and not incidentally African American ones organized around Hip Hop, reggae, and jazz; that is, they are finding a meaningful edge by identifying with others who have defined such a position whether by design or circumstance or both and who have given artistic expression to the energy of resistance. There are distinctive ways that this is done and there is now an extensive literature on such subcultures and the role of race as well as gender and sexuality in their formation.13

Second, this generation has a passion for communicating in every imaginable medium in ways that are producing an unprecedented efflorescence of personal self-disclosure and reflection in public. Nowhere can this be seen more clearly than in the Jewish blogosphere, which provides an enormous window onto this world and its ways of reflecting upon itself.

Third, this generation--and we can expect this to intensify in subsequent ones--is being formed (and is forming) new kinds of families and new kinds of connections and attachments. The challenge here is not only to chart the demographics of intermarriage, but to have a close empirical look at the face of intermarriage, both interfaith and interracial, and the kinds of

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12 Personal communication, November 23, 2005.
identifications and relations that are emerging from them, including “Halfies” (see http://www/halfjew.com) and a whole range of practices arising from this self-definition. The demographic preoccupation with intermarriage has obscured other important aspects of changes in Jewish affective relationships, families, and notions of kinship. I have in mind everything from blended families resulting from divorce, remarriage, and other kinds of committed (or uncommitted) relationships, queer Jews and the wide variety of reproductive relationships and families they are forming, interracial child adoption, and the various assisted conception options (and their implications, whether from halakhic or other standpoints, most recently children of a common sperm donor seeking out their siblings). It is no longer possible—if, indeed, it ever was—to talk about Jewish identity in the singular or as something one “has” (as in “my Jewish identity”), though young people are encouraged to speak in precisely these terms.

As I have written elsewhere, this born-digital generation reveals a tectonic shift in the ways that Jewish youth and young adults relate to one another and understand them-selves. Their comfort with what has been called “social software” (blogs, bookmarking tools, wiki-server software that allows anyone to add and edit web content, whether for a wikipedia [encyclopedia] or most recently wikinews), is central to their creation of alternative modes of community. A large proportion of this extremely diverse generation prefers the many-to-many mode of communication over the one-to-many (or broadcast) mode, a preference that is consistent with their attraction to informal kinds of association over formal affiliations with Jewish organizations. Whereas it has long been assumed that strong ties (family, close friends, local community) are the key to Jewish continuity, social software activates a broad range of weak ties that have value in their own right (see the work of sociologist Mark Granovetter) and that expand the possibilities for converting weak ties into strong ones: one of Kelman’s respondents reported finding “a sense of community for me in the crowd” as a result of meeting people at other events in other venues. Aggregations start to thicken into more sustained and meaningful social entities, though no less episodic—the key here is that they are not predefined in advance and, as another of Kelman’s respondents explained, the appeal is to be among Jews without an agenda. Based on consent, rather than descent, communities of interest, affinity, and practice are multiple and distributed. Proximity is a function of the intensity of communication, rather than physical closeness. In sum, the notion of social software points to the primacy of connection — networked, self-organizing, peer-to-peer, bottom-up — in the production and circulation of content and the preference for collaborative and processual ways of working, even when a “cool” site or magazine is underwritten by the Jewish establishment.

These insights arise from the work of Cohen and Kelman, who have been looking specifically at the social life of this generation in venues and at events that feature programs with a Jewish angle. A particularly striking finding is the preference to be Jewish in the midst of non-Jews, which is expressed as a preference for attending events with a Jewish angle in venues where Jews and non-Jews are present and with a group of friends that are not exclusively Jewish—and hearing a black musician exclaim in admiration, “Wow!...Does he sound like he was raised in

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17 See Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimbllet, “Participatory Journalism,” Sh’mah (June, 2005).
the ghetto or what,” when he hears Matisyahu perform. The heterogeneity of the crowd—as well as of the offerings—is valued and especially the surprise in the mix. Jewish self-definition emerges here as an ongoing process that is creatively shaped with (and not only abstractly in relation to) non-Jews. These heterogeneous social worlds are layered, rather than compartmentalized or synthesized.

While Cohen and Kelman have focused on the participants and the venues, there is much to be learned as well from the producers, among them Michael Dorf (The Knitting Factory), John Zorn (Tzadik label), and JDub, “a non-profit record and event production company striving to build community through new and innovative Jewish music and cross cultural musical dialogue.” JDub is supported by the Joshua Venture Fellowship, the Natan Fund, and UJC/JESNA’s Bikkurim Incubator for new Jewish ideas.

Cohen and Kelman’s counterintuitive finding that this group exhibits a pattern of engagement without affiliation alarms the organized Jewish community, for whom affiliation is not only an index of Jewish identity, but also the key to the survival of their own institutions. What would they be without their members? Consistent with this finding, Cohen and Kelman also discovered a preference for loose social ties and intermittent involvements structured around common interests (affinity groups) and networks (connectivity being as important if not more important than proximity, as noted above). Appropriately, the venues that Kelman studied are focused gatherings that move from venue to venue and from event to event, with participants engaging in what they understand as a scene. Within a scene, they make aesthetic and affective judgments about the crowd and the vibe: bland is bad, one of many indications that this generation has a high arousal threshold. They prefer, in Kelman’s words, “episodic engagement,” porous (rather than hard or hermetic) boundaries, the freedom to move in and out of the various scenes in which they participate and to move around within them. Their scenes are informal (“hanging out”) and improvisatory character. In sum, while personally meaningful, what holds these social worlds together is very different from the model of synagogue or JCC membership.

These preferences, as noted above, may be a function of the life cycle stage of this particular cohort or it may be part of a larger pattern; as they form committed relationships, have children, establish themselves in careers, enjoy a measure of financial security, and buy a home, it is not unreasonable to expect their social patterns and practices to also change. Just how much of their present ethos, youthful spirit, and oppositional style—and their associational preferences—will carry over remains to be seen.

What is clear is the aversion of this group to direct efforts to draw them into the Jewish mainstream—to impose what they call the “Jewish agenda” and to expect them to submit to authority, which they associate with the synagogue and other organized attempts to capture them. They prefer flattened hierarchies, egalitarian self-organizing communities, and active participation (facilitated and intensified by the new communication technologies with which they are at ease). In a word, they offer a model that might be characterized as Jewish without an agenda, connection without affiliation, Jewish as contextual and relational. As one of Kelman’s respondents explained with respect to events and venues, “If it is not Jewish, you can get together a bunch of Jews and make it Jewish.”

21 That said, many people in this cohort are politically engaged and active around issues of social justice, a topic explored by Cohen and Kelman through interviews and to be discussed in an extended version of this paper.
Recognizing the challenge and the opportunity this cohort presents to the organized Jewish community, Daniel Sieradski is bringing what has been learned from this cohort to Jewish institutions. He is developing a proposal for Jewgie (short for Jewish geography) a social networking platform to facilitate the formation of alternative kinds of Jewish gatherings and communities in the context of existing Jewish organizations.

Open Source Jewishness

New technologies are not only tools, but also social practices. They are also models for reimagining ways to be Jewish and to form Jewish connections. The notion of open source—the basis for Linux, for example—has great appeal for this generation, because it is egalitarian, participatory, creative, and directed towards creating a public good that can be widely shared.22

Similarly, as Kelman has noted, sampling, which arises from the recombinatory possibilities of digital music technologies, is not only used to create new music—Josh Dolgin aka So Called is a master of the art—but also provides a model for new Jewish social practices and ways of thinking about them as well as about oneself. It is no accident that music should figure so prominently in the lives of those whom Cohen and Kelman studied. Music is central to contemporary youth cultures more generally and a close look at the kinds of music they favor models—and can be taken as an indicator of—their approach to culture (and to Jewish culture) more generally. Their musical literacy stems from unprecedented access to the widest range of offerings and to opportunities to make music with a wide variety of instruments, including beat box and sampler. Thanks to schizophrenia—the separation of sound from its sources—music can not only be detached from particular cultural contexts. It can also be taken apart and reassembled at every level: listeners disaggregate the tracks on a CD, they download single tracks from vast online collections, and they shuffle them on an iPod, while musicians take the music itself apart, sample it, and create eclectic mixes, omnigenres, music without borders.23 The result is a ubiquitous, mobile, and customized soundscape mixed from the most heterogeneous sonic materials. Such phenomena have been characterized as more routes than roots.24 Can Jewishness be imagined in such terms?

While policy and planning concerns are important, there is an urgent need for research on these emerging social and cultural phenomena apart from practical—and prescriptive—considerations. We need first and foremost to study what is there for what it is in the spirit of “Jewish is what Jewish does,” and this requires a broader mandate than the one generally shaped by Jewish communal concerns.

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24 See James Clifford, Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997.)