

Blog Post: A Few Thoughts on the Roots of the Identity Discourse

By Rokhl Kafrissen
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The Roots and Structure of the Identity Discourse in Contemporary Jewish Life

The question of identity has both personal and intellectual interest to me. Unpacking the identity discourse is part of my personal project, situating my experience as a born again Yiddishist within the larger context of American Jewish history. Why do I need Yiddish? and why didn't I have Yiddish?— those have been two of my guiding questions. It's impossible to answer these without stumbling over the related question of identity.

As I've written elsewhere, studying Yiddish brought me to a deeper understanding of my own family and the Jewishness transmitted within my home. Similarly, the study of American Jewish sociology has helped me understand the larger Jewish American milieu in which I grew up, and how I ended up with my middle class, suburban, Conservative Hebrew school, *sh'ma* and *hatikvah*, bacon is OK but ham isn't, 1980s Long Island Jewish identity. You only have to look at the Pew study to see that for the majority of American Jews, that kind of minimal observance, minimal education, maximal pride, is very much the *de facto* American Jewish identity today.

Rather than being natural or inevitable, my so-called Jewish identity was both a product of historical movements and a deliberately inculcated ideology, one that meshed so well with my upbringing as a liberal, cosmopolitan American, as to be invisible. What I'd like to do is push back on the sense of inevitability or naturalness that surrounds identity as a concept. Though identity may be a category of practice, as sociologist Rogers Brubaker has written, that doesn't mean we must accept it as a category of analysis. That means investigating the work that identity does and how it is historically and politically inflected.

First: identity as a post-war ideology. Identity as ideology presents Jewishness and Americanness as inherently compatible and complementary, and most importantly, that a synthesis of the two is sustainable and transmissible.

The integration of American Jews, especially Eastern European Jews, was the great project of the Jewish elite of the first half of the century. That integration came with many seemingly irresolvable contradictions and tensions. For example, the terms of integration of Eastern European Jews were set, in part, by the German Jewish elite, a group traditionally less than

enamored of Eastern European Jews. But the most fundamental of these tensions was a reimagining of the Jewish way of life as an American style religion. Turning Jewishness into the Jewish religion was like stuffing 10 pounds of *kishke* into a five pound casing. It was lumpy as hell, but it worked, sort of.

As it happened, the vast majority of American Jews didn't want religion or religious commitments. No matter. Identity as ideology could reframe the multitude of contradictions now at the heart of American Jewish life, including the rejection of religion by American Jews. Identity made it possible for sociologist Herbert Gans to make an observation which, 50 years earlier, would have seemed downright bizarre. In a 1951 ethnographic study he wrote: "In Park Forest... adult Jews quite consciously rejected any involvement in the religious and cultural aspects of the Jewish community, while trying to teach the children to be Jews."

Lemme tell you, I had a chill of recognition upon reading that. Gans had pretty much summed up my Jewish education, decades before it even happened.

Identity as ideology reframes the contradictions and tensions which have enabled the integration of American Jews and gives them a unitary, affirmative power. It also has another, related, political function.

The evocation, and invocation, of identity by communal elites works to reify American Jews as a group, even as the connections between individual Jews have become ever more attenuated. It also serves to justify the power and resources allocated to those elite institutions and leaders.

In her book *Speaking of Jews*, Lila Corwin Berman describes how at mid-century, thinkers like Oscar Handlin and Nathan Glazer characterized Jews as the American ethnic, immigrant group par excellence. They, and others, created what she calls 'sociological Jewishness'—Jewishness as a manifestation of American values. She writes: "Handlin and Glazer's attempts to prove the existence of an American ethnic pattern paralleled their desire to categorize Jewish experience in universal and American terms... arguing that all American groups felt the same tension between group cohesion and American integration..." Most importantly, there was "nothing distinctly Jewish about this bond."

This sociological Jewishness was a powerful formula for the integration of American Jews, but, as Corwin Berman notes: "...while naming ethnic identity as an American norm, they [Glazer and Handlin] neglected its content..."

Indeed, not inculcation of Jewish patterns of life, nor transmission of Jewish culture and history, but measurement and management of identity became the constitutive act of the modern Jewish communal apparatus. It's no coincidence that the most lavishly funded communal project of our generation has not been universal comprehensive Jewish education, but rather, an identity making vacation whose goals are no more controversial than encouraging passive Zionism and getting young Jews near each other. This is the insidiousness of the identity ideology.

The common purpose and shared culture that once bound Jews as a group, and set them off from the larger American culture, has dramatically diminished. It has fallen to the American Jewish elite—journalists, philanthropists, and social scientists—to evoke, and invoke, a sense of groupness without content, and the language of identity has been key to that project.

As sociologist Rogers Brubaker has argued, groups don't just exist, but are called into being in a variety of ways. Think of how an event like the latest Pew survey calls the group 'American Jews' into being. Without the survey, Jews in America are a diverse bunch, and, as we see by the numbers, the majority are only minimally engaged with the acts and beliefs of traditional Judaism, and are not much more involved with other Jews than they are with lots of other kinds of people. But the act of surveying brings those Jews together, bounds them within the inquiry, gives them the appearance of unified agency and purpose: being Jewish. Jewish identity is invoked in the very act of studying it.

The Pew survey is what Brubaker would call a project of group-making. Group-making is a "social, cultural, political project aimed at turning categories into groups or increasing levels of groupness..." The Pew survey is an event that reifies the idea of an American Jewish group, "groupness as an event." But it is a 'groupness' that reflects the values of the people constructing it. Those acting as consultants to the survey believe in a Jewishness bounded by Synagogue, Israel, Denomination and Federation. Those being surveyed, by and large, have a very different set of concerns.

As Brubaker points out, if groupness is something that needs to be cultivated and evoked, it can also fail to materialize. The 'groupness' the Pew survey (like all the previous NJP surveys) sought to invoke has consistently failed to materialize, or only weakly. Thus the talk of crisis from the Jewish institutional world and calls to action, or at least accountability. But that crisis rhetoric is itself a group making, identity heightening project. No matter what actions are taken or, or not, a sense of Jewish identity has been aroused in those who are the ostensible objects of crisis. And by using the language of crisis, the institutional elite, ethnopolitical entrepreneurs as Brubaker calls them, reinforce their own importance in solving whatever crisis they have defined.

In conclusion, Identity has become seemingly indispensable to the Jewish communal conversation, even as American Jews drift farther away from Jewishness. It behooves us to think critically about the work done by identity. For example, a willingness to grapple with the contradictions of American Jewish integration, that which is smoothed over by the identity ideology, could be an exciting new direction for Jewish thought and engagement.

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