Jewish Identity and Intermarriage: What’s at Stake?

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B’nai 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, 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, developed with Resetting the Table and Adena Philips, 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
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. Yehuda Kurtzer is the President of the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America and a leading thinker and author on the meaning of Israel to American Jews, the value of the Jewish past to the Jewish present, and questions of leadership and change in American Jewish life. Yehuda leads the efforts of the Institute across the North American Jewish communal landscape, and teaches widely in the Institute's many platforms for rabbis, lay leaders, Jewish professionals, and leaders of other faith communities.

Yehuda received his doctorate in Jewish Studies from Harvard University and an MA in Religion from Brown University, and is an alumnus of both the Bronfman Youth and Wexner Graduate Fellowships. Previously Yehuda served as a member of the faculty and as the inaugural Chair of Jewish Communal Innovation at Brandeis University. He is the author of Shuva: The Future of the Jewish Past, which offers new thinking to contemporary Jews on navigating the tensions between history and memory, and on how we can relate meaningfully to our past without returning to it.
Welcome Remarks, Framing, and Introductions

The Rabbis at BJ

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Questions and Answers

The Rabbis at BJ

This Year-Long Initiative for the BJ Community Includes:
• Lectures & Learning
• Intimate Conversations
• Community Events
• Ongoing Online Dialog
To learn more: www.bj.org/identity
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Yehuda Kurtzer

B’nai Jeshurun Jewish Identity Conversation
December 14, 2016

I. Negative Arguments
   a. Consequences for the American Jewish Community
      Behavioral:
      1. Leviticus Rabbah 32:5
      Numerical:
      Structural:
      4. Genesis 13:14-18
      5. Numbers 1:1-4
      6. Sifra 2:16:11
   b. Consequences for Judaism as a Continuous Tribal-Familial Culture
      Tribal/ “Horizontal”:
      4. Genesis 13:14-18
      5. Numbers 1:1-4
      Vertical
      6. Sifra 2:16:11
   c. Consequences for Individual Jews and Families

II. Positive Arguments
   a. Autonomy, Love, and Choice
      10. Micah 6:8
      11. Babylonian Talmud Yevamot 63b
   b. America as Context for Rethinking Jewish Identity
      Collective: Post-Ethnic
      Individual: Partial Jewishness
   c. Intermarriage Enables Major Gains for the Jewish People

III. Conceptual Frameworks for a Better Conversation
I. Negative Arguments (Concerns)  
   a. Consequences for the American Jewish Community

Behavioral Collapse:  
1. Leviticus Rabbah 32:5
   
   "רב חנה אמר בשם רב קפרא בשלום ד' אברים נשלטו ישראל ממערופי שם שאל חת שפם
   מעזה לשבטים ולד אברים קפרא השועור והעזה לשבטיםolah שאל חת פורם בשלום.

   Rabbi Huna said in the name of Bar Kappara: Because of four things were the
   Israelites redeemed from Egypt: Because they did not change their names; and they
   did not change their language; and because they did not speak ill of each other; and
   because none of them was sexually promiscuous. (And some say, because they did
   not change their clothing.)

Numerical Collapse:  
2. Mijal Bitton and Steven M. Cohen, “More is Better When it Comes to Jewish Numbers,”  
Forward Magazine, May 1 2015

We would argue that numerical strength is inherently valuable and essential to the meaningful Jewish
life of American Jewry.

As Magid hints in his article, one reason that we care is because quantity does affect quality. More
engaged Jews mean stronger communities able to mobilize more people and more resources, critical to
achieving political influence, social diversity, cultural creativity and religious vitality. Synagogues, day
schools, Israel trips, camps and more all depend on Jewish numbers, and so do institutions devoted to
bettering the world — such as American Jewish World Service, Repair the World and Mazon.

Fewer Jews means fewer friends for our children at Jewish summer camp, fewer fellow daveners for
synagogue-goers and smaller enrollments for day schools, diminishing the variety of Jewish possibilities.

In addition, the number of active American Jews of all denominations affects Jews worldwide. As today’s
strongest Diaspora Jewish community, American Jewry lends crucial support to Jewish communities
across the world, particularly to the State of Israel. Those who believe in a healthy relationship between
America and Israel, who see Israel as a haven for endangered Jews and who treasure its promise as a
Jewish and democratic state must care about the number of American Jews who are willing to help
shape Israel’s destiny through their political power.
Structural Collapse:


The American Jewish civil religion is an institutional ideology that functioned effectively to buttress the position and claims of the polity that sponsored it. It unified Jews across denominational and organizational boundaries. It legitimated the activities of the institutions of the polity itself, especially the federations. It also mobilized Jews to give and to work on behalf of the purposes defined by the polity. However, it was more than that as well. “Civil Judaism” clearly responded to a desire on the part of many American Jews to give their Jewishness a larger significance, and to do so in terms that allowed for, but did not require, elaborate theological affirmations or religious observances. It was in many ways an ideal religious stance for Jews who, as they moved to the suburbs in the 1950s, had rushed to build synagogues in order to fit in well with their church-building Christian neighbors, but who were uncertain about the content with which to fill these synagogues, other than life-cycle celebrations and an annual pilgrimage of public reaffirmation of the faith at the High Holidays. Jewish civil religion both provided a content, a religion of support for Israel, for social justice, and for preservation of the faith (however ill defined), and a set of alternative venues, for some more compelling than the synagogue, from which to practice this religion.

b. Consequences for Judaism as a Continuous Tribal-Familial Culture

Tribal/Horizontal

4. Genesis 13:14-18

14 And the Lord said to Abram, after Lot had parted from him, “Raise your eyes and look out from where you are, to the north and south, to the east and west, 15 for I give all the land that you see to you and your offspring forever. 16 I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth, so that if one can count the dust of the earth, then your offspring too can be counted. 17 Up, walk about the land, through its length and its breadth, for I give it to you.” 18 And Abram moved his tent, and came to dwell at the terebinths of Mamre, which are in Hebron; and he built an altar there to the Lord.
5. Numbers 1:1-4, 17-23

On the first day of the second month, in the second year following the exodus from the land of Egypt, the Lord spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the Tent of Meeting, saying: 

Take a census of the whole Israelite community by the clans of its ancestral houses, listing the names, every male, head by head. 

You and Aaron shall record them by their groups, from the age of twenty years up, all those in Israel who are able to bear arms. 

Associated with you shall be a person from each tribe, each one the head of his ancestral house...

So Moses and Aaron took those men, who were designated by name, and on the first day of the second month they convoked the whole community, who were registered by the clans of their ancestral houses—the names of those aged twenty years and over being listed head by head.

As the Lord had commanded Moses, so he recorded them in the wilderness of Sinai. They totaled as follows: The descendants of Reuben, Israel’s first-born, the registration of the clans of their ancestral house, as listed by name, head by head, all males aged twenty years and over, all who were able to bear arms — those enrolled from the tribe of Reuben: 46,500.

Of the descendants of Simeon, the registration of the clans of their ancestral house, their enrollment as listed by name, head by head, all males aged twenty years and over, all who were able to bear arms — those enrolled from the tribe of Simeon: 59,300.
And you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am The Lord (Lev. 19:18).

Rabbi Akiva teaches: this is the fundamental principle of Torah.

Ben Azzai teaches: this is the book of the generations of Adam, (Gen. 5:1) this principle is more fundamental.

c. Consequences for Individual Jews and Families (Sin, Shame)


For most of their history, the Jews have rightly been regarded, by foes and admirers alike, as a zealously endogamous people. Indeed, Jewish marital exclusiveness has been one of the persistent motifs of anti-Semitic literature from antiquity to the present. Some antagonists have attributed the Jews’ insistence on marrying among their own to arrogance, others to a stubborn misanthropy. More recently, it has been seen as a symptom of insufficient civic attachment, even a lack of patriotism.

To outsiders of a more sympathetic cast, the Jewish fidelity to the norms of endogamy is more readily understood as a means of insuring group survival. A small religio-ethnic minority, the Jews have depended upon families to transmit a strong sense of identity across the generations and thus to withstand the allure of majority religions or cultures. Adherents of a faith that commands them to serve as bearers of a specific conception of monotheism, they have also been particularly sensitive to the dangers of dilution through syncretism. Beginning with the biblical text itself, Jewish religious writings warn of the potentially subversive link between exogamy and religious assimilation. “You shall not intermarry with them,” the book of Deuteronomy admonishes the Israelites. “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.” The corollary of intermarriage, the Bible instructs, is the attenuation of Israel’s adherence to monotheism.

To be sure, no rules are followed universally, and so, over the course of history, Judaism necessarily developed means for creating Jewish families in cases where individual Jews engaged in sexual and marital liaisons with Gentiles. The primary such means was through the conversion of the non-Jewish partner. (In Jewish law, converts have the exact same status, both religiously and ethnically, as native-born Jews—which incidentally is why the term “intermarriage” is reserved only for the union of a Jew with someone born to parents of another faith who has not converted to Judaism.) Absent such a conversion, no interfaith liaison stood a chance of winning acceptance within the Jewish community. Indeed, Jews who broke the taboo were usually stigmatized by Jewish society and shunned by their own families.

When the "nice Jewish boy" finally brought himself to call his mother and tell her that he was marrying a non-Jewish woman, he expected the worst. To his surprise, his mother promptly replied: "So you and your bride will come live in my apartment."
"Ma, I'm glad you're taking the news so well," the son said. "But we wouldn't think of putting such a burden on you. After all, three people living in one small apartment. . . ."
"What burden?" shrugged the mother. "As soon as we hang up, I'm putting my head in the oven."

II. Positive Arguments
   a. Autonomy, Love, and Choice


“We are convinced, however, that-more than ever before-personal stories are basic to who American Jews are, as Jews and as human beings. That is so in part because Jews such as Molly, compared to predecessors a generation or two ago, define themselves far less by denominational boundaries (Reform, Conservative, Orthodox) or institutional loyalties (Hadassah, Jewish community centers, synagogues). Their Jewish identi­ties are not constituted by organizational activity, do not center on concern for the state of Israel, and do not arise out of anxiety about anti-semitism. The communal quest for "sacred survival" that animated many American Jews a generation ago is simply not what motivates the Jews whom we studied (Woocher 1986). Nor do they manifest any traditional sort of Jewish religious commitment. We rarely met individuals who said they came to Jewish commitment (which we shall label their 'Judaism," regardless of the presence or absence of strictly "religious" content) be-cause of particular beliefs in God or revelation or the chosenness of Israel. Nor did we meet many individuals who expressed their Jewish commit­ment primarily by performing a fixed set of behaviors.

What matters to the Jews we interviewed, rather, are powerful indi­vidual memories and experiences, the personal stories in which these fig­ure, the personal journeys that they mark, and the people who share the most meaningful moments on these journeys with them-primarily the members of their families. In this they bear a strong resemblance to Chris­tians in late-twentieth-century America, among whom, Wuthnow argues, "a traditional spirituality of inhabiting sacred places [ e.g., churches] has given way to a new spirituality of seeking," characterized-as it is among the American Jews we encountered-by negotiation among competing glimpses of the sacred, experiences of partial knowledge, and a preference for practical wisdom (1998, pp. 3-4). Personal journeys and experiences, especially if shared with other family members, are the stuff out of which their Judaism is now imagined and enacted, a Judaism constructed and performed by one individual at a time. The spaces in which it transpires are predominantly intimate and private-homes and families, friendships and romances-and some of the most important Jewish action transpires deep inside the self, where meaning is registered, reflected on, and im­posed.

We can only probe these spaces, within the self or outside it, with the help of the individuals who inhabit them. We begin, therefore, with fairly lengthy sketches of two particularly articulate individuals who shared their stories with us.”
10. Micah 6:8

והני קל אדום, פה-סוד; ימים-ייהוה זורן ממקו, כי אמא-עשוה השם,size=60מִשְפָּט וְאַהֲבַת חֶסֶד size=60-ם, כי יְהוָּה דּוֹרֵש מִמְךָ-ם, size=60וּמָּה טּוֹב-ם, size=60מה, size=60הִגִיד לְךָ אָדָם-ם.

8 “He has told you, O man, what is good, And what the Lord requires of you: Only to do justice And to love goodness, and to walk modestly with your God

11. Babylonian Talmud Yebamot 63b

It is taught: R. Eliezer said: Whoever does not engage in producing children, it is as if he spills blood... Ben Azai said: It is as if he split blood and diminishes the image of God, since it says [after both phrases] “So then, be thou fruitful and multiply.” They said to Ben Azai: There are those who learn well and fulfill well, those who fulfill well but don’t learn so well, (it appears that) you learn well but don’t fulfill very well. Ben Azai said to them: What shall I do? My soul lusts for Torah and likely the world will be sustained by others.
b. America as Context for Rethinking Jewish Identity

Individual: Partial Jewishness


The persistence of an image of decline, and our decades-old experience, does not fully explain why the assessments of the Jewish population and our trajectory have been so bleak. Nor does our predisposition to view ourselves as an “ever-dying” people fully explain reactions to the Pew survey and other systematic data about American Jewry. To be sure, such opinions have some positive value in promoting and mobilizing discussion. In addition, there is some truth to the dark assessments of the Jewish future in America, even if the data are being misinterpreted and concerns are overblown.

Perhaps the fairest summary of social scientific data about contemporary American Jewry is that there is no simple narrative. Jews in America have not vanished as predicted by Look magazine’s article and the eponymous book by Alan Dershowitz. The population is, in fact, larger and more engaged in Judaism than in previous eras. At the same time, an increasingly large segment of the population now identifies in non-traditional religious ways. Jews could bemoan their fate and look wistfully at the past. But it turns out the past was not all that positive and that, in some respects, the newly discovered ways to provide education and support for Jewish identity development are more powerful. The challenge is to build on successful strategies and to discard those that are not working.
III. Conceptual Frameworks for a Better Conversation

a) What is “Jewish identity,” what does it mean to have one, and how does what we think as a meaningful Jewish identity change or evolve depending on cultural and political circumstances?

b) How much of what we consider “authentic Judaism” can be thought of as separate from what the Jewish people are actually doing?

c) What is the boundary between the “Jew” and the “non-Jew?” Is Jewishness an intrinsic ‘otherness?’ When and how is the difference allowed to be elided?

d) How does a community or a people manage difference and diversity when it comes to something as essential as individual identity?
Save the dates for upcoming Hartman JIBC Lectures:

Wednesday, January 11, 2017 – Christine Hayes
Wednesday, March 8, 2017 – Donniel Hartman
Wednesday, May 17, 2017 – Orit Avnery

All lectures at 7:00pm

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