

The Implications for Interfaith Families of Definitions of Jewishness: A Report on the Jewish People Policy Institute's *Exploring the Jewish Spectrum in a Time of Fluid Identity*

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The Jewish People Policy Institute's [Exploring the Jewish Spectrum in a Time of Fluid Identity](#) includes a fascinating discussion of definitions of Jewishness. While the report is most interested in how those definitions influence Israel-Diaspora relations, they have important implications for those who seek to engage interfaith families in Jewish life and community. The report also includes an important discussion of welcoming intermarried families while maintaining communal norms, on which I have blogged separately.

The report was a project headed by Shmuel Rosner and John Ruskay and is based on the 2016 Jewish World Dialogue, which involved surveys and discussions in which 715 Jewish leaders from around the world participated. The JPPI is a prominent Jerusalem-based think tank chaired by Stuart Eizenstat, Dennis Ross and Leonid Nevzlin.

The Fluidity of Jewishness

The report describes the current situation as follows (15): Being Jewish means having a connection to a broadly defined group with certain characteristics or definitions – with no definitions there is no group, and with no group there is nothing to connect to – but many of the definitions that formerly defined the Jewish group no longer apply, and the era of fluid identity makes the notion of setting boundaries or defining who is “in” or “out” of the group unappealing and impractical. In addition, different communities of Jews (especially Israel and the Diaspora) have different and at times contradictory definitions of Jewishness, and the lack of a broadly accepted understanding has ramifications on cooperation between Jews and on the policies of institutions.

There is no unanimously agreed upon definition of Jewishness and what being a Jew entails; some see Jewishness as voluntary, others as a matter of Jewish law – a Jewish mother or convert – and no single conversion procedure is accepted by all. (18) For the government of Israel, a Jew is anyone born of a Jewish mother or who converted to Judaism and does not have another religion. For the rabbinate in Israel, the mother must be proven Jewish, or the conversion must be Orthodox and approved by the rabbinate. For the 2013 Pew Report, it is those who say their religion is Jewish, or who have a Jewish parent or were raised Jewish and still consider themselves Jewish in some way. (19) Definitions can reflect the ways Jews conceptualize their identity (who we are), how Jews should conceptualize their identity (who we should be), or pragmatic considerations (what definition is good for the Jews). (20)

Change from the traditional views has occurred due to fragmentation and secularization which weakened religious definitions, the integration of Jews into general societies resulting in a sharp

rise in the number of intermarried families, and the establishment of Israel where Jewishness has legal and practical implications beyond religious beliefs and communal belonging. (22) “As a result of” the diminishment of boundaries previously set by both the Jewish and the general communities:

young Jews have increasingly married non-Jews, and the number of families in which one parent is Jewish and the other is not has grown dramatically. So much so, that in the United States this year it is estimated that about a half of the new generation of young adult Jews comes from mixed families. By Orthodox Halachic criteria, many of these young people are not, in fact, Jewish. However, ... only about a quarter of this year’s Dialogue participants accept this strictly matrilineal criteria... That is to say, it seems that most Jews, for obvious reasons, wish to include those who self-identify as Jews and/or participate in Jewish life... To do so necessitates a rewriting of the rules of community membership, which, in fact, is taking place. Otherwise, the community of Jews will shrink rapidly – a result very few would find desirable. (23)

With respect to religion, most Jews today do not fully adhere to a set of practices and laws that define them as a coherent group with similar behaviors (Shabbat, kashrut) and most do not accept rabbinical or halachic authority. Examples are the adoption of patrilineal descent in the US, and the numbers of Israelis who consider soldiers fighting for Israel Jewish even if not under Jewish law. (24)

“Jews are found in different shapes and forms, some of which are new, some of which challenge the understanding of other Jews, and some of which break traditions...” These include Jews of no religion (who do not say their religion is Jewish but who identify as Jewish in some ways); one commentator says this group does not feel a sense of solidarity or commitment to the welfare or continuity of Jewish people or Jewish culture.” (25-26) The 2011 Jewish Community Study of New York found a group of self-identifying Jews whose parents are not Jewish (but who usually have a Jewish partner or grandparent) and who have not undergone a formal conversion. The report also describes “behavioral Jews” – those who do not declare themselves to be Jewish, but who live their lives as Jews, among Jews, especially in Israel.

The report is remarkably even-handed in its discussion of “partial Jews.” The Pew Report also found people declaring themselves “partially Jewish” – brought up with more than one religion (Jewish and something else), intermarried Jews deciding to exercise two religious affiliations, or Jews who consider themselves solely Jewish but not “fully” Jewish (generally because they have a non-Jewish parent). “For some of these Jews the ‘partial’ is a fact of life; for others, it is an ideology” (citing Susan Katz Miller’s *Being Both*). (26) “While, generally speaking, Jewish streams and organizations do not encourage partial Jewishness, and in some cases even encourage their members to make a more coherent choice (of one religion), the reality is that there is a growing sector of partial Jews... This could definitely motivate Jewish communities to have welcoming policies towards partial Jews and include them as part of the larger Jewish world.” (27) (The report says that most intermarried parents do not tell their children that they are Jewish, quoting the Millennial Children of Intermarriage study and an article by Shmuel Rosner.)

The report expresses concern about a schism of the Jewish people, which some argue has happened to some degree already, particularly if the definition acceptable to Israel is too remote from what is acceptable to non-Israeli Jews. (30)

Aspects of Judaism, Essential Actions for Being Jewish, Prisms for Understanding, Modalities of Connection

In their surveys the JPPI asked respondents to rank the importance of **four aspects of Judaism** as primary components of Jewishness: Religion, Culture, Genealogy, and Nationality/Peoplehood. The Pew Report asked a question on this topic. Overall, Culture was highest ranked, followed by Nationality/Peoplehood, Religion, and Genealogy. The report observes that Israelis rank Nationality/Peoplehood higher than Americans, the Orthodox rank Religion higher than others, and a minority of both Israelis and Americans consider Religion to be the main component of Jewishness. (33-34) There are also different rankings among respondents from different denominations.

JPPI also asked respondents to rank five **actions as essential for being Jewish**: overall, the highest ranked was taking care of other Jews and Israel, followed by working to better the world, being a part of a Jewishly inspired group, studying Jewish texts/history/culture, and finally, keeping the laws of the Torah. (37) The report observes that the low ranking of keeping the laws of the Torah is consistent with religion not being the main component of Jewishness; the high ranking of taking care of other Jews and Israel is consistent with Nationality/Peoplehood being the highest ranked component. It is worth remembering that the Dialogue participants were highly engaged, including with Israel. Younger respondents and in particular younger Diaspora respondents put less emphasis on Nationality/Peoplehood and on taking care of other Jews and Israel. (40-41)

The report discusses **four prisms through which the meaning of Jewish belonging can be understood**: ancestry, sentiment, behavior, or belief. The prisms correspond to more than one of the components of Judaism – for example, religion combines sentiment, behavior and belief but not necessarily ancestry. If connection to Judaism is a biological fact of ancestry, a person doesn't have to act in any particular way and may not be actively involved in the Jewish community. If belonging rests on self-identification, it might or might not involve other manifestations. If belonging rests on behaviors, Jewish behaviors today are not easy to define. "There is no codified list of behavior that makes a person Jewish." (42-43) Belonging could require certain beliefs – but there is no agreement there, and no objective definition.

Some say that "what is a Jew" is more important than "who is a Jew" – they prioritize active Jewishness. This is the criticism of Jews of no religion in the Pew Report, who express little interest in any aspect of Jewish life – ritual, national identification, or communal engagement. (44-45)

JPPI surveys asked about **four modalities of connection to Judaism**: a person decided he is Jewish (sentiment), a person is born to a Jewish mother or converted (belief), a person is born to a Jewish parent (ancestry), or a person who lives an active Jewish life (behavior). The overall rankings were born to a Jewish parent (33%), born to a Jewish mother/converted (28%), lives

active Jewish life (14%), decides he is Jewish (11%), combination (15%). The report says the survey results are inconsistent with much of what Dialogue participants expressed in their meetings – the survey answers revert to traditional denotations of connection (religion and ancestry). Younger respondents were more ready to accept self-definition. (46-48)

When asked who had authority to decide who is Jewish, the answers were local communities (37%), self-definition (30%), rabbis (23%), Israel (6%), combination (4%). (49-54) The report generally describes a decline in rabbinical authority. (55-59) The surveys asked whether Israel's definition of 'Jew' is insulting to Diaspora Jewry. More than 20% of Americans "totally agreed" and more younger respondents and Reform respondents agreed.

The authors note that "Jews seem to put less emphasis on biology, which fits nicely with their understanding that intermarriage is an irreversible part of Jewish life and with the cautious optimism some have concerning "the community's ability to turn this challenging trend into an opportunity." But as Jews emphasize nationality/peoplehood and taking care of Israel and other Jews, comfort with intermarriage could seem to rest on shaky ground. Intermarrieds show much lower level of connection to other Jews and Israel (citing the Millennial Children study). "In this sense, a high percentage of intermarried families within the Jewish community could complicate the desire of many Jews to have 'nationality' and 'peoplehood' as components more significant than 'religion' or 'culture'." (74)

Implications and Recommendations

Jews are clearly going through a state of confused identity. "That Jews who participated in JPPI's Dialogue all stressed the need for the community to be welcoming does not mean that they advise a completely loose definition of Jewishness." (95)

"The most profound change underway, is that world Jewry is shifting from being a 'family' in the biological sense, and from being a group who share a faith in the religious sense, to something else – a 'people' with a 'culture' (the word 'civilization' is often used in such contexts)." The challenge is that biology and religious practice were fairly easy to define; "Defining 'culture' and 'people' is much trickier." "Surely there are starting point: Jewish texts; the Jewish calendar; a shared historical narrative; a land and a capital (Jerusalem); a language. And yet the Jews who participated in the JPPI's 2016 Dialogue did not seem to be satisfied with the notion that the Jews are just a group of people who want to share these cultural components. They want to be a people in a deeper sense – that is, even as they say that ancestry and biology matter less to them than before – they seem unwilling to give up on the notion of being a family." (95-96)

The report's concluding recommendations (96) are:

- Diaspora communities should count as Jews only those who have a Jewish parent or have undergone "proper conversion" by one of the established denominations. Self-defined Jews should be welcomed and respected but not counted as Jews.
- Diaspora communities should be clearer in asserting through programs and actions, especially those aimed at intermarried families, that Judaism is not strictly a religion – but rather a civilization, a culture (in a broad sense that includes religion) of a people.

- Jewish households – in which as many members as possible are Jewishly connected and committed – should remain the ideal to which the community strives (even while the community recognizes and accepts the fact that many Jews who are important to the larger community marry non-Jewish spouses, and will continue to do so). Jewish communities are advised to take this ideal into consideration in choosing their leaders and role models.
- Israel should develop a non-Orthodox Jewish culture that could play a role in the identity of all Jews, and should clarify the criteria for Jewishness, and offering a clear and easy path to conversion for immigrants who are not Jewish. (96)
- to strengthen the sense of peoplehood for Jews “who do not instinctively feel that kind of connection, including some ‘Jews by choice,’ distant Jews, mixed families, partial Jews, and non-Jews who affiliate with Judaism.” “There is a growing number of people affiliated with the Jewish world (whether it is ‘Jews by choice’ or non-Jewish members of the Jewish community) who do not instinctively feel a connection to Judaism as a nationality, and see it mostly as a religion. This development makes it necessary to create initiatives that consciously seek to enhance the understanding of the Jewish peoplehood component among all who participate in Jewish life (Jews and non-Jews who affiliate with the community).”