Jewish organizations tend to want to know the numbers. How many people participate in events? What proportion lights candles? How do intermarriage rates compare for day school and supplementary school graduates? There is no escaping the need for numbers. Knowing “how many” does matter. So, too, does knowing whether programs are effective on the basis of objective measures.

But we also need to know what being Jewish means to people, how they experience participation in Jewish life, and how their Jewish experiences influence their lives. This kind of knowing is important for its own sake, because we’re curious about the Jewish world, but also to enable us to design programs that work and to create instruments for quantitative analysis that are calibrated to the real world.

There are two distinct styles or types of qualitative research. Ethnographies describe slices of life and explain what’s really going on. The ethnographer is often a participant observer who keeps a notebook of detailed descriptions. She or he then tries to create higher-order concepts that capture the dynamics of the particular settings. Samuel Heilman, the leading contributor of ethnographies on Jewish life, has written on Jewish study groups, Jerusalem street life, the ultra-Orthodox and Jewish mourning practices. His recent book, *When a Jew Dies*, is noteworthy for its contribution to both religious studies and sociology. The book provides a detailed scholarly account of the religious meanings of various halachic and religious folk practices. Based on his participant obser-

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“Jewish people,” what they remember are their concrete attachments to other members of their traveling bus community. This spring, the Cohen Center was able to further test these observations through a survey of birthright Israel alumni. When asked to choose the single best way of summing up the birthright experience, two-thirds of survey respondents chose either “a journey to my Jewish roots” or “a group Jewish experience.” Just 15 percent claimed that the trip most resembled a “fun vacation.” The quantitative survey research thus built upon and extended the qualitative research.

In contrast to ethnography, the emphasis in interview research is on how subjects interpret their social selves and situations. One illustration of this kind of research is Steven Cohen and Arnold Eisen’s The Jew Within. Based on interviews with over 50 moderately affiliated Jews, the study found that Jewish identity has become increasingly personal and inner oriented. The study provided a welcome corrective to the tendency in survey research to equate Jewishness with ritual observance (i.e., the more rituals, the more Jewish). It also helped rabbis, educators and activists to better understand a key segment of their constituency. But the moderately affiliated are only one segment of the Jewish public. In the study Connections and Journeys, Bethamie Horowitz shows that Jewish identity assumes multiple forms and is dynamic over the course of a lifetime. Even among the moderately affiliated, Jewish identity shifts and changes over time.

Studies more narrow in scope have focused on Jewish identity at particular stages of life. Sylvia Barack Fishman recently examined Jewish identity at two particular crossroads: marriage and conversion. Lynn Davidman studied ba’alei teshuvah (the newly Orthodox) and now has her sights on movement in the opposite direction: Orthodox Jews who have left the Orthodox fold. These studies contribute mightily to our grasp of what Jewish means to Jews in varying contexts.

Qualitative research is time consuming and expensive. This explains, perhaps, why there are many subjects that have not yet been adequately investigated. I’d like to conclude by mentioning four areas that would benefit from intensive qualitative research:

The Synagogue. Riv Prell has written on Havurot, and Sam Heilman on the Orthodox synagogue, but I can think of no recent book-length study of one of American Jewry’s core institutions: the non-Orthodox synagogue. Why do the Jews who attend synagogue do so, what are they seeking and what do they find? What are they doing when they pray, sing, nosh or schmooze? How do they differ from those who stay away, and how do synagogue dynamics differ from one type of synagogue to the next?

Jewish Education. There are also relatively few ethnographic studies of Jewish educational settings. The academic study of Jewish education tends to focus on what we ought to be teaching and how. But we should also be asking: What do teachers actually communicate to young American Jews in our various educational settings? What are the core values they seek to communicate and how are those values lived and understood by the learning community? Recent books by Joseph Reimer on Jewish supplementary schools (Succeeding in Jewish Education: How One Synagogue Made it Work) and by Amy Sales and Len Saxe on Jewish summer camps (How Goodly are Thy Tents) show what is needed. But we need many more such books, covering the full array of Jewish educational settings, including day schools, outreach programs, adult education, preschool programs and more.

Attachment to Israel. Survey research suggests a declining attachment of American Jews to Israel. It also shows that feelings of connection vary across the Jewish denominations. But what does Israel mean to contemporary American Jews? How do they conceive of the country and their relationship to it? In addition to regular surveys, we need new qualitative research.

Jewish Philanthropy. Jewish giving is apparently changing in important ways. As Jews give more money to general causes, observers worry increasingly about generational continuity among donors. There is, therefore, an urgent need to better understand Jewish philanthropists — and those who could serve as philanthropists but do not.

Neither qualitative nor quantitative research stands on its own. To better understand American Jewry, and to maximize our capacity to enhance its future, we must avail ourselves of all of our various ways of knowing. Qualitative research will certainly continue to provide key pieces of the research mosaic.