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THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE

MEMORANDUM

July 1, 1964

TO: Lucy Dawidowicz
Joseph Greenblum
Milton Himmelfarb
Ben Ringer
Marshall Sklare
Marc Tannenbaum ✓
Isaiah Tennen

FROM: Menheim S. Shapiro

SUBJECT: ATTITUDES OF JEWISH YOUNG PEOPLE

At a meeting of the Committee on Jewish Communal Affairs a couple of months ago there arose some discussion about research on the attitudes of Jewish young people toward their Jewishness. When I pointed out that there was a considerable amount of such research already available in scattered places, they requested that a brief summary of such material be prepared for them.

Miss Joyce Klein of my department has prepared a review of some of this material.

Since I think you may find this of interest, I am attaching a copy.

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THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE
Jewish Communal Affairs Department

THE MEANING OF JEWISHNESS TO AMERICAN JEWISH YOUTH

A Survey and Interpretation of Research

I. Introduction

What follows is an attempt to summarize some research findings about the attitudes of American Jewish youth toward being Jewish. It is based upon the work of sixteen authors, whose articles, books or papers are named in the notes which follow the text.

The question "What is Jewish identity?" is one to which each person gives his own answer. There are, however, certain elements which may relate to Jewish identity and to which we will tentatively point. One is the commitment to the religious precepts and beliefs of Judaism; another is the positive feeling of belonging to a unique and important group; and a third is an awareness of and involvement with the culture and institutions of this group. The foregoing are among the aspects of "Jewishness" with which this paper will concern itself.

II. Religious Practices and Beliefs of Young Jews

Most young American Jews rarely engage in religious practices. One study showed that only one quarter of the young Jews interviewed had attended temple once a month or more often in the past six months, while the corresponding figures for Catholics and Protestants were four-fifths and three-fifths respectively.¹ A higher percentage of Jews say they never attend services than members of other religious groups (the ratio is about 3:1).² Viewing the attendance of Jewish young people at services by branch of Judaism, we find that one third of the Orthodox Jews attend services bi-weekly, while 85% of the Conservatives and 90% of the Reform Jews attend only several times a year.³ The same study asked respondents to reply to the statement: "I regard active connection with a synagogue as essential to my religious life." Many who replied "yes" were among the least

frequent actual participants. Among the Orthodox, less than 15% said "yes", among the Conservatives over 20% said "yes" and of the Reform 30% said "yes". When young people say they attend services only several times a year, they seem to be emulating their parents, who they say rarely attend.⁴

Young American Jews rarely believe in the efficacy of prayer. One third of the Jews rarely or never pray, as compared with one-tenth of the Catholics and Protestants.⁵ Fewer Jews than teen-agers of other religions believe that their prayers are always answered.⁶

Most young Jews observe neither the Sabbath nor the dietary laws. Fewer are interested in "learning more about religion" than are Catholics or Protestants. However, more young Jews say they like to "argue about religion".⁷ Religion in general plays a minor role in the hierarchy of young Jews' life goals. Of those who responded to the question "What is most important in life?", 8% of the Jews said "to live in accordance with religious beliefs" (as opposed to 15% of the Protestants and 42% of the Catholics); 30% said "to make the world a better place" (compared with 46% for the Protestants and 20% for the Catholics); 28% answered "my own happiness" (as did 18% of the Protestants and 14% of the Catholics) and 21% said "financial independence" (compared with 8% of the Catholics and Protestants interviewed).⁸

One third of the Jews held that "culture can exist without religion" while one seventh of the Protestants and one tenth of the Catholics held this view.⁹ In one sample, 50% of the Jews, 34% of the Protestants and 24% of the Catholics said that men could build a good society without divine or supernatural help.¹⁰ When asked which was the one group they thought could do the most to promote world peace, the majority of Catholics and Protestants said "religious leaders" while most Jews answered "educators."¹¹ Jews stress intellectual clarity as their primary requirement for an ideal ethical and religious system, while Protestants emphasize personal adjustment and Catholics require spiritual fulfillment.¹²

Only one quarter of the Jews believe in a Personal God as compared with two-thirds of the Protestants and the Catholics.¹³ Loyalty to God is important to only 11% of the Jews, but more consider "loyalty to government, people and family" important

than do Catholics and Protestants (the comparable figures are 87% for the Jews, 46% for the Protestants and 24% for the Catholics).¹⁴ In another study, 23% of the Jews, 57% of the Protestants and 63% of the Catholics said that they believed that religion was better than logic for solving problems.¹⁵ One fifth of the Jews, over one third of the Protestants and almost one half of the Catholics say that their religious beliefs make them very happy.¹⁶ Thus, Jewish youngsters appear to be less religiously oriented in every way than their Protestant and Catholic classmates.

III. Attitudes on Jewish Identity

Most evidence seems to point to the fact that Jewishness plays little part in the personal lives of young American Jews. A study made at Yale in 1946 found that less than half of those interviewed felt that being a Jew had a worthwhile effect on their lives, 34% viewed it as a handicap and the remainder considered it a neutral factor.¹⁷ A more recent study at Harvard found that only 35% of the Jewish students interviewed "professed Judaism as a religion, agreeing wholly or substantially with its beliefs and traditions."¹⁸ While about one quarter of the Jewish students at Harvard are Jewish, only one tenth of these are Hillel members. At Northwestern University, a study found that 116 of 200 Jewish students openly affirmed their Jewish identity, while 94 others expressed one or more reservations -- uncertainty, self-consciousness, or indifference.¹⁹ Most researchers find that very few young Jews completely reject Jewish identification, although they express great confusion about what being Jewish means. At Brandeis University, a Jewish-sponsored institution, 63% of the students acknowledge that they are Jews, but only 31% of these said they profess Judaism as a religion, "agreeing wholly or substantially with its beliefs and traditions."²⁰ However, only at Stanford University did as many as 7% "totally reject" their Judaism. At Boston University, barely one per cent were willing to give up being Jewish, while at Brandeis no one tested would.²¹

While there seems little doubt that there has been a weakening of religious and ethnic bonds, and Jewish students appear far more interested in political and social problems

than in Judaism, they by and large scorn conversion and most believe in maintaining some kind of Jewish identity. A 1947 study of Jewish college students in New York City asked "Is it important for Jews to continue to survive as a people?" and received replies over two to one in the affirmative.²² A recent study has found that a high percentage of Jewish youth insist on maintaining Jewish identity for themselves and their progeny: One tenth of the Jews (as compared with one quarter of the Catholics and one half of the Protestants) said they would intermarry.²³ Another survey found that 29% of Jewish students at one college "tend to identify or associate with Jewish people more than Gentiles... and therefore think of themselves as Jewish," that 26% think of themselves as Jews because their parents are, and that 18% think of themselves as Jews in a cultural sense.²⁴

IV. The Role of Israel

Some observers have mentioned Israel as a factor binding Jewish youngsters to their heritage. Back in 1947, the Yale survey found 58% favoring the idea of a Jewish state.²⁵ In 1952, a study in Brownsville, Brooklyn, found that the youngsters interviewed were Zionist sympathizers rather than Zionists. They were stirred by the birth of Israel, but their lives were in no way altered by this.²⁶ Most subscribe to the statement: "I am interested in Israel because of its Jewish inhabitants and folks tradition only,"²⁷ but do not view Israel as their "homeland". There is for the young American Jew no direct link between Israel and their own Jewishness.

V. Factors Affecting Jewish Identity

A. Age

It has been found that Jewish commitment among youth seems to decrease with age. Some studies find the sharpest break between the 7-8 and 10-11 year old groups. The results of one survey showed that in the younger group 41% expressed a positive preference for Jewish activities

while only 19% of the older children did so.²⁸ Other studies find the greatest change between children below 13 and those in the 13-17 age range. It appears that in the later age group a "stage" occurs in which young Jews react against their tradition; this seems to occur in secondary school rather than in college. It is important to note that the fact that Jewish activities decrease with age may or may not imply increased rejection and negativism toward Jewish things, but may simply represent broadened horizons. However, several studies did find increased defensiveness and insecurity with increased age. More older children expressed a conflict between being Jewish and being American and expressed stereotyped notions about Jews. This may represent a heightened appreciation with age of the positions of Jews as a minority group in American society. The campus appears to have a noticeable effect on young Jews for the open self-identification apparently decreases as they advance in college.²⁹

B. Socio-economic status

Children of low socio-economic status parents reveal a greater tendency than high socio-economic level children to prefer activities with Jewish content.³⁰ Most Jewish students who express positive self-identification are from the lower and lower middle class; while those from the middle and upper classes express more reserved identification.³¹ 18% more of young second generation Jews are likely to avow their "Jewishness" than are third generation Jews.³² Identification appears to decrease with each generation. Finally, it appears that Jewish girls accept and affirm their Jewishness more than their male counterparts. They also participate more in Jewish organizational activities and give more indications of secure feelings about their Jewishness.³³

C. Jewish Background and Education - Their Influence on Identity

The homes of most American Jewish youngsters are apparently neither strongly observant nor strongly non-observant. They report a marked lack of concrete Jewish stimuli, however, (in the forms of books, discussions, etc.)

in their homes.³⁴ A study of a Zionist youth group found that most of the active members were children of foreign-born parents, came from homes of fairly high Jewish intensity and influence and had attended a Hebrew High School. The author found that the youth group was unable to maintain prolonged appeal for children without a strong Jewish home background.³⁵ Another study found that of those youngsters who expressed intenser feelings of "Jewishness", 30% had intensive training in the traditional forms of Judaism.³⁶

Other studies have found that the majority of Jewish college students have had several years of childhood Jewish education. One survey reported that two thirds of the respondents had had Jewish education for at least one year.³⁷ Another study indicates that the average Jewish college student had attended a week-day afternoon school for 4 years.³⁸ All agree that the education received by most was meager in content and lasting effect. One study found, that although Jewish day school graduates tend to continue to observe certain rituals and practices, they do so in varying degrees. Day school graduates tend to be active in Jewish communal affairs and to assume leadership of the organizations with which they are affiliated.³⁹ Formal Jewish education of this sort thus appears to be significantly and positively related to the graduates' behavior in adult life. This study also showed that choice of occupation and secular education are not related to the graduates' Jewish behavior in adult life.

VI. Conclusions

How does our picture of American Jewish youth finally take shape? The young American Jew is more interested in political and social problems than in religion. He is more skeptical about religion, less observant of customs, less interested in preserving the institutional forms of his religion than his Gentile friends. He has a "quasi-positive" attitude toward being Jewish -- he would like to like Judaism. His Jewishness is frequently marked by a certain ethnic attachment but is void of cultural consciousness and values. The meaning of Judaism in today's world is unclear to him and this may cause him to feel insecure and even hostile to his heritage. As his age

increases, Jewishness appears to interest him less and less. The young American Jew has strong opinions on many Jewish problems but he is far more definitive about what he does not believe than about what he does believe. The young Jew defines the Jews not as a cultural-historical or ethnic group but as a kind of religio-ethical group, although he himself is not religious. This view conforms to the prevailing Christian view of the role of Judaism as one of the three "major American faiths." The non-religiosity of Jews would seem to be in accord with the American "religious style" as well as with a prominent strain within Judaism itself which contends that the center of the Jewish religion is commandment, not dogma.

To most American Jewish youngsters, being Jewish is no longer a burden or obligation but merely a fact, generating neither anguish nor elation. The feeling of uniqueness and pride which being Jewish has often meant in the past seems to be fading. The American Jewish youth has not yet completely lost his sense of Jewishness, but he has not found it either.



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