Forging Jewish Identity: Models and Middles in Jewish Sources

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B’naï Jeshurun
About B’nai Jeshurun

Founded in 1825, and re-imagined at the turn of this century, B’nai Jeshurun is a nonaffiliated Jewish synagogue community that strives to experience God’s presence by praying, studying, teaching, volunteering, celebrating, and caring for each other and our world. Our services are joyful, musical, socially progressive, and accessible, weaving together tradition with contemporary life.

We use a traditional prayerbook and we welcome Jews from every stream of Judaism. While we respect each person’s struggle to find his and her own level of observance, we are deeply committed to a core of halakhic behavior as the expression of our spiritual and moral values. We build our kehillah kedosha—sacred community—with creativity and intention—kavannah—under the guidance of our rabbis, who reach into the wellsprings of Jewish wisdom to present a compelling and energizing vision. Drawing inspiration from the great teachers of our tradition, who embodied and articulated some of Judaism’s deepest and most cherished values, our rabbis strive to address the challenges of our time in the search for justice, understanding, and wholeness. We believe that God empowers each person to change his or her individual reality—as well as the power of community to change the world. We believe that our lives are of consequence and that what we say and do matters.

We welcome you to study, pray, and serve with us.

Jewish identity in America is changing. We at BJ feel called to a serious examination and inclusive dialogue at this moment in our collective journey. We will look deeply into the contemporary meaning of belonging and community, in particular as it pertains to intermarriage, with the goal of informing the possible programmatic, halakhic or cultural changes required to honor our unfolding tradition at BJ.

Jewish Identity, Belonging, and Community (JIBC) is a year-long initiative through which the BJ Community will explore the topics of Jewish identity, intermarriage, and interfaith families in our times. Anchored by four lectures and directed study with the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America, JIBC programming will include other large public events, intimate home-hosted gatherings, self-guided study, and a town hall meeting for the BJ community. Program information is available at www.BJ.org/identity

The Year-Long JIBC Includes:

- Lectures & Learning
- Intimate Conversations
- Community Events
- Ongoing Online Dialog for BJ members: bj.insights.us

To learn more: www.bj.org/identity

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About the Shalom Hartman Institute

The Shalom Hartman Institute is a pluralistic center of research and education deepening and elevating the quality of Jewish life in Israel and around the world. Through our work, we are redefining the conversation about Judaism in modernity, religious pluralism, Israeli democracy, Israel and world Jewry, and the relationship with other faith communities.

Our work focuses on developing and enhancing:

- **21st Century Judaism**: Developing compelling Jewish ideas capable of competing in the modern marketplace of identities and thought.
- **Religious Pluralism**: Building a Jewish people and a State of Israel that respect and celebrate diversity.
- **Jewish and Democratic Israel**: Ensuring Israel’s foundations as the democratic homeland of the Jewish people committed to equal rights and religious freedom for all.
- **Jewish Peoplehood**: Forming a strong mutual commitment between world Jewry and Israelis as equal partners in the future of Jewish life.
- **Judaism and the World**: Serving as a gateway for leaders of other faiths to engage with Judaism and Israel and build new foundations of understanding and cooperation.

The Shalom Hartman Institute of North America enriches the resources, vision, and commitment of the leaders and change agents who shape the future of Jewish life in North America and set the agendas of its educational, religious, and community institutions. Through text study, peer learning, and interdenominational dialogue, the Institute is shaping a future for North American Jewry of intellectual renaissance and renewed inspiration.

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Dr. Christine Hayes is a faculty member and Senior Kogod Research Fellow at the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America. She is the Weis Professor of Religious Studies in Classical Judaica at Yale University.

She received a BA in the Study of Religion, summa cum laude, from Harvard University and both an MA and PhD from the University of California Berkeley, Department of Near Eastern Studies.

Christine’s research at the Institute focuses on talmudic-midrashic studies; her most recent work, *What’s Divine about Divine Law: Early Perspectives* won the 2015 National Jewish Book Award for Scholarship and the 2016 Jordan Schnitzer Award for the Association from Jewish Studies.

Other published works include *Between the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds* (1997, winner of the Salo Baron prize), *Gentile Impurities and Jewish Identities: Intermarriage and Conversion from the Bible to the Talmud* (2003, National Jewish Book Award finalist), and numerous articles in peer-reviewed journals and scholarly anthologies.

She is an elected member of the American Academy for Jewish Research, serves as Vice-President for Program for the Association for Jewish Studies.

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B'nai Jeshurun Jewish Identity Conversation
January 11, 2017

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I. In the Beginning...

1. Genesis 1:1-2

The Lord said to Abram, “Go forth from your native land and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation...

II. Memory

2. Exodus 12:17-19, 21-27, 43-49

This day shall be to you one of remembrance: you shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord throughout the ages; you shall celebrate it as an institution for all time.

Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread; on the very first day you shall remove leaven from your houses, for whoever eats leavened bread from the first day to the seventh day, that person shall be cut off from Israel.

You shall celebrate a sacred occasion on the first day, and a sacred occasion on the seventh day; no work at all shall be done on them; only what every person is to eat, that alone may be prepared for you.
17 You shall observe the [Feast of] Unleavened Bread, for on this very day I brought your ranks out of the land of Egypt; you shall observe this day throughout the ages as an institution for all time.

18 No leaven shall be found in your houses for seven days. For whoever eats what is leavened, that person shall be cut off from the community of Israel, whether he is a sojourner (ger) or a citizen (ezrach) of the country. 20 You shall eat nothing leavened; in all your settlements you shall eat unleavened bread.

21 Moses then summoned all the elders of Israel and said to them, “Go, pick out lambs for your families, and slaughter the passover offering...

24 “You shall observe this as an institution for all time, for you and for your descendants. 25 And when you enter the land that the Lord will give you, as He has promised, you shall observe this rite. 26 And when your children ask you, ‘What do you mean by this rite?’ 27 you shall say, ‘It is the passover sacrifice to the Lord, because He passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt when He smote the Egyptians, but saved our houses...’”

43 The Lord said to Moses and Aaron: This is the law of the passover offering: No foreigner shall eat of it. 44 But any slave a man has bought may eat of it once he has been circumcised. 45 No bound or hired laborer (toshash ve-sakhir) shall eat of it. It shall be eaten in one house: you shall not take any of the flesh outside the house; nor shall you break a bone of it. The whole community of Israel shall offer it. 48 If a sojourner (ger) who dwells with you would offer the passover to the Lord, all his males must be circumcised; then he shall be admitted to offer it; he shall then be as a citizen of the country. But no uncircumcised person may eat of it. 49 There shall be one law for the citizen (ezrach) and for the sojourner (ger) who dwells among you.

3. Deuteronomy 26:1-11
When you come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance and have taken possession of it and live in it, you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from your land that the Lord your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket, and you shall go to the place that the Lord your God will choose, to make his name to dwell there. And you shall go to the priest who is in office at that time and say to him, ‘I declare today to the Lord your God that I have come into the land that the Lord swore to our fathers to give us.’ Then the priest shall take the basket from your hand and set it down before the altar of the Lord your God.

And you shall make response before the Lord your God, ‘A wandering Aramean was my father. And he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number, and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. And the Egyptians treated us harshly and humiliated us and laid on us hard labor. Then we cried to the Lord, the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. And the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great deeds of terror, with signs and wonders. And he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. And behold, now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground, which you, O Lord, have given me.’ And you shall set it down before the Lord your God and worship before the Lord your God. And you shall rejoice in all the good that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house, you, and the Levite, and the sojourner who is among you.

4. Ruth 1: 15-18

15 And she said, “See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.” 16 But Ruth said, “Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. 17 Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you.” 18 And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more.
III. Covenant

5. Exodus 19:2-6

There Israel encamped before the mountain, 3 while Moses went up to God. The Lord called to him out of the mountain, saying, “Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel:

4 You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. 5 Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words you shall speak to the people of Israel.

6. Deuteronomy 26:16-19

This day the Lord your God commands you to do these statutes and rules. You shall therefore be careful to do them with all your heart and with all your soul. 17 You have declared today that the Lord is your God, and that you will walk in his ways, and keep his statutes and his commandments and his rules, and will obey his voice. 18 And the Lord has declared today that you are a people for his treasured possession, as he has promised you, and that you are to keep all his commandments, 19 and that he will set you in praise and in fame and in honor high above all nations that he has made, and that you shall be a people holy to the Lord your God, as he promised.
7. Deuteronomy 29:10-15

“You are standing today all of you before the Lord your God: the heads of your tribes, your elders, and your officers, all the men of Israel, your little ones, your wives, and the sojourner who is in your camp, from the one who chops your wood to the one who draws your water, so that you may enter into the sworn covenant of the Lord your God, which the Lord your God is making with you today, that he may establish you today as his people, and that he may be your God, as he promised you, and as he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

It is not with you alone that I am making this sworn covenant, but with whoever is standing here with us today before the Lord our God, and with whoever is not here with us today.

IV. Qedushah

8. Deuteronomy 7:6-8

For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the Lord loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt."

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10 “You are standing today all of you before the Lord your God: the heads of your tribes, your elders, and your officers, all the men of Israel, your little ones, your wives, and the sojourner who is in your camp, from the one who chops your wood to the one who draws your water, so that you may enter into the sworn covenant of the Lord your God, which the Lord your God is making with you today, that he may establish you today as his people, and that he may be your God, as he promised you, and as he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. It is not with you alone that I am making this sworn covenant, but with whoever is standing here with us today before the Lord our God, and with whoever is not here with us today.

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10 “You are standing today all of you before the Lord your God: the heads of your tribes, your elders, and your officers, all the men of Israel, your little ones, your wives, and the sojourner who is in your camp, from the one who chops your wood to the one who draws your water, so that you may enter into the sworn covenant of the Lord your God, which the Lord your God is making with you today, that he may establish you today as his people, and that he may be your God, as he promised you, and as he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. It is not with you alone that I am making this sworn covenant, but with whoever is standing here with us today before the Lord our God, and with whoever is not here with us today.

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9. Leviticus 11:41-45

All the things that swarm upon the earth are an abomination; they shall not be eaten. You shall not eat, among all things that swarm upon the earth, anything that crawls on its belly, or anything that walks on fours, or anything that has many legs; for they are an abomination.

You shall not draw abomination upon yourselves through anything that swarms; you shall not make yourselves unclean therewith and thus become unclean. For I the Lord am your God: you shall sanctify yourselves and be holy (qadosh), for I am holy. You shall not make yourselves unclean through any swarming thing that moves upon the earth.

For I the Lord am He who brought you up from the land of Egypt to be your God: you shall be holy, for I am holy.

10. Deuteronomy 7:1-6

When the Lord your God brings you to the land that you are about to enter and possess, and He dislodges many nations before you—the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites, seven nations much larger than you—

and the Lord your God delivers them to you and you defeat them, you must doom them to destruction: grant them no terms and give them no quarter.

You shall not intermarry with them: do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons.

For they will turn your children away from Me to worship other gods, and the Lord’s anger will blaze forth against you and He will promptly wipe you out.

Instead, this is what you shall do to them: you shall tear down their altars, smash their pillars, cut down their sacred posts, and consign their images to the fire.

For you are a people consecrated to the Lord your God: of all the peoples on earth the Lord your God chose you to be His treasured people.
11. Deuteronomy 23:4-9

No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted into the congregation of the Lord; none of their descendants, even in the tenth generation, shall ever be admitted into the congregation of the Lord, because they did not meet you with food and water on your journey after you left Egypt, and because they hired Balaam son of Beor, from Pethor of Aram-naharaim, to curse you.—But the Lord your God refused to heed Balaam; instead, the Lord your God turned the curse into a blessing for you, for the Lord your God loves you.—You shall never concern yourself with their welfare or benefit as long as you live.

V. Three Responses to Crisis: Radical Exclusion, Radical Inclusion, a Middle Way


After these things had been done, the officials approached me and said, “The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands with their abominations, from the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. For they have taken some of their daughters to be wives for themselves and for their sons, so that the holy seed has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands. And in this sacrilege the hand of the officials and chief men has been foremost.”


There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.
On that day, an Ammonite convert came and stood before them in the house of study. He said to them: “May I enter the assembly [i.e., marry an Israelite woman]?” Rabban Gamliel said to him, “You are forbidden.” R. Joshua said to him: “You are permitted.” Rabban Gamliel said to him: “The scriptural verse says ‘An Ammonite and a Moabite shall not enter into the assembly of the Lord, even to the tenth generation’” (Deut 23). R. Joshua said to him, “But are the Ammonites and Moabites still in their own territory? Sennacherib, the King of Assyria, has long since come up and mingled all the nations, as it is said, ‘In that I have removed the bounds of the peoples, and have robbed their treasures, and have brought down the inhabitants as one mighty’ (Isa 10:13).” R. Gamliel said to him: The verse says, ‘But afterward I will bring back the captivity of the Children of Ammon’ (Jer 49:6) [proving that they have already returned and are therefore an identifiable national group].” R. Joshua said to him: “The verse says ‘I will turn the captivity of my people Israel and Judah’ (Jer 30:3), yet they have not already returned [implying that the prophecy of the Ammonites’ return may also remain unfulfilled]!” So they permitted him to enter the assembly.

Rabbi Yosi said: A convert is like a born child.

It has been taught in the name of R. Yehudah: A convert himself both brings [first fruits] and recites [the required declaration from Deut 26:3].
What is the scriptural basis for this view?

“No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham;] for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations” (Gen 17:5).

In the past you were the father of Aram, but henceforward you are the father of all nations.

R. Yehoshua b. Levi said: The law accords with the view of R. Yehudah.

A case came before R. Abbahu and he decided it in accord with the view of R. Yehudah.

17. Mishnah Sotah 7:8

� ביהר, יא יושב עלייה, שטאמור (דברים ל) מקץ שבע שנים בתיה. והוכנסת נוכל ספ деיה למעלה וליהוה הכנות רחצ את הכנות נוכל כדי, והסחנ נוכל לכה דמל, זכר דמל נוכל למלך, והמלך יושב יושב

� ארפ אלמה עמד וקבל קוה עמד, ושבחוהו חכמים. ושבחהו תרצה (שם לו) ולא תוכל עלייה דמל.

At the conclusion of the first day of the festival (Sukkot) in the eighth [year], at the end of the seventh year, they made a wooden platform in the Temple court, and [the king] would sit upon it, as it is said, “At the end of seven years, in the set time” etc. (Deuteronomy 31:10). The sexton takes a Torah scroll and passes it to the head of the synagogue, the head of the synagogue passes it to the deputy, who passes it to the high priest, and the high priest passes it to the king and the king stands and receives it, but reads it while sitting.

King Agrippa stood and received it and read standing, and the sages praised him. When he reached, “You shall not place a foreigner over you” (Deuteronomy 17:15) his eyes ran with tears. They said to him, “Fear not, Agrippas, you are our brother, you are our brother, you are our brother!”

VI. Imagining Community

18. Exodus 18

Now Jethro, the priest of Midian and father-in-law of Moses, heard of everything God had done for Moses and for his people Israel, and how the LORD had brought Israel out of Egypt. After Moses had sent away his wife Zipporah, his father-in-law Jethro received her and her two sons...

Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law, together with Moses’ sons and wife, came to him in the wilderness, where he was camped near the mountain of God. Jethro had sent word to him, “I, your father-in-law Jethro, am coming to you with your wife and her two sons.”

So Moses went out to meet his father-in-law and bowed down and kissed him. They greeted each other and then went into the tent. Moses told his father-in-law about everything the LORD had done to Pharaoh and the Egyptians for Israel’s sake and about all the hardships they had met along the way and how the LORD had saved them.
Jethro was delighted to hear about all the good things the LORD had done for Israel in rescuing them from the hand of the Egyptians. 10 He said, “Praise be to the LORD, who rescued you from the hand of the Egyptians and of Pharaoh, and who rescued the people from the hand of the Egyptians. 11 Now I know that the LORD is greater than all other gods, for he did this to those who had treated Israel arrogantly.” 12 Then Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law, brought a burnt offering and other sacrifices to God, and Aaron came with all the elders of Israel to eat a meal with Moses’ father-in-law in the presence of God.

The next day Moses took his seat to serve as judge for the people, and they stood around him from morning till evening... 17 Moses’ father-in-law replied, “What you are doing is not good. 18 You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone.

Listen now to me and I will give you some advice, and may God be with you... 23 If you do this and God so commands, you will be able to stand the strain, and all these people will go home satisfied.”

Moses listened to his father-in-law and did everything he said. He chose capable men from all Israel and made them leaders of the people, officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. They served as judges for the people at all times. The difficult cases they brought to Moses, but the simple ones they decided themselves. Then Moses sent his father-in-law on his way, and Jethro returned to his own country:

veyelekh lo el artzo (reversing the move of Abraham).

9 Then Boaz said to the elders and all the people, “You are witnesses this day that I have bought from the hand of Naomi all that belonged to Elimelech and all that belonged to Chilion and to Mahlon. 10 Also Ruth the Moabitite, the widow of Mahlon, I have bought to be my wife, to perpetuate the name of the dead in his inheritance, that the name of the dead may not be cut off from among his brothers and from the gate of his native place. You are witnesses this day...”

18 Now these are the generations of Perez: Perez fathered Hezron, 19 Hezron fathered Ram, Ram fathered Amminadab, 20 Amminadab fathered Nahshon, Nahshon fathered Salmon, 21 Salmon fathered Boaz, Boaz fathered Obed, 22 Obed fathered Jesse, and Jesse fathered David.
Save the dates for upcoming Hartman JIBC Lectures:

Wednesday, March 8, 2017 – Yedidah Koren
Wednesday, May 10, 2017 – Donniel Hartman

All lectures at 7:00pm

For program details, please visit www.bj.org/identity

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