

Chosen People? The Break-Up of American Jewish Identity

Repeatedly asked to uphold value systems they no longer share, Diaspora Jewry may soon hit unsubscribe

By **Todd Gitlin** | March 27, 2016 10:00 PM

My approach to clarity is to go to the ambiguous side, or to put it more high-mindedly, to turn to Wittgenstein's concept of "family resemblances." "The Jews," in other words, exemplify the sort of social entity Wittgenstein spoke of as "a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing." There are, in the case of the Jews, as Wittgenstein said, "overall similarities," and he went on: "I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than 'family resemblances'; for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way." All manner of qualities and boundaries are stirred together in that "Etc. etc."—doctrinal, institutional, legal, textual, ritual, national, and whatnot. Seen from within or without, there are resemblances but not identity. Curious, then, and interesting, that concepts like "Jewish identity" should be hazy at the boundaries. It is not irrelevant that Wittgenstein was himself baffled about being a Jew—three of his four grandparents were Jewish, but one of them, his paternal grandfather, born Moses Meier, became a Protestant and changed his middle name to Christian. This might well be a biographical root for his interest in family resemblances.

The genealogy of Jewish identity as a problem is ancient.

It can't be denied that, for centuries, the "complicated network" of the Jewish condition was, and continues to be, channeled through an overlapping obsession with a story contained in a book; by identification with it (as in "The People of the Book"), and by contestation within it; with the effort to know, cherish, and preserve that book, and to honor those who take it seriously, to recite, decipher, and dispute it, to try to manage its contradictions, to honor the chain of commitments and sacrifices described there, to use chapters and verses of that book against other chapters and verses, aspiring always to make sense of a world full of absence in which the one certainty about life is that it ends. The most important activity of an honorable Jew was to study the book which told the story of a tribe that was anointed as God's deputies on earth, along with the sanctioned commentaries on it.

The people of Abraham, "father of many," found it beneficial, or at least comforting, to confront,

or evade, radical mysteries of their existence in the company of a tribe equipped with, if nothing else, a common vocabulary. The Jews had a story that featured them. *There was convergence on that story* concerning a unique and immensely powerful deity Who created the world and flooded it to punish a failed species, saving only the line of Noah, a uniquely just man, and Who later came to an otherwise undistinguished descendant of Noah called Abram, and spoke to him, and set him toward a destination in Canaan, otherwise undistinguished as well, and set him on his journeys and his tasks, and arranged for an endpoint in a land whose meaning to them derived strictly from the fact that it had been designated by God.

As you know, a great deal ensued, including rituals, miracles, enemies, exiles, escapes, the delivery of commandments and the setting of laws, and eventually, defeat and centuries of Diaspora (vastly longer than the time of the Jewish State), and further on, throughout all the failures and defeats, the punishments meted out for their failures to do well by their assignments, millennial yearnings for a return to the Holy Land. Even Jews who disdained any foothold in the varieties of doctrinal Judaism felt the calling to locate themselves on a map whose once and enduring center was in Jerusalem. Jerusalem was what you had a relationship to, even if that relationship was mysterious, abstract, and hypothetical. The language of Jewish longing for a surpassing, redeeming deliverance was saturated with a hunger for Zion even in the breasts of Jews who were not Zionists.

The Jews were the beneficiaries of a particular kind of story: It was not just a narrative of characters and events of the form, *A did X to B, upon which C happened*. It was not a story prescribed for a self-contained tribe. It was a morality tale that traced variations on an overpowering theme: *A single God chose a single man to engender a singular people. Here's what happened when they tried to live up to their mission; tried and failed; tried, failed, and tried again.*

In the Jews' story, the age of gods in the plural was now to be overshadowed, and the age of God had arrived. This designated people told a story about themselves in which *their* story was central because the single God whom they recognized, different from all the gods who were of surpassing value to all other peoples, determined that *they* should matter, because He had chosen them—and not to worship a local god but to be the people of the single God. The single God was not only *their* God, the local God of their tribe, but *the* God, God in the singular, everyone's God, whether they knew it or not. So, a universalist claim is built into the history of the Jews. God hammers it home when He addresses all the Jews in the world from Mt. Sinai (after finally delivering them from bondage). The Jews are a particular people charged with universal significance—if you like that paradox, you like the Jews. The Covenant declares a mission that exists not only for God and for the Jews but for the others. As it is written in Genesis 12:3, “by you shall all families of the earth be blessed.” “... *all families of the earth.*” There were others, *goyim*, *Auslander*, to contend with.

In a word, the Jews were designated a people among peoples, with a particular mission and task: Jewish exceptionalism. To be for themselves in the name of being for others, and for others in the name of being themselves. Not to be “a people” but “the people on behalf of the people.” The logic was circular but weirdly compelling, as was it also perplexing to the people whom God singled out.

The story mattered because the single God must have known that there were other peoples holding to other gods. The Talmudic story of the young Abraham makes the destruction of idols a proof of virtue, in fact.

The idea of chosenness was not unique to the Israelites. But, unlike other people's parallel claims, it persisted even as the meaning of chosenness proved elusive and even obscure. It was the inescapable magnet for Jewish identity. And perhaps for this reason it had the probably unintended effect of provoking a zero-sum challenge to all the peoples left unchosen. As Liel Leibovitz and I wrote in *The Chosen Peoples: America, Israel, and the Ordeals of Divine Election*, "The promised land's native inhabitants struggled against a theology that declared them to be, in effect, the children of a lesser god. When they resisted becoming history's beautiful losers, they construed their defeats as martyrdom, built identities around humiliation, set out to regenerate themselves through acts of magic and will, and began to rationalize the next war." The later Abrahamic religions developed their own forms of either-or chosenness. They too recognized the power of the idea: the universal in the particular. Even toward the end of the 20th century, 50 percent of a **national sample** of American Jews conducted by the sociologist Steven M. Cohen said they agreed with the statement, "Jews are a 'chosen people.'"

Breaking out of the ghetto, the Jewish Enlightenment altered—widened and complicated—the scope of Jewish ideals. Some Jews who entered the outside world, in Cohen's words, "universaliz[ed] what had been a particularist civilization," but it was a particularist civilization with a difference. They would take up the Hebrew language but they would also sign up with ways to belong to distinct nations. For these Jews, there was not only an opportunity but an imperative to return to one or another version of the divine election that stemmed from their origin—to open the Jews up to broader Enlightenment currents of thought, to enlarge and in part secularize Jewish education; to make the Jew a citizen of the world, equipped, or saddled, with ethical obligations, even to point the way. A universalist tendency had long been latent in the cloistered Judaism of Europe; now, let free, it could flourish. What was good for the Jews would be to complete Hillel's triad: to be for ourselves; to be for others; and to be all that now. In other words, the Jews in the Diaspora were a people of ethics.

Exiles did not cease, and new homelands were founded. Under pressure, many European Jews flocked to varieties of the secular left and then, eventually, under the pressure of oppression, to Zionism, which, although ostensibly secular, carried in its bones a millennial spirit of return to the biblical homeland. In America, Jews went to work founding—in the words of a recent *New York Times Magazine* ad for an Upper East Side condominium complex—"a new tradition." New traditions, actually, and quarrels among these traditions, both religious and secular, perched uneasily on the foundations of older traditions.

In the historical land of Israel, as Leibovitz and I wrote, "undercurrents of chosenness rattled the ground. ... Even as [Zionists] fiercely disputed all manner of things, including the nature of a Jewish state, and what policies to pursue, a spirit—one might even say a dybbuk—of chosenness

inhabited them, and continues to do so.” But in America, the old question came to the surface again: *chosen for what?* A good part of the answer would become: chosen for success. Jews were acculturated into a pot for partial melting. But also chosen to stand for justice, to complete Hillel’s triad.

It was another turn of the screw of ironic history that the Holocaust—as it came to be called—should have opened up American society for Jews. Barriers fell. Anti-Semitism withered—both the genteel type and the murderous type. Restricted covenants were banned by the Supreme Court in 1948. University quotas were phased out. Turn-of-the-century Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe could join in the American celebration and give over their hearts to the newly founded Israel even as their children were retreating from *Yiddishkeit*. Even as the Holocaust left us reeling, Jews overwhelmingly joined in a combination of redemptive spirit, old-country nostalgia, and successful assimilation. Rituals of religious observance, holidays, and food, cleared for acceptance by dietary laws that were held to be inscribed with the imprimatur of God. The grandchildren, like myself, found ourselves freed for secular lives infused with what we thought of as Jewish values. This is a story for another day. Even as religious connections thinned out—Jews attend religious services at much lower rates than other religious denominations—the Jews, at least in America, became a people of ethics. In Cohen’s words, “Jews are ethnically hyperactive and religiously indolent.” I would say also: *ethically* hyperactive.

But here was yet another turn of the screw: The Holocaust now became a badge of Jewish identity. Whatever you thought about the Jews being chosen by God, our people had been singled out for the worst assaults ever delivered upon a whole people in modern history. A Christian might say that the Jews were crucified. And to have suffered this crucifixion, vicariously, to feel forever scarred by it, became a badge of identity. As Steven Cohen wrote about his 1989 survey: “The Holocaust is more important to more respondents than any other symbol [of Jewishness]. As many as 85 percent say it is at least very important, and 56 percent call it extremely important. Both figures exceed comparable rates for all other concepts in the series”—the High Holidays; an attachment to Israel; God; the Torah, all of them.

The Holocaust was the ultimate denial of equality, of dignity, of justice. And if anything, it only elevated the significance of the affirmative values that had been so atrociously annihilated by Nazi Germany. As the Holocaust became more central to the Jewish imagination, so did the ethical core of being Jewish—a commitment to equality, dignity, justice. So it is that the liberalism of American Jews has withstood decades of disillusion. It should not be surprising that, as Judge Richard Posner noted recently in the *Washington Post*, “the three liberal justices besides Sotomayor are Jewish”—though as he quickly added, they are “not, it seems, influenced by Judaism in their judicial work.” Not by Judaic doctrine, but by the penumbra of egalitarian ethics that, to most American Jews, feels like their birthright.

So, what does Jewishness mean today, in America? Is there a core, an essential overlap, in the thick of all the family resemblances? Let’s look at other social surveys, a quarter-century after Steven Cohen’s. In 2012, the **Public Religion Research Institute** found that 87 percent of Jews said that the Holocaust was “somewhat or very important for informing their political beliefs and

activity.” Nearly half (46 percent) of American Jews cited a commitment to social equality as “most important to their Jewish identity,” twice as many as cited “support for Israel (20 percent) or religious observance (17 percent).” In 2013, a [Pew poll](#) found that:

U.S. Jews see being Jewish as more a matter of ancestry, culture and values than of religious observance. Six-in-ten say, for example, that being Jewish is *mainly* a matter of culture or ancestry, compared with 15 percent who say it is mainly a matter of religion. *Roughly seven-in-ten say remembering the Holocaust and leading an ethical life are essential to what it means to them to be Jewish, while far fewer say observing Jewish law is a central component of their Jewish identity.* And two-thirds of Jews say that a person can be Jewish even if he or she does not believe in God....The view that remembering the Holocaust is essential to what it means to be Jewish is shared by majorities in all of the large Jewish denominational groupings.

As Hitler’s movement had chosen the Jews for annihilation, the Jews could now choose themselves: not only as survivors but as redeemers. But what if there is no consensus on what it means to “live an ethical life”? What if a chasm divides the values of American Jews, Diaspora Jews, from the Jews of the Jewish state?

Between 1948 and 1967, American Jews could cherish the state of Israel on both particularist and universalist grounds. Israel was the state of the Jews, for sure. It had a part to play in the great universalism of nationhood. But it also leaned socialist. It could be exhibited as a case study of national liberation. Palestinians had no reality to the great majority of American Jews, but the Israeli victory in 1947-48 served both particularist and universalist needs. The Jews of the liberal-left were doubly blessed. Be it Old Jerusalem or New, Holy Land or God-fearing America as a “city on a hill,” the exalted state located elsewhere had long been, for the Diaspora, a badge of identity, a palpable sign that history has a vector and of renewal. Pride in the survival—indeed, the triumph—of the Jewish state evoked pride.

The Israeli victory in the Six Day War for a while re-cemented the salience of the Holocaust. David had crushed Goliath. But in the conquest of the Territories lay demon seeds. The statehood of Israel had the sanction of international law. It still does. But when Israel became an illegal occupier of the territories it conquered in 1967, it forfeited its universalist mantle. It made Israel look like a less compelling answer to the immense question of what might be left of chosenness, which dovetailed with the problem of what meaning might be found in the Holocaust. First under center-left Labor governments and more radically under the Likud, Israel interpreted chosenness as a title to land and a warrant for defying world opinion and international law. It justified its aggressions as defenses. But this was an almost fatal mistake. Israeli exceptionalism abandoned the high moral ground. Gripped by messianism and a volatile brew of desperation and truculence, Israel defies the hard-fought achievements of the Diaspora as it becomes steadily more illiberal, and thus more offensive to Jews who remain among America’s most liberal populations. In a world of sinful nations, Israel now, simultaneously, claims the privilege of victimhood and the

right to be honored as democratic even as it abandons liberality. This is a hell of a climb-down from *tikkun olam*, the injunction to repair the world and welcome the stranger. It offers little solace or cohesion for American Jews. For the built-in ambiguities that face all minorities in America, Israel is no spiritual refuge.

By now, a growing minority of younger American Jews are so intensely angry at the actually existing, increasingly illiberal Israel, which is no longer the Israel of Martin Buber and Paul Newman, as to reject “Zionism” as a dirty word and endorse the whole bundle of BDS politics, including the academic boycott—a direction made easier as American-Jewish oligarchs fund land-grabs and implant enclave fortresses in East Jerusalem and on the West Bank. Some are naïve; some are thoughtless; some can think of no other way to get the Israeli government’s attention. Not many liberal American Jews go so far, but **the gulf that has opened up** between Israeli and American Jews will be a fundamental feature of the Jewish landscape for a long time.

Obviously Israeli politics is in an inflammable state, in no small part because Palestinian politics are dead-ended. The polarization in Israel-Palestine generates aftershocks in America. And we are in the throes of a nasty feedback loop. When the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations lays claim to speak for American Jews (the Israeli philosopher Menachem Brinker has asked whether there are any *minor* Jewish organizations), it reveals itself helpless to resist the soft messianism and aggressive desperation of the West Bank Occupation. The more the American Jewish establishment colludes with Netanyahu, the more damage the Israeli right does to the prospects for peace, and the more polarized are American Jews. As Israel becomes steadily more illiberal, it becomes more vexatious—more divisive—for Jews who, all in all, remain among America’s most liberal populations—and the younger the Jews, the more so. Minor Jewish Organizations will likely proliferate.

As a cement for American Jewish identity, the Holocaust is aging. The cracks will grow—and not only over Israel but whether the Jews are really a people of values, and if so, which they are. Schmaltz, however marketed, will not hold together a fractious population whose two world centers, Israel and America, are increasingly irreconcilable. The people of values are once again tested to decide what their values are. Which is where we came in.

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