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**FORMING A JEWISH RELIGIOUS IDENTITY AMONG AMERICAN
ADOLESCENTS: A STUDY OF JEWISH DAY AND SUPPLEMENTARY SCHOOLS IN
CHICAGO**

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**Forming a Jewish Religious Identity Among American Adolescents:
A Study of Jewish Day and Supplementary Schools in Chicago**

The Jewish community in the U.S. is perhaps facing its most difficult time as an identifiable religious community (^{Commission} ~~A Time to Act~~, 1990). Significant numbers of Jewish adults have indicated in national studies that they have a marginal interest in Jewish values, ideals, and practice. Many adults have questioned the role of Judaism in their personal search for fulfillment and communality. These trends have dire implications, not only for the quality of Jewish life, but also for the very continuity of religious existence for a large segment of the Jewish people. Over the last several decades, intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews has risen dramatically, with about half of young adults raised in Jewish families now marrying outside the faith (Kosmin et al, 1991; Kaplan, 1999). What is even more striking is that among the children of these interfaith marriages, only about one-quarter are being raised as Jews (Kosmin et al, 1990). At this rate, some have suggested that the Jewish religious population of the U.S. may well be on the way to extinction.

Is the state of Jewish intermarriage and lack of commitment to Judaism a more general trend of increasing religious disaffiliation that we find with other religious denominations like Catholics? Or is this disaffiliation a uniquely Jewish problem? Posing the problem in this way misses an important aspect of Jewish identity. Since early modern times, Jews have been a minority population. Their ability to sustain their sense of Jewish identity despite persecution has contributed to their survival. Today, Jews in America do not face nor have they ever faced the same level of antisemitism as Jews in other countries. Within the last fifty years, the possibility

of outside cultural and social forces intent on destroying the American Jewish community has become less likely. The nomination of Joseph Lieberman for Vice President of the U.S. speaks to the acceptance and comfortableness that many Jews are experiencing in a pluralist America. Some Jewish foods like bagels have become standard fare in fast food restaurant chains and Jewish idioms like "chuzpah" are part of the American vernacular.

Now that Jews have become more fully integrated into American society, the choice to pursue one's Judaism has to be a conscious one, and this choice must be compelling emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually. The process by which this choice is made, we argue, ^{is} begins within the family and is reinforced through socialization and educational experiences within a rich Jewish tradition. *awk*

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In the past, being Jewish typically meant growing up in families and neighborhoods that were fully immersed in symbols and customs of Jewish life. Typically, Jews came in contact with their cultural and spiritual heritage in a variety of institutions and settings. Young people developed a strong sense of Jewish identity through their everyday experiences. Today, however, there are fewer such neighborhoods, families are more isolated from one another, and Jewish clubs and social groups have been replaced by secular or Christian associations that in earlier times Jews would have never considered or been allowed to participate in. Thus, the assimilated life style of Jews in American society, reinforced by weaker family and community social ties, places Jews in a state of anomie previously unknown to Jews. Another explanation of this phenomenon is described by Gans (1979; 1984) in discussing "symbolic ethnicity" and its effects in circumstances of few and weak and social ties.

But it is not just the assimilated life style that threatens the sense of Jewish identity, it is

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also young people's lack of an attachment to Israel. In the past, Israel had a spiritual identity for the Jewish people evident not only through historical roots but also through worship and prayer. Young adults who were born twenty-five years after the Holocaust, and the creation of the State of Israel, do not have the same spiritual identification with Israel as their older siblings and parents. Recent political actions by Israel, especially during the previous (Netanyahu) government, may lead Jews with more liberal political inclinations to question their relationship with Israel. Moreover, they find it difficult to identify with a state that is not the home of a majority of their distant cousins from Germany, Hungary, or Poland but ultra Orthodox believers who reject western culture, middle eastern Jews, and former Russians and Ethiopians whose Jewish roots, have questioned. This lack of a religious and cultural connection to Israel further erodes Jewish identity.

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Assimilation and waning religious and cultural affiliation with Israel among adults raises serious questions about the formation of Jewish identity among children. Some have argued that the Jewish socialization and educational experiences of American adults during times of financial prosperity of the 50s, the lack of commitment in the 60s, and the narcissism of the 70s have all contributed to a weakening in adults sense of Jewish identity. It would be difficult to learn retrospectively if this was indeed the case. It seemed to us that a more reasonable place to begin would be with understanding how young people form a Jewish identity, distinguishing between those young people who seemed more rooted in their own sense of self and their Jewish identity than those who seemed less so.

Adolescence is a significant time both religiously and developmentally. By seventh grade most young American Jews begin instruction for bar and bat mitzvah, a religious ceremony

where a young person affirms the covenant with the Jewish people. During this period young people begin to articulate their sense of who they are as human beings, including how they relate to their parents and their peers (Erickson, 1968; Csikszentmihalyi and Larson, 1984).

Adolescence is also the time when young people are perhaps the most vulnerable with respect to their sexual identity, as their physical development changes dramatically (Csikszentmihalyi & Schmidt, 1998). While these emotional and physical changes are occurring, we expect young people to consciously integrate their personal and religious identities in meaningful ways.

Sometimes this can be difficult, especially when young people receive conflicting messages from their families, friends, and the media about what is valued and how one should act responsibly.

Increasingly, we are seeing the importance of providing young people with opportunities to develop moral judgements and behaviors. Having a strong sense of religious identity can help adolescents become stronger individuals as they move through adolescence to adulthood.

To examine issues of Jewish adolescent identity we have embarked on a pilot study of Jewish adolescents attending Jewish day and supplementary schools in Chicago. This study will hopefully form the blueprint for a larger national study. At this time, we have identified our sample, planned our design including surveys, interviews, and observations, and created a series of instruments. To date we have conducted a series of focus groups with tenth and twelfth graders in a Jewish modern Orthodox day school. Using the voices of the adolescents, we illustrate in this paper some of the theoretical underpinnings of our work. It is important to regard this work as a first step.

As a group we are reaffirming and often learning new things about ourselves and the formation of our own childrens' Jewish identities. This paper, while written primarily by Adam

Gamoran, Bethamie Horowitz, and myself, represents the work of our entire team including Gail Dorph, Ellen Goldring, Roberta Goodman, Barry Holtz, David Kaplan, Rafe Stolzenberg, and Linda Waite. Scientists and Jewish scholars, some the children of rabbis themselves, we approach our work through both scientific study and Jewish knowledge. In essence, we are a team of researchers and Jewish educators trying to understand how young people come to understand themselves and their Jewish identities. Specifically, we are interested in learning about Jewish adolescents and their parents and how they participate in Jewish life through practices and rituals; express their feelings about being Jewish; the importance of spirituality in their lives; how they learn about Jewish life through family, school, and community; and their relationship with Israel and the Jewish people.

Adolescent Identity and Religious Identity

Moses Maimonides, a famous Jewish jurist, philosopher, and theologian who lived in the twelfth century, posed the following question: “Who are we, and to what do we aspire?” Interpreting his answer to this question, Lerner (2000) writes, “Our actions bespeak our prior judgments, and like it or not, those judgements in turn testify to the standards that guided them. To the extent that we have chosen those standards, we open ourselves to scrutiny. We disclose both our sense of present imperfection and our future hope” (p.65). Commenting further, Lerner goes on to say that one of the great themes of Maimonides is that, “Each of us should choose a fitting model to pattern our own life after and that we do so with as much self-awareness and deliberation as we can muster”(p.65). Adolescence is that period when we expect young people to begin this journey, by articulating who they are, what they believe, what their life goals are,

and what direction they will follow to achieve these aims (Csikszentmihalyi & Schneider, 2000).

In our more secular literature, we have looked at this process mainly through concepts such as self-esteem and early career formation but rarely have we ventured into the religious side of identity formation.

Yet, religious life is an integral part of human existence, and some sociologists would maintain is fundamental to the continuation of society. Durkheim, the son of a French rabbi in the late nineteenth century, who some consider the father of sociology, argues that religion's true function is "to make us act and to help us live." He maintains that the believer who has communed with God is not simply a person who sees new truths that the unbeliever does not, but rather is an individual who has the strength to endure the trials of existence and to overcome them. If we accept this proposition, it would seem that religious identification, particularly for adolescents, should provide an inner strength-which we typically refer to as "resilience"- to overcome personal adversity.

As Durkheim writes, the reality of religious forces is to be found in the real experience of social life. Not only are religious beliefs and practices accepted by individuals, these beliefs also become part of the group and unify it. "Religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community..." (Durkheim p. 44). When Durkheim speaks of a moral community, he is defining a group of individuals who have mutually recognized and recognizable identities that unify them, cognitively and normatively. In some sense it is not only having a religious identity but affiliating with a particular group and being part of that group that builds both individual strength and situates one in a community. The stronger the personal

identities of a particular religious group, the stronger the moral imperatives that define that group.

Young people form their religious identities through their social experiences. The inculcation of religious identity for Jewish children, like other children, begins in the family and is reinforced through worship. For centuries, young Jewish boys received special instruction in Hebrew and religious life in synagogues. Only within the last seventy-five years, have some of these synagogues provided religious instruction for Jewish girls. The formalization of the American Jewish religious schools in the early 1920s was designed to supplement the education of American Jewish children attending secular schools. Young boys and girls in some Jewish groups began attending some form of religious school outside of their public schools. However, among the rigorously orthodox sects, boys continued to attend separate religious schools, sometimes augmented with secular schooling in high school and college. By the 1960s, synagogue attendance in America sharply declined, although religious school attendance did not decline as precipitously. For some Jewish children, a deepening paradox began to emerge, one in which the parents may be non-practicing, yet expect their children to attend supplementary religious schools. Today this paradox remains for many Jewish families, which makes the most constant religious influence in some young people's lives, particularly in early adolescence, the religious school experience.

Religious Jewish School Experience

Jewish education today encompasses a broad range of learning experiences involving hundreds of thousands of American Jews of all ages (in one way or another). Many of these

institutions are under the auspices of individual religious denominations—the Orthodox, the Conservative, the Reconstructionist, and the Reform. There are commonly two types of Jewish education. First, there are the *day schools*, approximately 800 in the U.S. serving about 120,000 children. These schools are primarily Orthodox in type, although there are some Conservative and a few Reform and Community schools. These schools have both a secular and religious program. Then there are about 1,700 *supplementary* schools serving about 280,000 students. The supplementary schools for years have educated the bulk of the Jewish population. Yet they continue to face difficulties in motivating students who have spent a full day at public school, who have ongoing homework responsibilities, and who have a variety of competing interests such as television, sports, music, and other leisure-time activities. The purpose of these schools is religious education, which for most culminates in the bar and bat mitzvah at age 13.

Confirmation (primarily practiced by Reform Jews) occurs at tenth grade. However, most students will leave religious supplementary school after their bar or bat mitzvah (^{Comission} ~~A Time to Act~~, 1990).

The day schools have been increasing in number, but still only reach 12% of the Jewish population in the U.S. The overwhelming majority of parents chose not to send their children to these day schools, which they see as confining or too religious. However, over the past ten years there has been an increase in the number of liberal and community day schools, which has resulted in a slight increase in the number of Jewish children attending day schools. For our purposes, we are interested in both day and supplementary schools. We assumed that the day schools were particularly important, since the school's curriculum and the religious practices of the parents would be the most reinforcing for a strong Jewish identity. In some sense the day

schools became the benchmark for determining where religious content, practice, and sense of spirituality are the most sharply defined.

Conceptions of Jewish Identity

Social scientists studying religious identity within the Jewish population have primarily focused on performance of Jewish rituals as the major indicator of Jewish identity (Cohen, 1988). More recently, Horowitz (1999) has argued for a broader conception of Jewish identity which includes subjective attitudes (e.g., centrality of Jewish identity); religious activities (e.g., Jewish ritual practices) and cultural affiliation (e.g., displaying Jewish symbols, membership in religious organizations). These definitions were formulated from 87 in-depth interviews conducted in 1996 and 1,504 surveys conducted in 1998 among Jewish adults ranging in age from 22 to 52 in New York City. On the bases of the responses, Horowitz identified a third of her population as high on all three dimensions--intensively engaged--a third who were low on all three--otherwise engaged, and a third who exhibited a variety of patterns--mixed. Among the three broad conceptions of Jewishness, the two extremes are well understood and corroborate "conventional wisdom" about Jewish life--that the American Jewish future is a forced choice between assimilation and Jewish distinctiveness.

The middle third, Horowitz argues, is perhaps the most distinctively American of the three modes. This middle mode combines two dimensions: a more circumscribed Jewish involvement along with integration and high achievement in the American mainstream. The people who have mixed patterns of Jewish engagement are not indifferent about being Jewish,

but their ongoing Jewish involvement depends on it being meaningful and compatible with their daily lives. The individuals who experience this form of Judaism are more likely to ascribe to Judaism a set of values and a historical consciousness rather than as a particular mode of observance. In contrast to traditional expressions of Judaism, in which commitment, affiliation, and practice were inseparable, in present day America we find these Jews expressing commitment with little affiliation or practice and vice versa. For adolescents, we suspect, being in families with this mixture of commitment, affiliation, and practice can be especially confusing as they attempt to reconcile their individual sense of who they are with their religious understandings.

Horowitz (2000) also found that Jewish identity is not fixed throughout the life course, but changes over time. This conclusion was drawn from retrospective accounts and still needs to be tested with a longitudinal sample. Nonetheless, as we turn our attention to adolescents, we should not assume that the patterns of identification that they express will remain in place throughout adulthood. However, we suspect that adolescents who grow-up in families that are “intensively engaged” in Jewish life may be more likely to continue their Jewish commitment, affiliation, and practice than young people growing up in families identified as the “otherwise engaged” group.

Research on the relation between Jewish schools and Jewish identity relies mainly on ritual practices and other behavioral practices (including in-- versus inter-marriage) as indicators of Jewish identity. Several studies indicate that Jews who receive an intensive Jewish education as young people are more active and involved in Judaism as adults, although it is difficult in these studies to distinguish between the effects of Jewish education per se, and the effects of

families that choose to send their children to intensive forms of Jewish education, that is, Jewish day schools (Bock, 1976; Himmelfarb, 1977). The most rigorous of these studies used retrospective reports to control for the Jewish affiliations and ritual practices (Cohen, 1995). This study shows that more intensive Jewish education is associated with more adult Jewish involvement, lending some credibility to the notion that Jewish education causes Jewish involvement (Cohen, 1995). These findings, however, are not conclusive.

None of these studies has examined changes in Jewish identity over time, so it is difficult to draw conclusions concerning the relation between Jewish schooling and Jewish identity. Moreover, what is fundamentally interesting are the processes by which schooling and identity may be related, and the patterns through which these processes change over time. These issues can only be explored in a longitudinal study which combines information about schooling experiences with indicators of the multiple dimensions of Jewish identity. Our project may help to lay the groundwork for a research study of this type.

An Exploratory Analysis

Relying on the Horowitz conceptualizations (1999), we formulated a series of survey and interview questions to ask Jewish adolescents. Since many of these items had never been used before, we decided to test some of our initial assumptions with several focus groups of students at a Jewish high school in the Chicago area. We specifically selected a day school since we expected that these students would bring a clarity of meaning to our discussions of Jewish identity that students who attended secular school may not have. We intended to engage these young people in free-flowing conversations about how they view themselves as Jews, how they

express their Jewish identities, and what affect their experiences in school have had on their sense of Jewish commitment, affiliation, and spirituality.

Focus Group Samples

The school selected for our study is located in a midwestern city and would be characterized as “Modern Orthodox.” In schools of this type educators and students are expected to rigorously follow the traditions of Jewish law, but in a way that allows them to live and work within the secular society instead of buffering themselves from the outside world, as is more typical among more fundamentalist Orthodox (or “ultra-Orthodox”) members. Parents of the students commonly hold jobs in the secular society, and some are not necessarily Orthodox in their personal religious practices. All of the Jewish educators in the school are Orthodox Jews; however, many but not all of the teachers in the secular program are Orthodox. The school encompasses grades nine through twelve, and the curriculum includes highly intensive academically oriented subjects found in other private independent schools as well as an extensive Judaic studies program. The school is co-educational, but boys and girls are separated for Judaic studies. This gender separation does not occur for instruction in secular subjects. Following high school graduation, the overwhelming majority of students will attend a variety of postsecondary institutions, including public and private secular universities that range from highly competitive to competitive secular colleges and universities, Jewish affiliated universities such as Brandeis and Yeshiva University, and Jewish seminaries in Israel and the U.S.

The focus groups were conducted as part of an exploration of a larger set of issues, including the school context, characteristics of educators, attitudes of parents, and learning opportunities for students. We conducted interviews with administrators, and held focus groups

with teachers and parents, in addition to the focus groups with students. This paper draws exclusively on the student focus groups. Two groups of students, one composed of tenth graders and the other twelfth graders, participated. Each group consisted of ten students. The students were selected by the school principal in response to our request to include female and male students who varied in their religious commitments and practices and in their level of academic accomplishment. The focus groups were not designed to be true random samples of the school population by grade, but were composed of students with a range of views on the issues we were interested in exploring.¹

In the Horowitz typology, Jewish commitment, affiliation, and religious practice can be distinguished on the bases of three major constructs. Subjective Jewish centrality or commitment, looks directly at a person's internal relation to Jewishness, separate from any active outward expression. Abstract in form, these are values and norms by which people describe their Jewishness. The other two categories are behavioral, one of which taps a person's religious ritual practice, and the other a person's involvement in "cultural-communal activities." Specific types of items are related to each of these categories. With respect to subjective Jewish centrality, intensively engaged adults rated themselves high on the following items; I am proud to be a Jew; I have a clear sense of what being Jewish means to me; I have a strong sense of belonging to the Jewish people; I have a special responsibility to take care of Jews in need around the world; Overall, the fact that I am a Jew has very little to do with how I see myself (this item is rated high in disagreement); It is important for me to have friends who share my way of being Jewish; and when faced with an important life decision, I look to Judaism for guidance.

The behavioral sets of items included the following: for ritual, personally fasting on Yom

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Kipper; having someone in the household light *Shabbat* candles; keeping separate sets of meat and dairy dishes in the household; and refraining from spending money on the *Shabbat*; for cultural, displaying Jewish objects in the household, attending lectures or class on a Jewish topic, reading Jewish periodicals, attending synagogue, and being able to read and understand Hebrew. Horowitz points out that some Jews can be highly involved in the cultural and communal domain of Jewish life without participating in ritual activity. Although these items were specifically designed for adults, all of them, including those in the ritual and cultural categories, are relevant to adolescents, although some of these are aspects of the teenager's family environment not their own religious practice. Young people are often compelled to follow the rules of family and school, regardless of their own beliefs and commitments. Thus it may be the case that high levels of ritual and cultural activity among adolescents may not necessarily correspond to high levels of subjective centrality. More unlikely would be the case of a teenager who has a high level of subjective centrality when his or her family and school exhibit low levels of subjective centrality, ritual and cultural identity. out

We had two specific objectives in the focus groups. First, we wanted to see if the students would express themselves in ways that made it possible to see variation on the items related to subjective Jewish centrality. This category is the most difficult to respond to, and we were concerned about the sharpness and depth young people would bring to these items. Second, we were concerned if we would find some variation in this Orthodox group of young adults on issues of subjective feeling, ritual, and cultural identity. While we did not expect that, in a free-flowing focus group, all of the points in these three scales would manifest themselves, we were however surprised at the depth and the extent to which these young people mirrored the beliefs

and actions of the intensively engaged adults. Moreover, we also were able to identify a few adolescents whose subjective Jewish feelings, and ritual identities varied somewhat from the intensively engaged teenagers. This variation is particularly important since we suspected that in the supplementary schools we would see more of the mixed engagement and a few of the otherwise engaged. Cultural identities require the least accommodation, and we suspected and found little variation on this point among these students.

Intensively Engaged Adolescents

We began the focus groups by inviting the students to talk about their lives at school. After a brief period of adolescent “venting,” when students described what they liked and disliked about their school, they began to talk more openly about their lives as Jewish young adults. It took little prompting to elicit expressions of the subjective centrality of being Jewish among these students. Attending a Jewish day school clearly helps to set boundaries and reinforces a sense of Jewish identity. Among these intensively engaged young people we also see that their identity extends to their sense of learning and spirituality.

David states, “ Being Jewish means being a moral person and following the Torah.” The importance of the torah to Jewish life was reiterated by both girls and boys. We also found some students who described a clear sense of what being Jewish meant to them spiritually, and how these feelings related to the Jewish community. Nava comments,

“When I read Torah that’s the moment when I say to myself, ‘I’m a responsible Jew, I am committed to my community and I know that I can uphold this identity within the boundaries that surround my culture here in America.”

The importance of God and spirituality was expressed by several students. Alisa explains,

“I personally believe that there is a God and like that he does, or as some people would probably say, She, but, God has a general plan and whatever happens is what God wants. No matter what happens it is all part of the plan for us and even like some bad things happen sometimes like I know that there is always good to come, because that’s what happened in the past and if it is the same God, it will happen in the future.”

The strong sense of belonging to the Jewish people and sharing one’s life with friends who are also Jewish was described by Shana:

“When we all come together to celebrate certain Jewish holidays and you feel all this love and we’re all here for the same reason and we are all celebrating and singing. And it is just like this amazing thing that you are part of this community and you are part of this bigger thing. And it gives you this feeling of I am part of this, this is me, and I like it.”

Here we see the definition of group unity that is being reinforced through ritual practice.

However, ritual practice was not always connected to subjective centrality. According to these students, following Jewish law contributes to morality, but one can be a good person even if one is not a Jew. For some students, being a good “Jew” meant being a good person. But as Aimee comments, “defining a good person doesn’t necessarily mean you are a Jew. One can be a good Jew without rigorously following Jewish law.” Some of the other students seemed unwilling to accept this position. For them, following Jewish *halacha* (Jewish law) is central to authentic Jewish practice.

Ritual and the Intensively Engaged

Among these students the religious ritual that was nearly universally upheld was the “honoring” the Sabbath and “keeping it holy.” Throughout both focus groups we heard comments about the importance of the Sabbath. Ilana explains,

“Most of us are *shomer shabbas* (observers of the Sabbath), which means, you know, we cannot drive [on Friday night or Saturday], we cannot go to dances and like a lot of times dances and stuff like school activities in public school are on Friday nights and Saturdays and we couldn’t do any of that stuff [if we went to a public high school]. During the week, I sometime get home later and my dad gets home later and we don’t always eat together. But I always know that Friday night we are all going to eat together, no matter what.

Moderator: So you feel that by going to this kind of a [Jewish school]...

Ilana: Yeah, it gives us more of a chance to be included in the larger student things because we’re, like, everyone is like us and everyone can and can’t do the same things.”

Thus, for Ilana, common adherence to religious observance draws the Jewish students in her school together just as it sets them apart from others.

Adolescence developmentally is a time when individuals are particularly sensitive to belonging to a group or being excluded. The common bonds of the religious school help to foster a communal ethos that is accepting and comforting. Trying to maintain ritual practice in a public school can place adolescents in positions where their private practices are public and non-conforming to the larger peer group. In this school, this tension is somewhat alleviated although the students recognize that they are different from other adolescents in public school.

It was not only the Sabbath that some of the students observed but other rituals related to

the Sabbath, like not driving on Friday night or Saturday, attending religious services, and not watching television. As for keeping kosher there was a difference of opinion. Some of the students keep kosher in their homes and when in other people's home's also observe the laws of *Kishrot*. Hannah explains, "Sometimes I go to a friend's and someone will say, 'Why aren't you eating, and I explain, "Well I keep kosher." And it is sometime hard to sit and explain it to someone." Keeping kosher still makes even those intensively engaged uncomfortable. As Jonathan comments,

"I was in a situation last weekend where someone said about their, when they were at someone's house for dinner and they were uncomfortable. Instead of saying we keep kosher, he keeps kosher or whatever, he said he is allergic."

For teenagers, keeping kosher certainly sets boundaries that are sometimes difficult to follow, it makes one different. While some students said that they kept kosher even with friends who were not, other students indicated that this was not typical. According to another student, "I don't think the majority of our school keeps kosher. I really don't know for sure, but I don't think so."

As we expected cultural activities played an important part of what it means to be Jewish.

Rachel: "We went on a program to Israel where we went to school and toured the country. It was amazing."

Moderator: "Did it make you feel more Jewish?"

Rachel: "Well I don't know, for me personally it was more like these were my ancestors.

It was not like, 'Oh let me go start opening a book and praying.' It was more like a heritage type. And then like it was definitely incorporated with spirituality like along the way. Because there is no way to deny that when your are there."

In the tenth-grade focus group, Joanna claimed that the celebration of Israel's Independence Day in her school was more "heartfelt" than the usual Fourth of July celebration in American society: "Like we really celebrate the fact that we are independent." Her statement of "we" in the preceding quote reflects her identification with Israel; although she is American, she includes herself in the "we" who share in Israel's independence.

The celebration of Israel's independence day not only binds Jews around the world, but provides a focus for community within the school. As Dina explains:

I think there is definitely this appreciation of the school, in the sense that they're trying to build an informal atmosphere and definitely a sense of community among the kids where each one of us can relate to one another. Not only to each other but the teachers are not distant from us. And I think that there's a real appreciation here [on] days like *Yom Ha'Atzmaut* (Independence Day) where it is not really classes, learning about Israel. It is fun, and kids want to have fun. And I think there are not many options for fun in this school. So when there are days like *Yom Ha' Atzmaut* it is appreciated, and I think there is something very wonderful about that."

Evidence of Some Mixed Group Identity

While most students in the school could describe what it meant to be Jewish there were a few students who had difficulty relating their Jewishness with a sense of spirituality. Alison explains,

"I'm Jewish and I identify with being Jewish but I am not religious to any extent.....

I am not observant, [observant here refers to religious practice] but I am still Jewish. And

I identify with being Jewish.”

This type of statement was rare. However, a few students made similar comments. Alison feels Jewish, identifies with being Jewish but does not rigorously observe religious practices. With respect to believing in God there were considerable differences of opinion. At one end were comments such as “I personally believe that there is a God and if bad things happens sometimes like I know that there is always good to come.” At the other end there were comments such as, “...with this God thing, I don’t know, I don’t think every day is a miracle. I don’t think ‘Oh God did it.’ I think more like humans did it. Like even like concentration camps, like I don’t know, I don’t think like, ‘Oh God did it for a reason,’ I think like humans did it.” Here we find the same type of questioning among some adolescents that many adults have with respect to their Judaism, that is a strong identity with being Jewish but a lack of a spiritual connection.

We also found variations in ritual practice. Driving on the Sabbath is not allowed among Orthodox Jews. Jonathan explains why he does not comply.

“I don’t drive all the time just when I need to do it. But I don’t drive up to someone’s house. They do not want to do that and it is not okay with them. For me it is okay. So I drive. I am going to respect what I want to do and I want to respect them. So I do it where they cannot see it. If they asked me I would be willing to tell them. So I would drive to a friend’s house but I would not park in the front of the house, I would probably park a block away.”

The decision not to engage in the ritual is clearly conscious and made so not as to offend others who are more traditional in their observance. Jonathan appears to recognize and is sensitive to the practices of others. This awareness of a moral problem and way Jonathan

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resolves it reflects his own moral judgment. Those who study the development of moral behavior could see this as a step toward making independent moral judgments. Those who are more religious would see this as problematic. However, Jonathan goes on to say, “I would not go to the movies on the Sabbath.” Using his own rationale, Jonathan is drawing boundaries around what is acceptable practice and what is not. There is an inherent tension between the choices adolescents make and the choices we would hope they would make. Our task will be to understand how and why young people are making these choices and to determine how we can help them make these choices more responsibly.

Jewish Identity and Jewish Schooling

The focus groups also helped to shed light on the relation between Jewish schooling and Jewish identity in all its dimensions. In one sense, choosing a Jewish school is an expression of Jewish identity. Either the family, or the young person, or both, has made a choice to attend a Jewish private school, and by doing so they affirm the centrality of Jewishness and Jewish practice in their lives. Clearly, then, we cannot take the association between Jewish schooling and Jewish identity to be a simple causal one.

At the same time, the Jewish school enables the young person to express his or her Jewish identity in ways that would not be possible in another context. As we have seen, the Jewish school provides both the skills the students need to learn Jewish observances, and the opportunities to carry out those observances in a supportive context. Collective ritual and cultural practices help bind young people to their religious group and likely strengthen the three dimensions of identity, subjective centrality, ritual practice, and cultural heritage. Thus, it seems

likely that Jewish schooling here plays some causal role. To determine the extent of this causal role, it would be necessary to disentangle the effects of three conditions: the young person's family environment which affects both the choice of a Jewish school and the student's Jewish identity; the young person's Jewish identity before enrolling in the Jewish school; and the impact of the school itself in reinforcing Jewish identity by providing skills, opportunities, and commitments.

Each of these three elements were evident in the focus group discussions. Responding to a question about how she thinks of herself as a Jew, twelfth-grader Ruth observes:

“Who your family is also helps to describe yourself as a Jew...before you can make the decision of what, how you're going to lead your life when you get old enough, your family, it is your family that basically decides that for you....”

At the same time, the discussions indicated that Jewish identity and commitments are not entirely predetermined before a student enrolls in the school. Some students described differences between their family's and friend's ritual practices and their own practices, as we saw with Jonathan. However, for most of the adolescents, it was the choice of a Jewish school that strengthened their Jewish identity. This may not have happened had they attended a non-Jewish school. This is perhaps best captured in the comments of Shira, a tenth-grader:

“I think in freshman year I was seriously considering leaving the school. But what I realized is that as a person who was raised from third or fourth generation Jews, and I know it is sounds a little sad, but assimilation is very active. And I can see why my parents, although both of them never had a Jewish education, although my father's Israeli, feel the importance of having me attend this school. I do not have to make the decision

whether or not on Friday night I want to go to that dance. Because the decision is made for me. And I think that's important, because when I get older, I will inevitably say, 'No I can't [do that] because it is *Shabbat*.' And I think that is very important. I think that it is important to sustain a child's Jewish identity. And I think that is very important. And then I realize that in the public school they are much more lenient in things like clothing. I think there is an importance of sustaining a child and keeping a child's Jewish identity. And I think this school really does that. I realized today, which is *Lag B'Omer* (a minor Jewish holiday), that it is wonderful that I can turn to these kids and say, 'I'm celebrating this holiday and they are also celebrating. They are learning the same language as me, they are also celebrating the *Shabbat* and I really appreciate that. There are many criticisms that I have for this school. But I definitely see why the advantages of sending a child to this school whether or not there are some negative aspects.'"

Shira's comments illustrate the importance of the family environment, the young person's own views, and the school in influencing Jewish identity, but it also exemplifies the difficult challenge one may face in attempting to disentangle these various influences from one another.

Conclusions

This exploratory research suggests that young people even within an Orthodox school environment vary in their engagement with Jewish life. Using the three indicators of subjective centrality, ritual, and cultural identity, we find that some adolescents are very high on all three whereas others are not. In some instances these indicators were linked with one another in that students whose spiritual identities were decidedly Jewish were more likely to participate more

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fully with their families in rituals and cultural activities. On the other hand, there were some adolescents whose engagement varied along ^{with} their spiritual identity and ritual practices.

Generally, among all the teenagers, participating in cultural activities was enjoyable and at a certain level reinforced the sense that they were doing things that were uniquely “Jewish” such as going to Jewish celebration or a trip to Israel. However, these types of activities tended not to encourage spirituality but rather a sense of historical connection. These activities also required less personal commitments to religious practice.

The links between subjective centrality and ritual seemed much more complicated and tended to vary more among the students. Some of the adolescents had more well developed ideas of what it meant to be Jewish spiritually while others gave explanations that were only tied to specific rituals. Some gave detailed explanations of subjective centrality but were consciously less ritualistic. From the focus group it is unclear whether these actions were more an expression of adolescent independence than a fully developed position. Nevertheless the ritual behavior of these students is certainly much higher than it would have been had they attended a public school. But the fact that these teenagers are in an Orthodox school says a great deal about the values and behaviors of their parents, and the parents and children of others who attend the school. Family, school, and peers strongly influence religious identity formation. Religious identity is multifaceted and ritual or cultural behavior may not necessarily indicate subjective centrality even in a school where there are strong shared values and consistent observance of religious practices.

Finally, what relationship do we see between a strong religious identity and adolescent development? While we would not want to be too premature in our conclusions, some

preliminary observations point to some very important results. First, we find that even in a relatively closed society, many of these young people are making conscious choices about their relationship with God and their ritual practice. Second, questions of morals and ethics play an important role in their views of themselves and others. Third, there is a strong sense of responsibility and obligation not only to family and friends but to Jewish society. The second and third points are particularly noteworthy, since recent studies indicate that adolescents' notions of responsibility to society beyond very localized activities such as a food drive for a nursing home are very rare. And finally, there seems to be a sense of awareness of "who I am" among many of the teenagers that, again, we infrequently find among teenagers in the U.S.

Will this sense of self and religious engagement be found among other Jewish students? We do not know. But here we suspect we are seeing the most congruity of religious identity with religious practice that we are likely to encounter among our full sample of students in different types of Jewish schools. As we begin to disentangle what contributes to a stronger sense of subjective centrality among Jewish adolescents we hope to learn how we can provide a more meaningful high quality Jewish education in supplementary and day schools.

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Notes

1. All names are pseudonyms. We have made minor grammatical changes to the transcript, such as deleting repetitive uses of 'you know' and 'like' in the quotations to make them more readable.

