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WHO/WHAT IS A JEW?

"The feature of Jewish exceptionalism is unassimilability ... In modernity the Jews again slip through the grasp of Gentile attempts to comprehend them. Are the Jews a race, a nation, or a religion, modern Gentiles and Jews asked. The answer depended upon the interest of who was asking." -- **Adam Weisberger**, discussing the works of Moses Hess, 1997, p. 128

At this point, before we go any further, it is necessary to pose what one would think to be a relatively simple query: What, dare we ask, is a Jew anyway? Who are they? Who qualifies for admission? What are the criteria for inclusion as a bonafide member of the Chosen People, secularly, religiously, or any other way? And for the Jewish masses that endlessly wail, rage, and breast-beat about enemies who have allegedly assailed them relentlessly throughout history, and for all the heralded Jewish oppressors who thought they could clearly identify and persecute the people who they hatefully despised, it is bizarrely enigmatic that by the end of the twentieth century even Jews cannot -- in consensus -- decide exactly who and what they are. It is, strangely enough -- as growth pains of modern Israel have borne witness -- an in-house controversy of the most profound dimensions. For if the state of Israel was founded as refuge for world Jewry, and if any Jew in the world has the innate right to be admitted there as an Israeli citizen, who, then, EXACTLY are they? "Jews live in a world," says Michael Selzer, "in which, seemingly, no two Jews can agree on what a Jew really is ... [but] every Jew has his own reasons for knowing that he is a Jew." [SELZER, p. 11] "It is a tragic irony," notes Barnett Litvinoff, "that the only people who could decide with certainty who were Jews were the followers of the Nazi ideologist Alfred Rosenberg." [LITVINOFF, p. 6]

Michael Selzer notes the bizarrely nebulous aspects of modern Jewish identity, making the issue sound like an excerpt from Alice in Wonderland:

"Ironically, one may discover the characteristics of one's own Jewishness in non-Jews, and all that one regards as most antithetical to it forming the essence of other Jews' Jewishness ... The only description of Jewishness which would apply to both, is that *they are not non-Jews*." [SELZER, his emphasis, p. 12-13]

Or what on earth is one to make of this observation by another Jewish commentator, Robert Kamenetz:

"I began to suspect that Jewish identity, as it has evolved in the West today, could be a real barrier to encountering the depths of Judaism. In other words, being Jewish could keep you from being a Jew."

[KAMENETZ, R., 1994, p. 156]

A 1964 textbook for Jewish high school students published by the Union of American Hebrew Congregations frames the answer to the "Who is a Jew?" query in as vague terms as possible, yet likewise lobbies for the activist continuance of this indeterminate "Jewish" entity:

"*Hard to Answer*. By now you have discovered that it's not easy to answer what first seemed like a simple question: What is a Jew? As a matter of fact, there are some intelligent Jews who do not think the question can be answered all. They say that we Jews are unique; that is to say, we are different from any other group of people on earth ... [Some people feel] that, to some extent, ... we are a religious group, in some ways a nation, in some ways a race, and in some ways a nationality. And yet we are more than any one of these by itself. We are a religious group *plus*, a race *plus*, a nation *plus*, and a nationality *plus*. But it is not easy to define what that 'plus' is in each case." [GITTELSON, R., 1964, p. 20]

The essence of Jewish identity is, hence (in echoing the Chosen People conviction), an undefineable *uniqueness* -- a term of distinction we will hear more about later in other contexts.

"Many ... attempts have been made," wrote Alfred Jospe, "to define the meaning of Jewish existence, yet not all point to the same tact: the Jewish people has usually been an enigma to its own adherents no less than to outsiders." [MILLGRAM, p. 7] "If you get rid of the theology and the biological mysticism," wrote prominent Jewish journalist Walter Lippman, who distanced himself from the Jewish community, "and treat the literature as secular, and refuse to regard the Jews as a ... Chosen People, just what elements of a living culture are left?" [TOLL, p. 160]

Some observers, like the hostile (non-Jew) Hilaire Belloc, have suggested that throughout history Jews, chameleon-like, amoebae-like, "adjusted their notions of themselves to suit the varying circumstances with which they were confronted. They were a race when it suited them, a nationality when necessity demanded it, a religious group, and, finally, a cultural unit when the situation made such a status desirable." [BELLOC, in WIRTH, p. 64]

Rabbi Jacob Neusner seems to affirm this, saying:

"For nearly a century American Jews have persuaded themselves that they fall into the religious -- and therefore acceptable -- category of being 'different,' and not into the ethnic -- and therefore crippling and unwanted -- category of being 'different.' Now that they have no Jewish accents they are willing to be ethnic." [NEUSNER, *Holo*, p. 978]

"In the European diaspora," noted Harry Golden in 1973, "Jews were called a nation and in the English-speaking diaspora a community. Now we are called an ethnic group, although in my travels I met few Jews who thought they were ethnics ... If we are ethnics, then Jews are the only ethnic group with their own religion." [GOLDEN, H., 1973, p. 4] "It is very difficult to give an exact definition of Judaism," wrote Kaufman Kohler in 1940, "because of its peculiarly complex character ... Religion and race form an inseparable whole in Judaism." [GITTELSOHN, R., 1964, p. 27]

Jewish author David Biale also addressed a nebulous Jewish identity in 1998: "To be a Jew, especially at this historical juncture, means to lack a single essence, to live with multiple identities." [BIALE, D., 1998, p. 9]

The idea of "being Jewish," says Nathan Glazer, can even go away for generations and sprout back to life from a patient seed that refuses extinction. "Even if [Judaism] finds no expression in one generation or another," he says, "the commitment to remain related to it still exists. Dead in one, two, or three generations, it may come back to life in the fourth." [SILBERMAN, p. 240] This incessant seed is the case, says Jewish commentator Stanislaw Krajewski, in Poland, where relatively assimilated Jews under communist rule are now finding their way back to a "particularist," Jewish identity based on racial lineage:

"One can always return [to a Jewish identity]. Jewish descent is the foundation. Sometimes, however, it remains pure potential and never finds expression. That, too, can change. The experience of my generation and people younger than us is that many people start from zero, and then begin to be involved in their Jewishness."
[Dlomaslowska-Szuk, p. 323]

Raphael Patai, a Jewish scholar, claims that, for all the knottiness surrounding the modern day issue, being Jewish can best be described as nothing more than "a state of mind." [PATAI, p. 23] (This kind of "state," of course, won't afford you citizenship in today's state of Israel, nor acceptance into any Jewish community anywhere).

On occasion, Martin Buber, the well-known Jewish religious philosopher, has obfuscated the matter entirely. He believed (in the words of Michael Meyer) that "Jews elude all classification ... [this] uniqueness was discernible only by the inner eye of faith and could be borne only as the yoke of the Kingdom of God." [MEYER, p. 3-4] In other comments, Buber inferred a racial, "blood" connection among Jews. Either way, each informs a general Jewish sense of being a "community of fate," covenant of fate, or collective destiny, "that unites all Jews, willingly or against their will." [SACKS, J., One, p. 6] "Whatever befalls the People of Israel," declares Yiddish folklore, "will befall Mr. Israel." [KUMOVE, S., 1985, p. 143]

Abram Leon reflects a Marxist socio-economic view in declaring Jews to be "historically a social group with a specific economic function. They are a class, or more precisely, a people class." [LEON, p. 74] A

kind of economic caste. "According to Marxists," notes Richard L. Rubenstein, "the Jews were not a distinctive religiocultural entity, but a petit bourgeois stratum of the larger society whose religion was the ideological superstructure mirroring the group's concrete social and economic relations."

[RUBENSTEIN, R., p. 121]

Once upon a time, in bygone eras, the definition of a Jew was simple enough. Jews were practicing members of Judaism, the seminal religious faith of both Christianity and Islam. They had a specific religion and belief system, distinct sacred texts, their own language, special customs, and the further back into history one goes (with a few conversionary aberrations), the more they were racially/linguistically homogeneous to their Semitic origins. In our day, this simplistic scenario has long since completely fallen apart.

By the end of the twentieth century, while there are many Jews who still adhere to various forms of Jewish religious expression -- Orthodox, Reformed, Conservative, and Reconstructionist Judaism among them -- others who still insist upon calling themselves Jews are irreligious, completely secular, or even atheistic. They wouldn't pick up the Torah over a comic book.

"Jewishness is obviously not just a religion," says Ellen Willis, an editor at the Village Voice Literary Supplement, "Secular Jews can feel every bit as passionately, viscerally involved in the question of being Jewish ... It's not a nation ... So what is it? In a certain way it's like a big extended family." [BRENNER, p. 341] "We ourselves know that most of us feel a strong sense of kinship with other Jews throughout the world," says Rabbi Roland Gittelsohn, "Perhaps without actually expressing it, in so many worlds, we feel as if we Jews constitute a large 'family.' When we read of some tragedy befalling a group of Jews in Poland, in Turkey, or in Persia, though we are not personally acquainted with a single one of them, we nevertheless feel a very special sense of loss." [GITTELSON, R. 1964, p. 37]

What about a cultural definition? Jews in the world Diaspora have, over hundreds of years, inevitably absorbed some aspects of the cultural accouterments of their host countries. While religious traditions are often a common denominator in world Jewry, the Jews of Iran, Iraq, Brazil, South Africa, Austria, and all others have developed local religious nuances. Expressions of more secular Jewish aspects of culture are even more entwined with local non-Jewish traditions. The controversial African Jews of Ethiopia (the Falasha) have for centuries practiced a Judaism which is, to orthodox European-oriented rabbinates, extremely problematical. For some, particularly amongst the most stubbornly orthodox of European (Ashkenazi) ancestry, and Jewish racists, the Falasha are simply not Jews. "What seems Jewish in one context," says Samuel Heilman, "may turn out to be quite something else in another. That is the lesson of contemporary pluralism to which few of us can remain blind." [HEILMAN, p. 11]

In fact, the legal assertion in Israel that recent Ethiopian and Russian immigrants to that land are brother/sister Jews (linked to some ancient genetic seed) has a curious sense of absurdity to it. New Ethiopian and Russian arrivals to the Jewish state are neither racially the same, linguistically the same, nor culturally the same. They are certainly not religiously linked either -- under decades of communism, most Russians are atheists/agnostics, and the Ethiopians have their own distinct brand of religious

practice. As Third World people, practically speaking, they have more in common with the local Muslim Arab Bedouin than they do with Russians -- Jewish or otherwise.

Indeed, in the historical sense, even a Jewish "cultural" continuum across time itself has no basis in fact. "When we talk," says Hillel Halkin, "about Jewish history, Jewish tradition, Jewish values, we are in fact talking about a highly complex configuration of diverse periods, places, and societies, which ... differ enormously from each other." [HALKIN, p. 6]

Is being Jewish then a racial essence? The traditional dictate of Orthodox Jewry and Jewish tradition, that a Jew is someone whose mother was Jewish, supports a racial pedigree. (The real reason for this matrilineal definition, suggests Norman Cantor, was because "ancient Israelites produced children by relations with Gentile slaves and concubines" and "purity of Jewish blood could [only] be scrutinized ... by the rabbinical ruling that Jewish descent had to go through the legitimate Jewish wife." [CANTOR, p. 48] Orthodox thinking also dictates that if an individual is born Jewish, he or she will always remain Jewish, even if they apostate. This seminal Jewish idea -- that if one is born a Jew, he or she can't shake it -- was the track Hitler followed in his attempt to exterminate European Jewry. "What defines a Jew," says South-African born rabbi Shlomo Levin, "is one single factor, the fact that they have a soul which is connected to God in a particular kind of way through the mother's line." [KLEIN, E, p. 202] Arthur Koestler calls this the "myth of a Biblical passing [of] racial purity throughout the ages." [KOESTLER, p. 236] "Born a Jew," says Roger Kahn, "*Halachists* insist, always a Jew. One cannot stop being Jewish by choice; personal choice is irrelevant to Jewishness." [KAHN, R., p. 43] "The classical view of Covenantal existence as the basic meaning of Jewishness," adds Monford Harris, "has always been that the Jew who rejects the Covenant is still a Jew. The atheistic Jew of our time (and perhaps this is the dominant type of our time) who may reject the covenant on the grounds that there was (or is) no God with whom a covenant was made, is still claimed by the covenant as a member of that covenant. The covenant by God with the ancestors stands for all time, with all Jews." [HARRIS, M., 1965, p. 91]

"It's not a question of religious belief or observance or 'having to be [Jewish]' or not 'having to be [Jewish],'" I said, patiently, trying to explain to this Catholic who only went to Mass on Easter," wrote famed Jewish novelist Judith Krantz in her autobiography,

"We were born of Jewish parents who were born of Jewish parents going back, I assume, for thousands of years, barring the occasional pogrom and rape. My ancestors were Jews as far back as you can possibly imagine. That alone is more than enough to make us Jews." [KRANTZ, J., 2000, p. 325]

Jewish psychoanalyst Theodore Reik put it this way:

"Once a Jew, always a Jew. The story is told in New York of the banker Otto Kahn and the humorist Marshall P. Wilder who was a hunchback. Strolling along Fifth Avenue, Kahn pointed to a church and said: 'Marshall, that's the church I belong to. Did you know that I was once a Jew?' Wilder answered: 'Yes, Otto,

and I was once a hunchback.' The conviction that there is an unalterability about being Jewish is expressed better in this dry sentence than in many treatises. It seems that it is as difficult for the Jew to get rid of his Jewishness as it is for the ancient mariner to lose the albatross." [REIK, T., 1962, p. 90]

Or, as Jewish sociologist Marshall Sklare has put it:

"One assumption of the Jewish family system is that all Jews share a common ancestry. The Jew is thought to be connected with all other Jews and the Jewish community is often viewed as a kind of extended family." [GOLDEN, H., 1973, p. 21-22]

On the other hand, those self-defining Jews with only a Jewish father are in for a rude surprise if they go to Israel, where the tenets of Orthodox Judaism legally hold sway in much of the secular culture. Judith Hertog was stunned when she moved from Holland to Israel, only to find that the coveted "Jew" notation on her national identity card was not granted; rather, it was stamped "Dutch" because her mother was a Gentile. "Sometimes I catch myself trying to avoid talking about my mother's Jewishness or lack of it," she laments, "as if I should be ashamed to have a feeling of belonging to the Jewish people without a Jewish mother. If only my mother's maternal grandmother had been Jewish, it would have been all right. Alas, my mother has only a Jewish grandfather ... Is it even possible to define Jewishness in a non-religious way? If it is not religion, what is it? Maybe just a crazy obsession, carried on through generations?" [HERTOG, J., 54]

Similarly, Meryl Hyman, who thought herself Jewish made plans to emigrate to Israel. But, alas,

"Late in 1996, I called the Israeli consulate in New York to inquire about making aliyah, about exercising a right to return to the homeland as an Israeli citizen and and a Jew. I asked the young woman who answered the phone to define a Jew. She said, 'If you have a Jewish mother.' I said, 'My mother isn't Jewish, but my father is. I am a Jew.' She said, 'No, you are not a Jew,' and hung up the phone. I was dismissed by the first person I called." [HYMAN, M., 1998, p. 20]

Emil Fackenheim compares the religious faiths of Christianity and Judaism, noting that Judaism is traditionally more than just a faith; it is a kind of obligatory, racial entwinement:

"A Christian child is born pagan, becomes Christian through baptism and itself is provisional until at confirmation the confirmant makes a conscious commitment to the Christian faith. A Jewish child, in contrast, is born Jewish ... If a Christian boy or girl cannot in good conscience make the Christian commitment, confirmation can be postponed, if necessary indefinitely ... The event of [the Jewish]

bar mitzvah cannot be postponed or cancelled: In Judaism a Jewish boy becomes a 'son of duty' -- obliged to keep the commandments -- quite regardless of his wishes, beliefs, or twinges of conscience."
[FACKENHEIM, p. 29]

The roots of such thinking go back centuries. "There is a line of thought," says Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, "that runs through the Middle Ages which seeks to include even the Jewish apostate within the rule that 'though he sins, he remains a Jew' ... [Jewish] tradition ... embraced all Jews and denied the possibility of any alternative basis of identity [SACKS, J., One, p. 90] ... The terms of the Covenant were reaffirmed by those who survived and remained Jews. For it bound not only those who 'stand here with us today' but also those who are 'not here with us today.' The Covenant was *involuntary* and spans all generations. There is, in Isaiah's phrase, 'no bill of divorce.'" [SACKS, J., p. 130]

This originally religious view of the absolute inescapability of Jewishness if born one is even reflected in the secular feminist world of 1998. In Jewish Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia, the authors declare their thinking about who qualifies as a Jew to be considered for the volume. Among the decisions is this one: "When both parents were Jewish, we included some women who rejected their Jewish identity or considered it irrelevant to their lives." [BRAWARSKY, S., Feminine, 1998, p. 49]

Complicating all this, however, the modern state of Israel -- which celebrates a Jewish nationalism, patriotism, and loyalty to Jewish "peoplehood" above all else -- expressly discarded Jewish religious law in a famous Israeli Supreme Court case in 1962. A born-Jew who had been sheltered from the Nazis in a Catholic monastery, "Brother Daniel" eventually converted to Catholicism and became a priest. But he was rebuffed in his legal attempt to proclaim his Jewishness and live as a citizen in Israel (per Israel's law that allows any Jew who wishes to immigrate to that country.) In this unusual case, Israeli secular law overruled Jewish religious law to underscore Jewishness as an allegiance.

"Surely," says Hillel Halkin, "in an age when most Jews the world over hold no firm religious beliefs and have no firm commitment to religious practice of any kind, there is something intellectually perverse, if emotionally understandable, in the contention that the son of Polish Jews [Brother Daniel] who has made great efforts to live in Israel is not a Jew because he believes in the New Testament, while the son of Polish Jews who live in Los Angeles is a Jew though he believes in astrology or in transcendental meditation, or in nothing more than his own personal welfare. " [HALKIN, p. 5] Halkin leaves unspoken what the essence of such identity irrationality is all about. A fundamental basis of "being Jewish" is its historical "otherness," resistance, and animosity to Christianity. While a Jew can even be legally accepted as an atheist, an important part of "being Jewish" is ultimately defined in emphatic antithesis - - to the Christian faith. "In the western world," observes Charles Liebman and Steven Cohen, "a significant characteristic of being Jewish is notbeing Christian." [LIEBMAN, p. 46] This is also exemplified in the 1990 case of two married Jews by birth from South Africa, Gary and Shirley Beresford, who, by Israeli Supreme Court ruling, did not qualify for the Jewish "Law of Return" to settle in Israel because they were members of the organization "Jews for Jesus." [SEDAN, p. 53]

And what of the case of Ilana Stern? Her father was Jewish. Her non-Jewish mother died at her birth, in a Russian labor camp. Her father was reunited with her after the war, and they moved to Israel in 1956. Believing herself to be Jewish, when she registered for the Israeli army at age 16 she was classified to be Christian. As Uri Huppert notes:

"The Ministry of Interior had a simple explanation, Jewish religious law holds that anyone who is not born of a Jewish mother, and has not converted to Judaism, is not a Jew. But then Ilana raised the thorny question of just where her supposed Christianity came from. From Jewish law, was the prompt response -- her Christianity had been inherited from her mother." [HUPPERT, U., 1988, p. 122]

After a string of futile legal convolutions to be declared a Jew, Ms. Stern eventually left Israel. [HUPPERT, U., 1988, p. 123]

There are always exceptions, however, to any definition of Jewry. How nebulous and erratic any answer to "Who is a Jew?" becomes (contingent also upon socio-political winds of the era) can be seen in the compilation Who's Who in American Jewry, 1938-39, which included fifteen Protestant ministers and two Catholic priests. [GOLDSTEIN, D. p. 31] (The historical context here, of course, was the rise of Aryan fascism in Europe and Jewish American efforts to publicly identify with mainstream American society). A former senator from Maine (and eventually Secretary of Defense under President Bill Clinton), Bill Cohen, always thought he was Jewish because his father was a Jew. Upon being made aware that traditional rabbinical law didn't consider him Jewish, he refused to convert to something he thought he already was and eventually became a Unitarian. [BRENNER, p. 12]

In the religious and genetic contexts, faced with increased Jewish intermarriage with non-Jews in western societies, the liberalizing Reform movement of Judaism has accepted children of Jewish fathers as being Jewish; this is a concession bitterly opposed by Orthodox Jews who do not accept this recent innovation. Although most liberalizing western Jews today publicly play down racial aspects of Jewish identity, for many it is often still, privately, an issue of concern.

Amy Sheldon, for instance, a feminist Jewish professor at the University of Minnesota, and part of a liberal Jewish community, married a non-Jew. "I was not ready," she laments, "for the messages I got from my own people ... It is hard to live with the idea that a whole community is capable of automatically turning against me and my family." [SHELDON, p. 79] This included racist comments about one of her child's blonde hair and the fact that he didn't "look" Jewish. In an Orthodox context, a Jew who had the misfortune to have red hair in a Haradim community spoke of his difficulty in finding a wife: "[Other Jews] thought I looked too much like a *goy* [non-Jew]." [MACDONALD, p. 214]

In 1970, two atheists, Benjamin Shalit and his non-Jewish wife from Scotland, fought the Israeli government in a legal struggle to accept their children as official Jewish citizens of the state. At stake was a realm of national privileges only accorded to Jews. In a 5-4 Israeli Supreme Court decision, their

two children were accepted as Jews. This decision nearly brought down the Israeli government, and by the time the Shalit's third child was born, Israeli law was firm in declaring this one *not* to be Jewish. Shalit (once the chief psychologist of the Israeli army) and his family eventually moved to Sweden. [HAZELTON, p. 38-39]

Scattered all over the world for a millennium, Jewish communities -- theoretically dictating continuous Jewish matrilineal lineage for thousands of years -- have obviously not been as insulated from their host peoples as some would have hoped. (And, too, during some brief periods in ancient history Jews actually proselytized converts into their community). Jews from Iran, for instance, by face alone, are not today distinguishable from Iranian Muslims. Jews from Arab countries generally look like Arabs. Although some have Semitic traces, many Jews from Europe appear to be physically European. The Ethiopian Jews are, of course, all Black.

So if being Jewish is not entirely religious, cultural, or racial, what is it? If none of these as a single force -- or the three in unison -- necessarily holds all those who call themselves Jews together, what remains? What binds this community so tightly, so forcefully, together? How does one liken oneself so insistently to this particular group? Why haven't most Jewish-Americans diluted completely into the American melting pot like so many Irish-Americans, Polish-Americans, and others?

Part of the reason is the continuous social psychology of an insular clan ethic, enforced by both the traditional isolation and folk history of Jews in the European ghettos and the separatist religious teachings of the Talmud. Even when pride in being Jewish was at its lowest ebb, in 1942, J. O. Hertzler still noted that "through most of history, the Jew has been loath to lose his distinctive identity. Today, whether he be Orthodox, Reform, 'liberal,' rationalist, or atheist, he usually does not want to cease being a Jew." [HERTZLER, p. 73] For many who call themselves Jews, there is simply the enduring connection to a romanticized notion of the mythology of "the Chosen People." If they are not active in the notion of a superior Judaic religiosity, then it may be association to an elite communal self that expresses itself in some other way -- often, as many do, to a Jewish claim of superior intellect and insight, or economic and historic achievement, the last two which are certainly related. "Far more Jews," says theologian Richard Rubenstein, "accept the unity of Jewish destiny than the unity of Jewish belief." [HALBERSTAM, p. 4]

With the demystifying of all religious principles in our secular age, "being Jewish" is largely reduced to a definition that simply rests upon an abstract historical essence that has as its main self-conception an emphatic contradistinction to those who *are not* Jewish. "Being Jewish" is then rendered as an allegiance to a self-conceived privileged caste, part of whose privilege is wearing the mantle of "History's Greatest Victims." The conceptual separation by Jews from all other people -- and their perceived innate anti-thesis in relation to them -- is at the core of traditional Jewish thinking. "Judaism," writes David Biale, "... defines itself ... in contradistinction to the Other, the *goy* [non-Jew]: the holy nation that 'dwells alone' ... against the 'nations of the world.' Without the Other, the Jew of 'Judaism' lacks definition." [BIALE, *Confessions*, p. 43] In other words, for many Jews, the clearest definition for the "What is a Jew?" riddle relies upon what "being Jewish" is not. Even large numbers of secular Jews who

have abandoned Judaism as a religious faith still define themselves in an alien relation to the non-Jewish Other. For such Jews, the threatening idea of an enduring pseudo-mystical, transhistorical "anti-Semitism" becomes the very foundation upon which they understand their communal identity, always in relation to the hostile "Other." This hostility becomes part of a continuous loop, expressed over and over again through history, elicited by Jewish arrogance and exploitation of those who inevitably become hostile towards Jews, thus reaffirming Jewish self-identity.

"The Chosen People had already been chosen by circumstance," insists Jewish author Earl Shorris in addressing the essences of Jewish identity, "They were defined from outside, for no man chooses to be a slave -- the condition that is thrust upon him. The genesis of the people whom God chose was from outside. They were a nation made by their enemies." [SHORRIS, E., 1982, p. 44]

Certainly, these days, such a definition of Jewry is of far greater importance and more encompassing than any other. After the Holocaust, Jewish self-identification accelerated the already existing self-notion of themselves as consummate (even transcendent) human victims. This allegiance is a peculiar one for it affords American Diaspora Jewry -- from their current positions of undeniable affluence, comfort, prosperity, and freedom -- to still lay a claim (at least abstractly, historically, mythically) to being oppressed. This claim to oppression, of course, does not emanate from persecution by Americans around them. It is a claim to conditions of the past -- both real and imagined, in other lands, in other eras; the claim is also rooted in a complete denial of their part in creating the conditions for their suffering. This country today is too multicultural and pluralistic; it is a land where the dominant majority is fast becoming today an aggregate of ethnic minorities, all unified in respective claims -- both historical and current -- to injustice wrought upon them. In such a pluralistic environment, it is difficult for Jews to be singled out for undeserved -- or even deserved -- hostility; in this sense, there is an extraordinary security in the solidarity of a wide field of co-complainants.

Paul Breines, a Jewish scholar, even goes so far as to suggest that the lack of any truly substantive anti-Semitism in mainstream America today is actually a "threat" to American Jews in that it removes one of the most important parts of their communal identity: the understanding of themselves as victims. And with the loss of victimhood goes the attendant "special claim to what is called the moral higher ground." [BREINES, p. 43-44]

No matter what individual Jews do in their lives -- as saints or sinners -- they still make claim to this "higher moral ground" of communal victimhood. Today's Jewish professor, entrepreneur, and lawyer (and even criminal) can relax in their comfortable armchairs and plan their next accomplishment, their next victory, assured that they always have the advantage as history's blessed underdog, certain that they are members of a group that is intrinsically better than others, not the least by virtue of their peoples' accumulative historic suffering. In this myth, the eternally oppressed Jew continues to succeed, over and over again throughout the world, in the face of another set of non-Jewish limitations and obstacles.

Meanwhile, the American Jew can play the riskless role of philanthropist, paying the fares and possibly housing costs of other Jews in the world, who are less fortunate than them, to make *aliyah* (ascension) to Israel and join the international Jewish protective army, human fodder for Jewish mythology. As Michael Goldberg notes, "Civil Judaism's idea of Jews' moral responsibility for one another extends no further than an arm's length to reach into a wallet." [GOLDBERG, M.] Or as Jonathan Woocher puts it:

"Civil Judaism's emphasis on countering anti-Semitism (of which there is relatively little in the United States) and supporting Israel (which is done primarily through financial and political activism) ... enables the American Jew to feel that (s)he is contributing to Jewish survival, without materially affecting his/her lifestyle or position in American society." [WOOCHER, p. 99]

Alain Finkielkraut, a French Jew, looks cynically at his Jewish heritage and the peculiar status that he is afforded for his genealogy only:

"... the Judaism I had received was the most beautiful present a post-genocidal child could imagine. I inherited a suffering to which I had not been subjected, for without having to endure oppression, the identity of the victim was mine. I could savor an exceptional destiny while remaining completely at ease. Without exposure to real danger, I had heroic stature..." [FINKIELKRAUT, p. 7]

This Jewish proclamation of "heroic stature" has its strongest modern foundations in their communal connections to victimhood under the Nazis in World War II. Yet there has always been nurtured the religious claims to "chosenness" by God, specialness, and a superiority over other peoples, elitist claims which have broadened into secular dimensions as well. Eliot Cohen, former editor of Commentary, sees Jewish "specialness," as many do, this way:

"I refer to that extra dimension given to Jewish personality and life by the fact that each Jew moves, consciously or not, in the context of a long and special history and religious ethical tradition that lays upon him, whether as a burden or a badge of pride, the sense of being "chosen," and so created in him the tendency, even the obligation, to carry himself 'with a difference.'" [COHEN, in KOSTELANETZ, p. 17]

"Let the Jew," says Will Herberg, "who rejects the doctrine of 'chosenness' examine his conscience and see whether these words [by Cohen] do not ring the inmost reality of his being." [HERBERG, p. 274] "A very large number of young Jewish people throughout the world have only tenuous ties to their Jewishness," wrote Joachim Prinz in 1972, "But -- and this is the problem which reminds us so much of

the Marranos [Jews who hide their identity] -- *can Jewishness be forgotten?*" [original author's emphasis: PRINZ, J., 1973, p. 195]