THE ART OF THE HAGADAH

FOCUS: JEWISH IDENTITY

Meredith Tax
Jeff Oboler
Marge Piercy
John Gerassi
Irena Narell
Jacob Picheny
Marian Neudel
Steve Fankuchen
Deborah Kaufman
Paul Zilsel
Gerre Goodman
Sam Julty
Florence Lewis
William Leffler
Andrea Behr
Ursula Sherman
Joel Ensana
Jay Ladin
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STEVE FANKUCHEN  Publisher/Editor

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Money! I’ve often thought that the only way I’d ever be able to get some would be for A.D.L. to put me on payroll as a living refutation of the anti-Semitic stereotype of Jews attracting the stuff. SHMATE, as children often do, has inherited its parent’s genetic deficiency. Money is attracted to the magazine like Yitzhak Shamir to Yassir Arafat! It’s nice that, with no paid publicity, SHMATE has attracted subscribers from Alaska to Texas. But, all the subscribers together do not even pay the printing bill. Think about that!

SHMATE is in a bit of a Catch-22 situation: in order to raise the funds to keep going, the magazine needs someone to work on money-generating activities such as distribution, publicity, donations, grants, etc. But, you can’t get someone to do that, if there is no money with which he or she can be paid. As it says in the Bible, King Reagan version, Plutocraticus 1:13, “And Money knew Money and begat more Money, yea, verily, unto the fortieth generation.” Therefore, it has become necessary to immediately deputize all SHMATE readers as instant staff. Congratulations! Your first job is to subscribe, if you are not a subscriber, or to renew your subscription right away if the last number on your address label code is an 8 or 9. The rest of you, meanwhile, can occupy yourselves getting friends and libraries to subscribe, as well as giving gift subs.

Once you have finished that preliminary training, you’re ready for bigger and better things. Those of you with organizational or media access might get SHMATE reviewed, advertised, or at least noted. For graduation you get to hold fund-raisers. Listen, just because I don’t know how to raise money doesn’t mean you don’t know how! Have a party, a dinner, a something for the magazine. Have people pay generously to come, tell them the virtues of — not to mention the need for — SHMATE, then hit them up for more money (Try not to blow all of it on pizza.) Explain, if necessary, the obvious: if we don’t like the way things are in the world, in the Jewish community, in Jewish media, then we must be prepared to do and give till it hurts a bit. We must tactfully say, as did the Reykjavik Gaon, Reb Nonhypocriticalus ben Mitzvah, to his tiny congregation which complained about the lack of a synagogue: “Put up or shut up! Enough kvetching, already!”

Pizza? God, that’s my problem right there! When it comes to money I don’t even know how to think big. Something like SHMATE needs an amount of money you can’t blow on pizza, an amount you could blow only on a trip to Mexico. And, yet, if every subscriber would forego a pizza every two months (or at least the anchovies, peppers, mushrooms, and extra cheese) and send what they saved, it would make a huge difference.

If any of you — especially those in California — are willing to hold a fund-raiser and would like me to come, just let me know. If you think you can raise more money by my not coming, so much the better. If any of you can send out a subscription/appeal letter to your friends, co-workers, families, and fans, great! (If so, try to include copies of the sub coupon. It really helps.) Any of you with “name recognition” who would be willing to sign or co-sponsor a general appeal mailing, please let me know. And anyone who has a current list of potential SHMATE supporters, that is inappropriate or too big for him or her to contact personally, should forward the list to me.

A sincere thanks to all of you for your continuing support, especially the letters, which are of inestimable value (and the only pay) for the authors, artists, and myself. If you move, please send in a change of address. Last issue alone, 5% of SHMATE subscribers moved without notifying me. At a cost of about $3 a piece, that is a large, unnecessary burden. I hope to focus one of the two coming issues on the “Right”, especially the Christian, radical, anti-Semitic, and armed “Right”. Articles and ideas are hereby requested.

A Happy Pesach to one and all! May the coming year bring a White House free from Pharoah!
LETTERS

— THE VIEW FROM OUT THERE —

Issue #7 struck me as being particularly fine, not only because of the seriousness of the political articles, but also because of the graphics.

Gloria Kirchheimer
New York, N.Y.

I like the way the magazine looks. I still hate the name, and can't bring myself to write it. Worse, I'd like to send gift subs, but it's embarrassing. Nevertheless, best wishes.

Ronnie Gilbert
New York, N.Y.

What impresses me about your publication is that you have courage in facing gut issues and yet not offending your readers. Honesty is what is most obvious in your approach. I am impressed by your progressive approach, which is needed in our religious theology, too, so that the needs and interests of all Jews are met. The lesbian issue is approached honestly. I am amused by your title and wonder how many modern Jewish women know what it means.

Edith Blicksilver
Atlanta, Georgia

I was able to relax for a few minutes for the first time in months and read issue #7... I really loved it. With the paucity of funds and one-armed-paper hanger approach, you've done a fantastic job of entertaining us as well as informing us.

Going through the issue, "Erev 1984" was excellent and on the money. The "Letters" show remarkable give-and-take and vivacity. I loved the Central American article and thank God for your four Nicaraguan articles, most important of which was the indictment of the A.D.L. — I tend to choke up when I encounter their activities as an arm of our President and our State Department. The centerfold certainly tops PLAY-BOY's in intelligence and emotion. . . . "New York Street Games" was witty and entertaining. Kirshheimer's article I adored . . . it was fantastic. All in all, I was just delighted with it... I will keep the magazine around the office and proclaim its wonders, and you certainly have my belief in your power.

Ed Asner
North Hollywood, California

Your editorial in Issue #7 and the "New York Street Games" piece were GREAT! The latter was really hilarious.

Larry Bush
Brooklyn, New York

Nicaragua articles good. Editorial on Grenada brilliant.

Gerré Goodman
Durham, North Carolina

Like "New York Street Games". I'm a Chicagoan, but I loved it anyway. I'm going to share it with some Brooklyn Walnut Creekers.

Elaine Starkman
Walnut Creek, California

Looks good these days. Thanks especially for the Nicaragua materials.

Richard Spiegelman
Oakland, California

Love your humor issue!

Irena Narel
Oakland, California

Especially appreciated the article on libraries in Issue #3.

Rabbi William Leffler
Lexington, Kentucky

I really liked Issue #7, especially the stuff on Nicaragua and Israel.

Meredith Tax
New York, N.Y.

I was first attracted to your publication because of its name and because I thought it would be lighter, more irreverent, etc. If you call something SHMATE, you must be aware that that is the slang of the traditional Jewish garment industry for FASHION — which gives wide birth to satire. If you have such a serious slant, why call it that . . . ?

Thanks especially for the humor issue. Yes, the content is different from your format, and I do appreciate your atypicality. Husband and friends dropping in all agree there is much to like. (Uniformly the connotation of your name gets in the way — in New York City it definitely means FASHION!) I liked Larry Bush's article based on his speech in Issue #1 as well as his adamant letter to you about the name.

There are news shops in New York City that show all kinds of obscure papers and magazines distributed by De Boer, but there is no similar service for offbeat Jewish stuff, which has to get around by the grapevine and expensive ads.

Doris Gold
Fresh Meadows, New York

I loved Issue #7.

John Gerassi
New York, N.Y.

CONTINUED NEXT PAGE
Thanks to Henry Finkelstein for his letter in SHMATE #7. He said what needed saying.
Marilyn Baumkel Pontiac, Michigan

I still enjoy reading SHMATE. You have something great going there.
Paul Foer Annapolis, Maryland

The Chanukah 1983 issue was very welcome once again.
Clara Robbin Berkeley, California

I enjoy SHMATE very much. I would like to see more information on the role of Jews in the labor movement. It would also be interesting to read of the role Jews are playing in left-wing movements in France, England, and other countries with large Jewish communities. Please keep writing on the role Jews played in the Spanish Civil War and World War II, as well as in the labor movement during the Depression. Keep up the good work.
Ross Rosen Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Just as I was wondering what ever happened to SHMATE, the new issue arrived. The same day, I received my first-ever letter from my birth father, telling me about my medical history. This all fits together because my first "Very Anonymous" letter to SHMATE was the beginning of a renewed interest in my adoption-related search, which has been a very fruitful search in many ways. Not only am I learning about some (biological) relatives, and understanding myself by learning about psychological issues of adoptees, but I'm starting to be an activist around the controversial issue of conception with anonymous sperm donors. The least I can do is send in my subscription renewal.
Not As Anonymous Berkeley, California

I especially enjoyed Issue #6. Seeing all the remaindered copies of Wallace Markfield's books at Barnes and Noble, I was beginning to believe I was his only reader.
Burton Levine Hamden, Connecticut

Thanks for informing me about Nicaragua.
Lori Lippitz Chicago, Illinois

Thanks for your work.
Bonnie Wolf Somerville, Mass.

I've enjoyed a number of the articles, found others fairly dry. I think I would enjoy more longer pieces. If a piece is interesting, I want it to go on, and if it's dry, at least I haven't struggled to get into it only to find it over already.
Sharon Silverstein San Francisco, Calif.

I nominated the Central America articles for reprinting in Temple University's Alternative Press Annual.
Sandy Berman Edina, Minnesota

It has been my experience that with the demise of Maxwell Perkins and William Sloan . . . most editors don't know how to write. They stay at their desks mostly because it gives them a sense of power to be able to say . . . "No Good . . . I don't like it because I don't like it . . . do me something . . ." But here comes Fankuchen. Not only does he write, but he's "epes" a scholar. He understands all the paradoxes in 1984, as witness "We destroyed the city in order to save it." O'Brien's thinking exactly. Fankuchen is a satirist. That means he is headed for trouble. Satirists see double. People like single vision, the literal. I should like to see more of this erudite editor's work.
Flossie Lewis El Cerrito, California

As the coordinator of the Martin Steinberg Center for Jewish Artists, I really enjoyed Gerre Goodman's thoughtful piece on Jewish art. It gave a good perspective on where we are coming from and where we need to go. Art was, and is, a natural expression of Jewish life, and perhaps we can celebrate the renewal of our people during the coming holidays by buying for ourselves handcrafted ritual objects. We need to strike a balance between reviving old forgotten Jewish art forms and creating new forms for future generations. For example, our own center in New York has accomplished much in helping to revive both klezmer music and Ladino songs, yet we are still exploring ways of creating an authentic Jewish music that grows out of our experience.

I hope that there will be more articles on the Jewish arts in SHMATE. But I also want to urge you to publish more on the plight of the Jewish poor, elderly, and the disabled, especially during the Reagan era. Some of our artists try to visit these isolated groups in our community and we find that, in most cases, the situation is getting worse for our sisters and brothers. Fortunately, there have emerged groups and individuals in our community that are trying to help, and their story also needs to be told.
Jeff Oboler New York, N.Y.

Your magazine picks up momentum with each issue. Keep it up!
Milt Goldberg White Plains, N.Y.

I enjoyed SHMATE #7, especially the articles on Jewish art and coastal chauvinism (which really made me homesick!)
Barbara Margolies Los Angeles, California
Welcome to SHMATE #8. I don't like ritual and I don't believe in God. Yet tonight is my father's yahrtzeit and I have just come from shul, an Orthodox shul. I am still not convinced that being Jewish is not optional, the opinions of learned rabbis and Nazis notwithstanding. Nonetheless, the only words I emotionally react to as "curse words" are anti-Jewish epithets. And, I capitalize the name of God in whom I do not believe. Clearly, the essential development of my Jewishness occurred long before I could read the fine print in the contract, let alone be aware that much of it was written in invisible ink.

Paradox, contradiction, contention: perhaps such is the essence of Jewish identity, both individually and collectively. A year ago I would not have thought of doing an issue of SHMATE on Jewish identity. It just wasn't that important to me or anyone else I knew. Or so I thought. Two things occurred which led to this issue of the magazine. The first was a conversation I had with a friend, who is a convert. During the course of our discussion I realized that I had a double standard concerning Jewish identity. To put it simply: I could not accept Sammy Davis Jr. as a Jew, though I would have had no trouble with Rod Carew. A corollary: I could not accept Sammy Davis Jr., but could accept Baruch Korff. Why so? Sammy Davis Jr. had publicly embraced Richard Nixon; Rod Carew had not. But, so had Rabbi Baruch Korff. However, he was born Jewish, while Sammy Davis Jr. was not. What I concluded from this was that, emotionally, I felt a born Jew was a Jew, but a convert had to be a mensch. Subsequently I asked several friends how they reacted to this and all indicated some sort of similar perception, though their casts of characters varied. ("Sammy Davis Jr.? No problem. Elizabeth Taylor? Never!")

The second occurrence which troubled me was a letter sent by four women to the Jewish Feminist Conference and to the local women's paper. Basically it said that converts were not real Jews, certainly not first class Jews. The issue evolved into a major subject of concern around the Conference. Though I recognized my own emotional ambivalence, I was firmly convinced that converts should be considered Jews. Period. After all, they do have history on their side, and massive amounts of it at that.

Which leads to another aspect of my ambivalence concerning Jewish identity: I am, by any reasonable definition, a secular Jew. Nonetheless, whenever I read something about secular Judaism, I am left with the feeling that, no matter how carefully constructed, what I have read is an illusion, a deck of cards, form without substance. Perhaps those are the wrong metaphors. Maybe what is described is real; it just doesn’t appear to describe what Judaism or the Jewish people is. The Jewish people have existed as a multitude of religious communities for the past two thousand years. Enlightenment and civil equality notwithstanding, I am not convinced that the Bund, Yiddish theater, and the Forward present a coherent rationale, let alone explanation, for the continued existence of the Jewish people. In what way will secular American Jews share more in common with secular Yemenite Jews than with other secular Americans? How long can a "People" live in the present when it is primarily based on nostalgia? What cement will bind us when our identity as Survivors of The Holocaust becomes a part of our history rather than a still-contemporary reality? As Israel solidifies its own independent national existence and we move, as a community, from Israel defenders to supporters to groupies, what vital energy will we be able to pass on to our children as Jews?

I am a fortunate person. Unlike many of my friends, I have never been uncomfortable being a Jew. I have never disavowed, been depressed by, or hidden my Jewishness. Though alienated from much of the middle-class Jewish community I grew up in, I seemed to understand that what I was rejecting were not Jewish elements, but rather certain characteristics common to some segments of the middle-class. Most of my co-lefties through the years identified the rejected attitudes and behavior as Jewish rather than as class phenomena. My family, especially my father, can take the credit for my keeping on course on that one. It was clear from his example that being Jewish did not mean you had to be petty, materialistic, intolerant of differing ideas and behavior. (My only regret is that he did not live long enough to read my words of appreciation).

Which gets me back to my original statement of apparent inconsistency: my going to an Orthodox shul on my father's yahrtzeit. What's more, my son and I make Shabbos every week, I fast on Yom Kippur, and when I go to shul, I am comfortable only in a traditional more-or-less Conservative service. Services in English have no meaning for me. Only in Hebrew, a language I do not understand, am I moved. Hypocrisy? A secret religious belief? I don't think so. The essential
JEWISH IDENTITY: continued

association of all these things is family, familiarity. They are a way of maintaining for me a spiritual/emotional connection between the past and the future. And, as I am thankful for (primarily) my father providing this opportunity for me through my childhood environment, so am I trying to do as much for my son.

Though it is the associations and familiarity of certain rituals which ordinarily provide their meaning for me, other Jewish rites have taken on meaning, even comprehensibility, more recently. It wasn't until my father died that I understood the purpose of a minyan—guaranteed instant community. Only when my son was born was I able to contemplate the absurdity of circumcision without a bris.

Though I have always identified positively as a Jew, for many years that fact was not particularly relevant in my daily life. The two exceptions which come to mind are, however, indicative of my attitude: I was kicked out of/quits a political study group because I thought it was clearly more important to go 3000 miles to my nephew's Bar Mitzvah than it was to attend a couple of study group meetings; I went to a Yom Kippur service after not attending for several years. I was so uncomfortable being in a service (lead by Zalman Schachter) held in a church and accompanied by guitars, that I had to leave.

After doing almost nothing specifically Jewish for many years, I now find that I am a "Professional Jew." I publish a Jewish magazine and I am an activist member of the Board of Directors of the Berkeley/Richmond Jewish Community Center. And, I am uncomfortable in the role. It's not that I question the legitimacy of what I do. Nor is the work qualitatively different than twenty previous years of political activity. Rather it is a tiny occasional doubt about the potential absurdity— for me— of any particularistic activity, the possibility that I am placing shackles on my own being.

When I conceived of this issue of SHMATE, I was certain of one thing: I wanted to give the authors complete freedom within a context of writing personally. I wanted a multitude of individual perspectives rather than a few drawn-out analytic pieces. It was suggested that everyone consider the questions: What makes me Jewish? Could I not be a Jew? Why am I a Jew? What is it to be a Jew? Who is a Jew? But, they were only suggestions, because I wanted to get at what people feel in their guts, believe with their hearts, and know with their heads. And, I wanted them to have the room to be, on paper, as ambivalent, indecisive, or vague as they might be inside. A brief fantasy of presenting a "cross-section" of Jewish opinion and backgrounds was dispelled by the impossible reality of such a task, especially in a small magazine. Instead I decided to content myself with doing overall, what I had asked the authors to do individually: illuminate rather than trying to explain the phenomena of Jewish identity.

STEVE FANKUCHEN
My thoughts about Jewish identity come from my biography: I grew up in Wisconsin, first in a small town, then in Milwaukee, then in the suburb of Whitefish Bay. I went to Brandeis, then London. I became a leftist and a feminist.

To be a Jew in most of the Midwest is to feel an obvious and conscious minority, the object of curiosity or attack. My mother's extended family were the only Jews in their small town; her brothers dared their father's wrath and married shiksa, but the girls remained single or had to import boyfriends from Milwaukee. Exogamy was out of the question; even in my high school in Whitefish Bay, you dated Jewish boys or you didn't date.

Gentiles were unpredictable; they acted nice, but could turn nasty. We whispered about the history teacher who told us, "Say what you want about Hitler, he built good roads." When I went to the main library on Wisconsin Avenue, I would pass "war souvenir stores" that specialized in Nazi regalia. In the Bavarian Inn, a sylvan retreat where I attended Sweet Sixteen parties, a sign hung until after World War II: "No Jews or dogs allowed." Under these circumstances, keeping a low profile was a survival skill, or so I was taught; you should be Jewish, but not too Jewish; you shouldn't be loud or assertive, though it was okay to be smart, even too smart — as long as you were a boy.

If you were a smart girl, you'd better learn to hide it. My freshman year in high school, I joined B.B.G. (B'na Brith Girls), but I couldn't figure out what it was for. I, who always knew the answers in class, would get confused and tongue-tied at meetings, while the "popular girls" talked about who was going with whom. Then they got down to business planning other meetings, dances, or fundraising events, appointing committees for same. I couldn't see the point. "It's to meet other girls," my aunt said. "It's social. And you do charitable work." But I felt so stupid and out-of-it, I left after six months and one convention. I now understand I was being taught skills appropriate to young women planning to stay in the suburbs and make good marriages, skills like arranging fundraising events, knowing who the right men were, and feeling good about feeling dumb.

B.B.G. and the confirmation classes at the local (Reform) temple were my main experiences with Jewish institutional life. And while I had a brief religious period in which I denounced my parents as hypocrites, the Judaism available didn't satisfy me intellectually or emotionally. My ethical sense was awakened more by things I saw on TV about the Civil Rights movement than by anything Jewish. The suburb I lived in was completely segregated and most of the Jews I knew didn't seem to feel that was any more of a problem than the Gentiles did. I responded by losing interest in religion.

My parents were neither spiritually inclined nor culturally Jewish, though they had my brothers bar mitzvahed. Like many suburban Midwestern Jews, they were extremely assimilated. As far as I could see, the main thing that made us Jewish was giving money to Israel. My parents had little interest in Jewish history, even their own; only after he died, did I learn my father had been with the Fifth Army division that opened up one of the concentration camps. My mother doesn't even know which one; he never talked about it. To me this seems a terrible denial and suppression of the past; to him, the episode was something unpleasant that he wanted to forget.

I went to Brandeis partly to explore my Jewishness, to know what our history meant, but also to free myself from having my group identity obscure my personal one. I wondered what Jews would be like in a place where they were the majority and didn't have to be scared; I hoped that would mean I was seen not as a Jew, but as a person.

As it turned out, I was seen mainly as a girl.
organizational life (at study weekends organized by the National Federation of Temple Youth) merely sharpened this contradiction for me. The studying was fine, even inspiring; but the spiritual and intellectual boys I hoped to meet turned out to be real grüber jungen in the dark, even worse than Brandeis bohemians.

In fact, there was little in the way I grew up that made me feel anything positive about being Jewish. It was only after I became a radical, started studying women's history, then left-wing and Jewish history, — getting in touch with a past that was completely foreign to my upbringings, — that I got interested in being Jewish again. One of the things I want to do is make that suppressed past available to other Middle American kids.

All of which is background to the ideas about Jewish identity that follow.

1) You don't get to choose whether or not to be Jewish, and you can't be Jewish alone; to be Jewish is to be part of a community. When I was a child in rebellion against my family, I used to say "You can pick your friends but not your relations; we are not the same kind of people, merely connected by an accident of birth." That's true of Jews, but it's not a small thing. Learning how to live with our families, with their baroque histories of war and betrayal, pain and cover-up; with their tragic and fundamental differences of ideas, incomes, destinies; with the impossibility of reaching agreement on anything important or even behaving civilly to each other for more than an hour or two — living with this is part of being Jewish. Seeing our families as different from us, yet interwoven with our most private and historically-constituted selves, is central to being part of a people.

2) A Jewish community that is homogenized and without internal struggle, that suppresses dissent and defines itself by formalized religious observance, social life, and public charity, will lose its children. That was the kind of community I grew up in; kids like me left. In the last few years a lot of people have begun to challenge the "necessity" of Jewish political consensus. One of the healthiest things in our tradition is its emphasis on argument and letting it all hang out; leaders who tell us our disputes will provoke anti-Semitism or be a shandeh to the goyim are bad leaders. In every period of lively Jewish ferment, there have been huge battles between frummers and atheists, socialists and Zionists, communists and anarchists, women and men, parents and children. The Commentary pods and their loathsome politics are Jewish and so am I; I have a responsibility to out-argue them, if only because in the eyes of the world we are both Jewish.

3) Jews are people to whom questions are posed by God and history, a people who ask questions and try to answer them. Even our characteristic cadence is a question. Some of the questions are: What does it mean to be the chosen people? What does the Holocaust mean? What does it mean that women are unequal to men in Jewish tradition? I can only say what my answers are.

For me, to be chosen means to be emblematic of humanity. All the contradictions within humanity, of class, race, gender, and belief, are contained within the Jewish people. The fact that we somehow became history's scapegoat of choice meant we scattered all over the world and got to be part of everything else while still being separate. If we can live together, if we can tolerate each other and see our common Jewishness and common humanity, so can the others. If we can see that women and men are equally people, so can the others. If we can stop being racist, so can the others. We have been chosen the way an illustration is chosen, not the way a king is chosen.

What the Holocaust means is the same thing. What it means is that it happened. German and Eastern European Jews were nearly annihilated, against the most fundamental moral principles of humanity, by people who deliberately and openly set out to exterminate them. Nobody did a hell of a lot to stop it, including us. That it happened means it was possible and it could happen again, that humanity is capable of it, that, as a species, we can totally destroy ourselves with the inhuman perfection of a death machine, and without much opposition. In other words, it is a warning.

And the inequality of women in Jewish tradition — that tiresome list of ways we are impure and things we are not eligible to do — what does that mean? Maybe it means Jewish women are chosen to fight it. It's a tough nut to crack; there have been some victories, as in the ordination of women, but the struggle has been sharp for many generations now. As is inevitable with a tradition that values women only as objects of marriage, where gay or unmarried women barely have the right to exist, where a shul is supposed to sell its Torah, if necessary, to give a poor girl a dowry, but only a small minority of these girls are ever taught to read it. Is it any wonder that there are more feminists

CONTINUED NEXT PAGE
who are Jewish than Jewish-feminists? A lot of us have cut out. A people that doesn't make room for the humanity of women will lose its women, one way or another; it will certainly lose their intellectual contributions, their creativity (and not only in childbirth); we hear many institutional complaints about the number of intermarriages, the dearth of volunteers, the hordes of childless Jewish women, not to mention the number who have simply walked out the door. A situation that isn't good for women isn't good for the Jewish people.

...keeping a low profile was a survival skill, or so I was taught; you should be Jewish, but not too Jewish, you shouldn't be loud or assertive, though it was okay to be smart, even too smart — as long as you were a boy.

The alternative is to develop a tradition that will not only see both sexes as important but will also be based on a genderless idea of "human." For the "separate sphere" we've heard so much about, where the precious mothering qualities of Jewish women (symbolized by the mikveh) have held sway, is a joke in terms of power. Take war, for instance: the division of labor on most occasions has been that men decided to fight and women took care of the orphans. A nuclear war won't have orphans; a new job description is needed. There are times when it may be to the advantage of women to have a separate sphere. Women should be the ones who define those times and I doubt they will pick the shul or the Knesset or the disbursement office of the Federation.

If we can clean up the differences in power in these places, and some women still want to go to the mikveh,

I wouldn't stand in their way. That's why I'm not interested in defining myself as a "secular Jew," or as a "religious Jew." I think there are more meaningful differences within Judaism, and I am most profoundly interested in differences in power.

And the inequality of women in Jewish tradition... what does that mean? Maybe it means Jewish women are chosen to fight it.

The first target of the arrogance and elitism taught to Jewish male children is neither the poor nor the goyim; it is the Jewish female. Women are not welcomed as equals in the Jewish community. We have to struggle to get inside, let alone transform it; but we are part of it, whether we like it or not. I think Judaism will have to change, especially in America, if its history is to have meaning. Yet how can this happen unless its humane and democratic impulses are strengthened by new forces, by those who have been excluded, denigrated, called impure? The struggle to transform Judaism and the struggle for women's liberation within it are the same. The meaning of the inequality of women in the Jewish tradition lies in the struggle to end it.

Meredith Tax is a veteran of the women's and left movements since the late '60s. She is a writer living in New York with her husband and 9 year old daughter. Her published works include Rivington Street, Rising of The Women, and Families (a picture book).
Jewish identity. You inherit it from your mother... like a disease, and I use the word carefully. Being Jewish has meant that I knew only dis-ease. A Jew was not supposed to know what happiness meant. That was for the beasts, the Goyim, and the Grubbe Yungen, those who went around town acquiring clap.

A Jew was not supposed to know what happiness meant. That was for the beasts, the Goyim and the Grubbe Yungen, those who went around town acquiring clap.

My mother used to sing a song that explained it all. In the minor key. The Jew, it seems, had a trace in his blood, an original sin handed down, not so much from "Chave" as from the "Zede Lot." And for the sin of Lot, the poor Jew had to pay through the kishkis. But he took it because God knows what He does; He never punishes anyone... God in His wisdom and provenance is always right. That was the refrain of my father's song... my father would join in on the refrain... while my brothers would howl as I would join in, too, both on the howling and the singing: "For God's sake cut that song out." "But it's religious", my mother would say... "So's the Pope," my older brother would cry... and immediately bring down on him the wrath of my father, who didn't want any of my brother's "untankful" (sic) remarks to infect the household.

My mother would also sing Eli, Eli... better than any cantor I ever heard... The line about fire and flame would send chills down my ulna. Every song had a message of the Jew as chosen for woe. No matter what he did, there was going to be tskuris. Even coming to America... It meant that you were breaking your mother's heart or leaving a sweetheart. I guess there were happy songs, but mostly they were sarcastic... Being happy meant you were telling some one off or exposing him for being a charlatan... What about the love songs? What about them? A girl was being betrayed, about to throw herself into the "Yam" (the sea), a boy was being driven to sleepless nights and days full of endless starvation (and think what that was doing to his mother). My favorite love song was a complaint about marriage (there were several). A newly-wed tells the wise old "yachne", who has come to find out why the girl is "vaining and klugging"... that the reason for her grief is very simple... she is stuck with "a shtick Luchs" for a man... My mother would always aim that song at my father, who would advise her to keep her lousy shirt on.

Of course, if you were my husband, being a Jew meant torture. First it was administered by your mother, who made you swallow hot chicken fat to loosen up the phlegm, or cascara to help you loosen up the stool, or mineral oil because it couldn't hurt. These practices were later put to use by Mussolini, who knew the "good of them". Being Jewish meant torture from other sources, the boys from Hopkinson Avenue, who came after you with sticks into which nails had been hammered... Later they joined the S.S.

What about the joy of cooking? What about the joy of eating? My husband used to vomit from anxiety, and his mother could cook. I used to vomit from my mother's cooking: imagine, if you can, lumps in chocolate pudding. That's how my mother cooked. And when she had to go to the "shops" to help support the family, my father threw a chicken into a pot, feathers and all. He remembered to put in some water, but not much. The odor of my father's chicken soup still assails me. I grew up eating treif on the sly... a girl yet. My mother understood, and although she didn't approve, she forgave me. As long as I didn't marry a gentile. Very much like the young man who keeps a kurve on Yom Kippur, and explains to his apoplectic father... that... It's O.K.... It isn't as if he's eating... Always a smart answer... So why don't I convert? Who wants to be happy! Who knows how!

Florence Lewis, who teaches at Lowell High School in San Francisco, is co-author (with Bernie Gadd) of Who Wants To Be Lillian Plotnick's Mother. Her passion for George Orwell antedated the fashion of our current year. She is the only American to win the prestigious Prix De Chabad for her recipe for making conch kosher with great quantities of salt.
More than any other story, Passover deals with the core identity of the Jews as a people. Even those Jewish communities that reject the Talmud and those individuals unconcerned with God look to Passover with a profound sense of belonging and continuity.

And more than any other Jewish writing, the Hagadah breaks with the tradition against illustrations. Perhaps this is because Passover’s essential elements are those of liberation and national identity rather than religion. Perhaps it is because the importance of the story has been so central to our identity that it was considered of utmost importance to pass it on even to the illiterate, especially young children. At times the tension over the issue produced bizarre results, such as Hagadahs whose figures had the heads of animals. (See pages 8 and 32.)

All of the illustrations in this issue of SHMATE are from Hagadahs. They span four continents, seven centuries, and six languages, English, Hebrew, Spanish, Arabic, Marathi, and Judeo-Italian.
Several years ago, I heard a lecture by Michael Medved at a local Orthodox synagogue. Michael had recently had a good deal of success with a book of interviews with his old high school classmates—a collaboration with David Wallechinsky titled *Whatever Happened to the Class of ’65?* The book had been purchased for television for a hefty sum and was running as a series of seamy episodes, for which Michael apologized to his audience. Its author, a recent “convert” to Orthodoxy, was now stamped with the seal of best-sellerdom and was touted as an eloquent spokesman for Judaism.

I listened with skepticism as he expounded on his strong conviction that religious beliefs coupled with temple affiliation were inseparable from Jewish identity. When I challenged him, I was described by the speaker as nothing more than a follower of the “ethical culture movement.”

I cite this simplistic and uninformed judgment only because, all too often, non-believing, agnostic, or atheist Jews are made to feel that their Jewishness, indeed their very loyalty and identification with the Jewish people, are highly questionable. Frequently this is done by the zealous and dogmatic “new-born” Orthodox, whose number seems to be growing at an alarming rate, for in their estimation, they alone hold the absolute answers to the ultimate preservation of Judaic values. This attitude often does irreparable harm, alienating large numbers of interesting and caring Jews from the Jewish community.

Michael Medved notwithstanding, I was born into a prominent Jewish family in Poland and was an already conscious and identified Jewish child in the 1930s.

Like other Jewish households, ours mirrored the political ferment that had jolted Jewish society from its intellectual isolation in the ghettos. No sooner had Jews emerged from the strictures of a religious past to face the modern dilemmas of the 20th century than they plunged into the avant-garde of all its great socio-political movements. Our family represented no less than three. Socialism was personified by my father, a labor and criminal lawyer, a prominent figure in the Polish Socialist Party. Zionism was the credo of my uncle Benzon, communism that of my uncle Judah.

In contrast, my great-grandfather, Judah Katz had been a rabbi of considerable renown, whose family had lived in Poland since the 15th century, and had at least a partly Sephardic origin. His son Sholom, my grandfather was also an Orthodox Jew.

On Saturdays my mother and I always went to my grandfather’s for the midday meal, which was cooked the day before and kept warm in strict observance of the Sabbath. I came to these dinners late, straight from school, where a six-day week prevailed. Emulating my father, I was a militant atheist even at that early age, and week in, week out, carrying my school-books, I desecrated my grandfather’s Sabbath. In all those years of Saturdays, he never indicated by word or gesture that my disrespect for his beliefs caused him pain. Nor was there ever a word of reproach to his son-in-law, my father, or to his son Judah for their renunciation of religious tradition or their political affiliations. My grandfather’s tolerance was especially remarkable because his view of the world was that the synagogue and the Law were the essence of life. Seen from that perspective I can appreciate all the more the generosity of his silence.

... all too often, non-believing, agnostic, or atheist Jews are made to feel that their Jewishness, indeed their very loyalty and identification with the Jewish people, are highly questionable.

It was my father, more than anyone, who lent meaning and content to my childhood. A socialist and an atheist, he remained tied to Poland and its political fortunes and misfortunes from his early youth. A leading figure in both the Polish Socialist Party and the Jewish Bund—a Jewish Socialist party that addressed itself primarily to the needs of the Jewish proletariat—he was a leader, an intellectual with a daring mind, always bursting with new concepts and ideas. Above his desk hung a portrait of Karl Marx and on his desk stood a photograph of Vladimir Medem, a leader of the Jewish Bund—his two loyalties. Along with tomes of Marx and Engels, he read all the contemporary Yiddish writers, subscribed to the Yiddish press, spoke an impeccable, literary Yiddish, and identified fully with the needs of the Jewish working class.

The Poland in which we lived was riddled with anti-Semitism, and my father suffered because of his secular Jewish commitment and his socialist ideology. On occasion he spent short sojourns as a political prisoner in a Polish jail and once, a whole week in Poland’s only concentration camp.

Marshal Pilsudski’s one-party government tolerated the existence of a large Jewish minority (3.5 million in a population of nearly 35 million), provided they were
“good” Jews, loyal to the Marshal. But my father was
an implacable opponent. After the Marshal’s death in
1935, the ruling colonels openly sanctioned anti-
Semitic outrages by the Nationalist party. In 1936,
Prime Minister Skladkowski officially approved all
the excesses with this statement: “My government con-
siders that no one in Poland should be injured. An hon-
est host does not allow anyone to be harmed in his
house. But an economic fight, why not?” Six hundred
years after King Casimir the Great had guaranteed
Jewish settlement in Poland, we Jews were not only
second-class citizens but “guests” in our country.

I was taught by my father’s example
that one had to justify one’s existence by making a con-
tribution, a difference in the world.

Because they believed there was no future for Jews
in Poland, Zionists such as my uncle Benzion thought
that Jewish energies had to be applied exclusively to
the cause of a Jewish homeland. The Socialists,
including the Jewish Bund, categorically rejected the
Zionist solution. Since the colonels were eager to rid
Poland of Jews the Socialists went so far as to hurl
charges of “collaboration” at the Zionists. My father
and my uncle Judah, for whom the Polish govern-
ment was the ultimate foe, thought that Zionism, with its
counsel of eventual departure, would play directly into
the enemy’s hands. They supported the socialist credo
that Jews must stay in Poland and fight for a better life
for all and that, along with Poland’s other economic
and social problems, injustice against Jews would be
eliminated only through the victory of socialism.

Of the three ideologies represented by my family I
was most attracted to my father’s. I was not a guest in
my country, despite the prime minister’s pronounce-
ment. My roots were deep, going back many centuries,
and my identification with Poland’s culture and his-
tory were just as great as any Pole’s—a sentiment with
which many American Jews can identify.

I do recall the first moment in my life that I felt an
outcast who could never quite belong in the Poland
that was my home. When I was about five my parents
took me to a famous spa. In the hotel where we stayed
there were no other children. Finally a little boy my
age arrived, accompanied by his parents. I was over-
joyed. We were inseparable for a couple of days until he
asked me: “Are you Jewish? Because if you are, my
parents said I cannot play with you.” And I replied
indignantly: “No, I’m not!” Immediately overcome by
the force of that lie, I nonetheless refused to have any-
thing more to do with him.

There were many difficult moments in my life after-
ward. I clearly recall wishing that I were a French, an
English, or an American Jew, though never again did I
consider being anything but a Jew. When I was still in
grade school, I had many gentle friends. The priest
singed them out for their Jewish associations during a
catechism class, and our relationship ceased entirely.

My family’s political involvement led to a special
awareness of the ominous rise of the Nazi monster
across our Western frontier and to my early hatred of
its ideology of brutality and murder. In the summer of
1939, my father took me on a promised vacation to the
United States to see the New York World’s Fair.
World War II broke out three days before we were
scheduled to sail back. My father connected with the
Jewish Bund in New York and became active among
Polish emigres and Polish-Americans to whom he was
doubly anathema, as a Socialist and a Jew. Eventually
I went to Columbia University on a scholarship.

For Polish Jews, 1939 was the beginning of a
horrible nightmare that ended in almost total
annihilation. Herded into ghettos and ultimately into
cattle cars, they fulfilled Hitler’s projection of a final
solution. We, in exile, were the lucky ones—we
became the relics of a dying people.

There was one uplifting moment, at least for me, in
those awful years—the Revolt of the Warsaw Ghetto,
the brief triumph of courage over bestiality. While the
Polish government-in-exile failed to give the signal for
the Home Army to intervene, Szmul Zygielbojm, a
Bundist leader in London and a dear friend of my
father’s, committed suicide to alert the world to the
imminent destruction of Polish Jewry. But his suicide
was in vain; the world chose to ignore his warning.

I feel that the best aspects of my
Jewish upbringing have taught me to
seek the two essentials that must be
every serious writer’s goal—truth and
compassion.

My father died suddenly and tragically in 1945, and
it was not until a number of years later that I went
back to Poland, to see “socialism at work.” I came back
convinced that my father’s dream of justice, equality,
decency and the elimination of anti-Semitism under a
leftist regime had been a mere illusion.

In 1953, I rediscovered my Zionist uncle Benzion
who had been smuggled into Palestine from Poland in
1939. He had become a noted Hebrew scholar and poet,
the translator of Omar Khayyam and Aeschylus into
Hebrew, and the head of the Jewish Agency’s Youth
and Hehalutz Department. In a few short years he
would be the first rector of Tel Aviv University. The
impact of his strong Israeli identity was enormous,
resulting in my developing an abiding interest in the
history and traditions of my people and an iden-
tification with Israel. This last has been sorely tested in

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recent years by Israel’s poor record with respect to the rescue of the Falashas, by its abandonment of its early Zionist ideals, by a growing militarism that goes far beyond the needs of self-defense, and, most of all, by the emergence of such personalities as Ariel Sharon. My expectations of my fellow Jews in Israel and in the Diaspora are extremely high. Too often I find them wanting. I feel a collective responsibility for the misdeeds of Jews anywhere. To me, being a Jew is equated with living a moral life of social responsibility and dedication to the highest ideals.

Rooted in the Jewish tradition is the idea of free will.

I never considered any other career than writing, even when I was a child. I was taught by my father’s example that one had to justify one’s existence by making a contribution, a difference in the world. Surrounded by social injustice and blatant discrimination against the ancient Jewish community in Poland, I became hypersensitive to all inequities.

My childhood indignation and compassion for the oppressed translated itself into a desire to change the world for the better through the use of my pen. This was also coupled with a need for immortality, for everyone wants to leave footsteps in the sands of time.

A very old Mordecai Kaplan told a friend of mine in Jerusalem in 1975: “Write and you will be remembered.”

Since my Jewish identity can be categorized as that of the historically conscious Jew who identifies with the history and fate of the Jewish people, I am always attracted to historical Jewish themes. I have, in fact, set myself the task of illuminating certain facets of Jewish secular history (the Bible has been covered sufficiently by others), whether they be the Bar Kochba Rebellion, the Warsaw Ghetto Revolt, the failure of Socialist Jewish Leadership in Communist Poland, or the odyssey of the Western Jewish pioneer.

A writer conveys who he or she is, and I believe that the best aspects of my Jewish upbringing have taught me to seek the two essentials that must be every serious writer’s goal — truth and compassion.

Rooted in the Jewish tradition is the idea of free will — mankind may alter its fate, or at least grapple with it. I was reared in the ideals of secular modern Jewish thinking and I reject the old Diaspora tradition of accommodation and martyrdom for God. Instead I am always attracted to ways to combat Jewish powerlessness and themes that express it. As Mordecai Anielewicz told Emanuel Ringelblum in the Warsaw Ghetto: “The idea was to choose how to die, either like sheep for slaughter or like people of honor.” A throwback to the Maccabees, to Masada, and to Bar Kochba.

Martin Buber has said: “Every moment must have in it a drop of Messianic passion.” My own Jewish pas-
What makes me Jewish? Could I not be Jewish? Why am I a Jew? What is it to be a Jew? Who is a Jew? There is something very Jewish in saying that there are several sets of answers to all these questions.

What makes me Jewish is a grandfather who himself converted first to Catholicism and then to Christian Science, but who was one of thirteen children, the rest of whom (so far as I know) remained Jewish and scattered my mostly Jewish cousins all over the United States and the British Commonwealth.

What makes me Jewish is a brief ceremony performed in a Reform rabbi's office in Boston nearly twenty years ago, which the Israeli government doesn't recognize.

What makes me Jewish is being married to a Jew who was committed enough to his Jewishness to make me want to find out what he saw in it.

What makes me Jewish is nineteen or so years of study, davening, teaching, singing and writing music, praying as a Jew, trying to structure my life by mitzvahs I can live with.

What makes me Jewish is my first unsolicited encounter with an anti-Semite during an anti-war demonstration (“All you Jews,” he said, “you wouldn't be demonstrating against this war if we were fighting it for Israel.” I didn't have the heart to tell him I'd been demonstrating against an Israeli war the previous week. Nor did I ever figure out how he knew I was Jewish. Probably he just took it for granted.)

What makes me Jewish is an hour and a half in a paddy wagon with a genuinely psychotic Nazi, from the likes of whom I had ostensibly been arrested to protect me, and four hours in the city lockup. I didn't know that it made me feel any more Jewish, but I think a number of my chavroth accepted me more comfortably afterward.

Which is to say that Jewishness is, to some extent, in the eye of the beholder. My brief sojourn as a guest of the Chicago Police Department has not made me any more Jewish in the eyes of the Orthodox rabbinate or the Israeli government. My late grandfather, on the other hand, had already made me Jewish enough for Adolph Hitler back when I was still a WASP of sorts.

I can say easily enough that my inner workings are so thoroughly and reflexively Jewish by now that I could never cease to be a Jew, except as a side effect of total amnesia, and I think that's psychologically accurate. But being a Jew also means understanding that it is next to impossible to be a Jew in isolation, in the absence of a Jewish community. So the way other people see my Jewishness isn't totally irrelevant, however much I sometimes wish it were.

What makes me Jewish is being married to a Jew (so far as I know), nor do Reform groups. Conservatives and Reconstructionists don't seem to have any problems, but that may be because I've never raised any official question for them. Some of my Orthodox friends don't understand why I don't go through with a full halakhic conversion, but it's not a major topic of disagreement. (Why don't I? Mainly because by the time I had thought about the matter enough to understand the issues, the Israeli government had taken such an obnoxious position on the subject that I was, and am, unwilling to give them the satisfaction. I don't think a bunch of politicians — half of whom are card-carrying secularists — have any business using my relationship with the Jewish people as a counter in the political game-playing necessary to build a parliamentary coalition. But if I were to become pregnant, I would undergo a halakhic conversion rather than make my children pay the price of my principles.)

...being a Jew means understanding that it is next to impossible to be a Jew in isolation....

Actually, the people who have had the most trouble with my Jewishness are secularists. It took me a while to figure that out, after several years of doing political work with Jewish socialists who mostly define themselves as secularist. Many secularists see their Jewish identity as deriving mainly from family background, including, but not limited to, “Red diaper babies.” Others see it as centered in culture and the kitchen. And some see it as being Jewish only because the Holocaust has made it inexorably clear that the goyim cannot be trusted to let us be goyim. It may mean a kind of "wooden leg" approach — seeing Jewishness as a handicap that can be lived with gallantly, comfortably, even joyfully, but which no sane person would voluntarily take on, except for some possibly sinister ulterior motive.

For a long time, I was totally turned off by that approach to Jewishness. I once gave a talk to a youth group titled “Are Bagels and Lox Worth Dying For?” It took an odd encounter with a friend to bring home to me the different ways people can choose to go about defining themselves. My friend has a taste for drag, which he rarely indulges. At a Purim costume party, he got into full regalia. Afterward, as I was driving...
NEUDEL: continued

him home, he asked me why I felt so uncomfortable with his outfit. I hadn't realized my awkwardness showed so clearly, but figuring I owed him an explanation if it did, I thought about it for a while. Finally I said, "I just can't understand why anybody would wear a get-up like that who wasn't required to. I avoid it every chance I get. Those are the clothes I wear doing the things people do, I wear jeans." And I realized, as I said it, that I viewed being a woman as a "wooden leg." I had done a pretty good job of living with it, but the idea that anybody would take it on voluntarily—or even just assume some of the trappings in play—was beyond my comprehension.

I don't know of any practicable solution to the problem that there is no way for a secularist to convert to Judaism.

So, in answer to your original questions, a Jew can be someone who feels tremendously at home with the tradition and the people, and tremendously lucky to have found them. And a Jew can also be someone who has been born into an identity and has mostly managed to live well with it (like Tevye telling G-d "So maybe You could choose somebody else next time?"). That's a distinction that is, I think, broader than the difference between those who are born Jewish and those who choose to become Jews. There are many "born Jews" who choose their mode of Jewish living in adulthood and feel profoundly at home with it. And there are even a few people who convert to Judaism for the wrong reasons and end up seeing it as something that has been wished on them, to which they adjust with varying degrees of success.

On a practical level, I guess I am asking all Jews to ask themselves the questions we are asking here, and not to reject other Jews whose answers, for whatever reason, may be different. I don't know of any practical solution to the problem that there is no way for a secularist to convert to Judaism, so that anyone who has converted to Judaism has, by that very process, set herself apart from a large segment of the Jewish people by declaring himself religious (if not necessarily Orthodox) rather than "cultural" or "secularist." Maybe what we need is tribal initiation ceremonies, as many Native American peoples have. (How about four hours in the lockup for demonstrating against the Nazis?)

We certainly need to encourage the Israeli government to rewrite the definition of Jewishness in the Law of Return, bearing in mind that its first purpose is not to build parliamentary coalitions or mollify a particular sect of Orthodoxy, but to provide for the saving of lives of people who might otherwise be made stateless in another Holocaust. The Law of Return should either say simply "For these purposes, anyone who is being exposed to privation or persecution as a Jew is a Jew, period," or should track the Nuremberg Laws at their most stringent—"Anyone who is Jewish enough to have been exposed to privation or persecution by Hitler's standards is a Jew." (The Nuremberg Laws, by the way, provided that a non-Jew who converted to Judaism and either married a Jew or was involved in Jewish organizations was to be treated as a Jew in all particulars.) There are ways in which all of us have chosen our Jewishness, and other ways in which it has been wished on all of us. I believe the Jewish people—and individual Jews—can comprehend and be enriched by both, if we are willing to accept them.

Marian Neudel went to school a lot, including a convent boarding school in Miami full of Latin American dictators' daughters and almost five years of divinity school doing Islamic studies. After subsequent careers teaching college English and "smashing the militarist machine" under the auspices of several organizations, she became a lawyer. Having recently given up working for others, she is now trying to make a solo practice remunerative without having ads painted on the ceilings of ambulances. She is a part-time cantor, former member of Chutzpah, and a member of Am Chai, the Upstairs Minyan, New Jewish Agenda, and Bitachon (an organization dealing with domestic violence in Jewish families), as well as a soldier in the war against frostbite in Chicago.
JOEL ENSANA

My father was Catholic, my mother Jewish. After eloping, my father converted, but neither of my parents practiced the religion. During the Depression, we lived with my mother's family where, as a child, I was able to observe the traditions and rituals of Judaism. Both my grandfathers wanted me to share their beliefs, but my parents felt it would be best if I made the decision when I was older. At school most of my friends were Jewish and we shared the usual name-calling and the after-school beatings. The prejudices against Jews we felt in the small town of New Brunswick, N.J., somehow drew us closer, especially since Hitler had begun his "final solution."

Later, while in the Air Force and stationed in Tokyo, I attended services at the Jewish Community Center. It was there that I decided to be what, according to the Jewish laws, I was already — a Jew. I was especially impressed by the fact that belief in Judaism had given the Jewish people the courage to survive; it had provided something they could always depend on and turn to in moments of trouble. Now in my middle age, beginning to lose close friends and family, acquiring aches and pains (as we all do), and anxious about time, I find my Jewishness a great comfort.

I have also been impressed, as a playwright, by the fact that such a minority, despite economic hardships, pogroms and the Holocaust, had contributed so much to the arts and sciences — to the things that increase the quality of one's life and lift one above the ignorance of prejudice and envy. I feel I made the right decision, and I'm grateful to my parents for allowing the decision to be mine.

Joel Ensana is a multi-talented writer from San Francisco whose plays and short stories have appeared on stage, radio, television, and in anthologies. Among other awards he has won the Norman Corwin, a Schubert Fellowship, and the National Broadcast Media Award For Best Entertainment on Non-Commercial Television.

JOHN GERASSI

I feel Jewish only when I hear an anti-Semitic remark or, when in Germany, Poland, or another country which has been viciously anti-Semitic in the past, I look at and am looked over by someone 57 or older.

I feel Jewish, as well as black, brown, red, and yellow, whenever I hear Reagan speak, because I know he is one of the world's most bigoted, jingoistic, chauvinistic, individuals, like a nativist of the worst kind.

But when Israel lets 3000 Palestinians be massacred by U.S.-supported Lebanese fascists, I feel Palestinian. And I will continue to feel "other" as long as U.S.-supported Somocista torturers and Honduran gorillas, and as long as it finances the raping, murderous death squads in El Salvador (trained under the U.S.-A.I.D. "Public Safety Program"), while pretending to condemn them. So many people are being murdered, tortured, and exploited all over the world today by the will and greed of the U.S. ruling cliques, that other countries' discrimination against Jews, as real and outrageous as it is, has become secondary to my loss of identity as a proud American. Like anti-Nazi Germans who opposed Hitler for all his vile behavior, I am ashamed of being identified with the world's new bully—the U.S., led by a president I honestly consider a fascist.

John Gerassi, author of The Great Fear in Latin America, The Boys of Boise, The American Way of Crime, and other books on exploitation, is a Professor of Political Science at Queens College in New York. A Korean War vet, he was very active in opposition to the Viet Nam War. As a result he was fired from San Francisco State University, jailed, and blacklisted. Subsequently he taught in France where he worked with Jean-Paul Sartre, whose biography he is now writing.
DEBORAH KAUFMAN

Organized religion, Israel, reaction to anti-Semitism: for me these three major touchstones of the Jewish people are negative images. But though I have been lucky in developing a Jewish identity derived from the positive associations of family, politics and culture, I have had to, nonetheless, redefine all of these issues.

Identifying as a Jew has, of necessity, been an intensely political matter for me. It has meant personal empowerment, an engagement with history, participation in current affairs, and a constant wrestling with principles. In some ways it is strange that I turned out this way, since I came from a Zionist, yet non-political, family. But in other ways, it is not so strange: I grew up in the '60s, a time when we felt that by making personal choices and by taking principled stands we could change the world. My heroes since childhood have always been people who made choices and took action in a world in which they made a difference — first the early Zionist settlers and pioneers (now no longer my heroes), then turn-of-the-century radicals and labor leaders such as Emma Goldman. These people had epitomized for me what it meant to be a Jew.

Today I don't have heroes, it's getting harder to make choices, and I feel less empowered. It's an increasingly painful struggle to define what it means to be a Jew, though my professional life superficially seems to indicate a happy, well-integrated Jewish identity.

I am locked into a passionate personal identification with Israel, but I've had to redefine my relationship with our supposed homeland.

I have potent memories of being in Israel as a child — of my uncle meeting us at Lod with a bag of oranges so sweet they made my parents cry, of my Polish uncle getting out of our car in order to walk up into Jerusalem, of riding in the back of an open jeep with my sisters and cousins with the wind and sun in my face.

Though my memories are uniformly happy, Israel today has grown into a sick relative for whom I feel more sadness than joy. I constantly dream of Jerusalem, of climbing ancient stone steps in search of something, or of running away from some war that's beyond my control. Today machine guns and mad Orthodox men remind me as much of Israel as orange blossoms and strong, socialist kibbutzniks. Today, I don't believe that the Jewish State is the answer to the "Jewish Question." As an adult, I see that there's something more special about the Diaspora than I'd been taught all those years. Living here is not second-best to living in Israel. As Diaspora Jews, we can maintain intimate connections with Israel, yet have a special, primary responsibility in being Jews where we are.

Similarly, I've had to struggle to redefine the meaning of the Holocaust. By its scope and relative closeness in time, the Holocaust has overshadowed almost every other historical experience. Growing up it was difficult, if not impossible, to relate to what I understood as an outburst of evil focused primarily on the Jews, to comprehend the numbers involved, to relate to any of it, when the only images I had were of the Jew as Victim/Martyr.

It seems as if a cover-up took place by people who wanted to make us identify with one of the most anti-Semitic and twisted images I can think of: the Jew as Victim/Martyr.

Thirty-five years after the war I know more of Jewish resistance and of individual heroism, of the organized underground, of those who wrote anti-fascist poetry and of those who planted bombs. Little by little, survivors are talking, slowly uncovering stories related to the war. But until now, it seemed that this was a secret. It seemed as if a cover-up took place by people who wanted to make us identify with one of the most anti-Semitic and twisted images I can think of: the Jew as Victim/Martyr. Anti-Semitic because it implies powerlessness and a lack of responsibility, which ultimately makes us feel deep shame and humiliation. Twisted because it implies moral righteousness and saintliness, which ultimately makes us feel bigoted and chauvinistic pride. Today, slowly learning the real truth about the war, I am overwhelmed by feelings of connection to the dead, whose complex, powerful and unsaintly stories, will never be told.

I've had the same rediscovery with regards to Eastern European history. I grew up in an atmosphere that looked down on Polish and Russian accents, that idealized the shtetl to the point where images from "Fiddler on the Roof" were all there was, an atmosphere that rewrote history so that when I heard "Bund" (albeit mispronounced!), I thought of a cake, not of an immensely important social and political movement. Bit by bit I'm undoing three decades of misinformation to allow myself the right to identify with my history, the right to feel a continuity over time, not poisoned by someone else's negative and reactionary version of the Jewish experience.

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KAUFMAN: continued

I grew up in a situation where family and Jewish holidays were almost synonymous. My happiest childhood memories are of lighting Chanukah candles, staying up late huddled with my sisters on the couch, watching the candles burn, of helping my mother put egg yolk and poppy seeds on the challah dough before it went into the oven on Fridays, of big, Passover seders, remembered warmly as long evenings of drinking, singing and dancing, which my father presided over.

As an adult I see that there's something more special about the Diaspora than I'd been taught all those years.

with his magic purple yarmulke. But after my family split up, I went through a long period from which I'm only now recovering, where the image of “family” and “holiday” evoked intense feelings of anxiety. But we go through cycles, and now that I want to have children, my ambivalence about these issues is melting away.

As I think about nuclear war, about death, and as I struggle against a notion of finality, ritual — once utterly unimportant to me — has become more important. A few years ago I edited a Hagaddah for a Pesach shared with close friends. The result was “Hagaddah 80,” a punk, tribal, poetic, somewhat controversial and very passionate participatory reading that, for me, transformed the relationship between history, both ancient and recent, and our own time. It wasn’t just Exodus and the story of freedom; it was the ritual that we created that made for a landmark experience.

Later when Glenn and I were married, we took as much control over the process as we could without totally butchering tradition. I designed the chuppah, painting private and universal symbols on the canopy and hanging loads of personal totems around the edge of the frame. Glenn constructed a wall of ancestors, ghosts, family, and friends — pictures and photos of people, dead and alive, who had touched our lives, including the haunting presences of our East European great-grandparents and our grandparents as they were photographed for immigration at Ellis Island. It was a wall of faces that capulized Jewish history — traditional and assimilated, new immigrants and third-generation, Americans and Israelis, the happy, the miserable, assorted “successes” as well as artists and misfits. The creating process was emotional and otherworldly. By creating our own rituals, we became part of a primal process — and this physical process linking our history, our families, and our personal life-cycles within a Jewish framework was one of the most profound experiences I’ve had.

That I never received the slightest understanding of Jewish social, intellectual, or artistic expression is the supreme failure of my so-called Jewish education, which consisted of ten years at Sunday school. No poetry, theater, music, or Yiddish language. I never once heard of Singer or Peretz in Sunday school. Not a mention of our Golden Age in Spain. No Alterman or Bialik. And nothing that would indicate that Jewish culture is alive today in the filmmakers, painters, and writers who are grappling with Jewish self-expression through the arts.

As an adult I am taking back what is mine. I am involved professionally with Jewish arts in spite of the ridiculous intransigence of the American Jewish establishment in refusing to see culture or education — our future — as a priority for funding.

Since 1980 I’ve been working on a very exciting and vital contribution to contemporary Jewish culture — the Jewish Film Festival. Not coincidentally I retrieved and built upon much of my Jewish education through such important films as IMAGE BEFORE MY EYES and THE FREE VOICE OF LABOR: THE JEWISH ANARCHISTS. I reinvigorated my political engagement by helping to build a solid forum for free expression and fresh ideas, for dissent and dialogue within the Jewish community. By being an advocate of funding for Jewish film and media, I’ve been able to see this fragile aspect of our culture slowly take root and blossom. What has been most wonderful has been that the festival has been home for Jews like me — young, progressive, turned-off by a Jewish establishment that builds edifices instead of community, that blindly supports irresponsible leadership in Israel while turning its back on Jewish gays, new immigrants, and other minorities here at home. I have been reaffirmed by the tens of thousands of Jews who, like me, are struggling to redefine what it means to be a Jew.

As an adult I have chosen — with this as my background — to identify as a Jew in order to take back what I never completely had, to build on what I believe in, to fully assert myself as a human being. There seem to be few leaders and even fewer heroes among us. Those of us who are going through this rediscovery must find our own way.

Deborah Kaufman is the Director of The Jewish Film Festival. She is an attorney and native San Franciscoan, presently living in Berkeley, where she is happily married to Glenn Hirsch.
At the time of my birth, in 1923, my father’s family almost disowned him for refusing to have me circumcised. My mother told me the story twenty years later, when we were refugees in New York:

How Aunt Vally, my father’s oldest sister, had come to her bedside in the Vienna obstetrics ward a few hours after I was born. She had begged my mother, in tears, not to do this terrible thing which would surely kill my grandfather.

But my parents were adamant; and the family survived. Grandfather Jacob lived for six more years, and I, the youngest, became his favorite grandchild, brith milah or no.

In Vienna during the 1920s, this story was not unusual. The city of 2 million inhabitants—about 10 percent Jews—had a strong Socialist majority. Its large stratum of Jewish intellectuals furnished much of the cultural and political leadership.

**We were, in fact, so many of the things which anti-Semites and Zionists both have accused the Jews of the Galut of being: cosmopolitan, cerebral, detached from “blood and soil” and traditional particularist loyalties.**

My childhood heritage formed a uniquely coherent pattern, woven from a number of disparate strands: there was the fierce prophetic vision of Karl Marx and RosaLuxemburg; Sigmund Freud’s psychological iconoclasm—"Totem and Tabu" had already been written, "The Future of an Illusion" and "Moses and Monotheism" were yet to come—; the passionate literary/artistic scepticism of Heinrich Heine and Karl Kraus; Baruch Spinoza’s gentle philosophical rationalism; and the scientific humanism of Albert Einstein. (Much later I would add the anarchist vision of Emma Goldmann and Gustav Landauer to my personal list.)

In my parents’ defiance of the circumcision ritual, Freud’s influence, more than Marx’s, was probably decisive: the near-castration of the brith, they thought, must be disastrous for the newborn male psyche.

Be that as it may, a whole generation of Central European Socialist-Jewish intellectuals grew up in this kind of late-Jewish-Enlightenment milieu.

We did not, in those pre-Nazi days, think of ourselves as particularly Jewish. In our humanism we were universalist, in our politics, internationalist, in our "enlightenment," anti-traditional. Our Judaism was, we felt, rather incidental. It was the tide of anti-Semitism, triggered by the Depression and culminating in the Nazi horror, that later burnt our Jewishness into our consciousness.

Looking back on it now, I ask myself how we could have missed the obvious and uniquely Jewish character of our subculture. Our culture heroes were almost all Jews. True, they—and we—were Jews who had rebelled against traditional Judaism, but this rebellion was itself characteristically Jewish. We were, in fact, so many of the things which anti-Semites and Zionists both have accused the Jews of the Galuth of being: cosmopolitan, cerebral, detached from “blood and soil” and from traditional particularist loyalties.

I don’t know what would have become of this heritage if the Nazis had not massacred Europe’s Jews. As it is, there are very few survivors—physically, culturally, intellectually. One of the few is Bruno Kreisky, the Socialist Jew who became Austria’s chancellor in the ’70s. His recognition of the common humanity of Jews and Palestinians, his policy of negotiating with the PLO, which has made him anathema to the Jewish establishment—these are the almost inevitable expression of our shared values.

The Jewish Enlightenment culture of my childhood years, with its denial of its own Jewishness, could hardly comprehend—much less stand against—the horrifying Nazi barbarism that engulfed Europe in the ’30s. And today, though the Nazis were defeated, the humanism of a Kreisky, a Buber, or an Einstein, still seems irrelevant and out of place in the era of nuclear rockets and cluster bombs and torture chambers; of Khaddafis, and Khomeinis, and Shamirs.

And yet, if we are to survive this age of Tashmad, if we are to have peace in Israel/Palestine, a Jewish tradition of humanist enlightenment and universality—now conscious of its Jewish roots—has to prevail over the fierce and separatist nationalism that is now in control. Admittedly, the chances don’t look too good. But who knows—there may still be hope. After all, Spinoza, too, was excommunicated in his day . . .

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Paul Zisel was 14 when the Nazis took over his city, Vienna. His teaching of theoretical physics was temporarily interrupted by the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1953. He continued teaching at the Technion in Israel, in Ontario, and Ohio. He co-founded Left Bank Books in Seattle and has served as President of the Seattle Chapter of the Grey Panthers. He has recently become enamored of computers.
A couple of stories to set the scene:
In 1976, when I was significantly younger than I am now, I traveled to Hawaii by myself and pitched my solitary tent on a beautiful white beach. There were eight other young people staying on the beach — four beautiful couples in four tents. They all had been in Hawaii for weeks. Their skin was tanned dark brown all over, and the sun had bleached their hair even blonder. They went around blissfully naked, drinking Primo beer, snorkeling under the translucent turquoise waves, and scavenging for pineapples. At night, I could hear the couple nearest my tent making love in theirs.

They were so nice, so uncomplicated, so healthy. I admired them, and I couldn’t think of a thing to say to them. I felt awkward because I was alone, because I spent a lot of time reading in the shade, because I had black hair on my legs. They included me at their campfires out of courtesy and taught me how to snorkel.

The winter is past,
The rain is over and gone.
The flowers appear on the earth;
The time of singing has come,
And the voice of the turtle is heard in our land;
The fig tree puts forth its green figs,
And the vines in blossom give forth their fragrance.
—The Song of Songs 2: 12-13

Another couple arrived: a woman with long, straight blond hair and a lovely Madonna face, and a New York Jew named Danny. When I walked over to meet them, Danny was telling the other couples about Costa Rica, bragging about a house he was going to buy on the coast there for less than nothing. I was immediately embarrassed. He was a bright, funny man, but I found myself wishing he’d tone himself down a little. He spent most of his time talking about making and spending money, and as soon as he realized that the blond kids looked down on him for his preoccupations, his stories became more exaggerated. He teetered on the line between charming audacity and downright obnoxiousness, and every time he launched into another outrageous tale, I felt that he was subtly taunting everyone for their politely suppressed but evident judgments.

We’re talking about ambivalence here; that’s what we talk about when we talk about Jewish identity. Danny was a considerable relief to me. He made me feel much more at home, and I became more cheerful and expansive. For me, he was the demon spirit of the beach, the balancing dark force that made the scene real to me. But oh, how he embarrassed me! Why did he persist in adding the finishing touches to these kids’ stereotypes? He was egotistical, crude, greedy — everything I had hated as an adolescent about the suburban Jews I grew up with. What if the blond kids started to lump me in with Danny?

I wish I knew whether any of those kids even knew that either of us was Jewish. I’d place a small bet that they didn’t. But no matter.

My second story, if you’re still with me, happened just last month. I work on a newspaper, and one of my fellow editors, a man I don’t know well, came over to my desk holding a wire service photograph of a military chaplain lighting the last of eight candles. The caption said the candles were a memorial to eight Marines killed on a rooftop in Beirut.

“Um, are you Jewish?” the editor asked.

I was real proud of the way I answered him. Very natural, I thought. I didn’t sound embarrassed at all.

He wanted to know whether the candle-lighting ceremony really could have been a memorial, or whether because Hanukkah is a joyful holiday, a memorial would have been entirely out of place.

There ensued the awkward minuet that always begins on these occasions. Both of us were going to great lengths to demonstrate how knowledgeable we were about Judaism (“I’m sophisticated and liberal,” “I’m proud of my heritage”), and both of us were going to opposite but equally great lengths to show the other that we weren’t pretending to know more than we did.
Frankly, his question sounded more appropriate for a learned rabbi: I hadn't the faintest idea whether a Hanukkah memorial was appropriate or not, although I believed that's what it was, if only because the chaplain probably had no notion himself of whether it was appropriate. A week later, the man turned to me in the cafeteria and said, "I hope you weren't offended when I asked you about that picture."

"Why would I have been offended?" I asked, mostly out of curiosity. It went unsatisfied, because by way of answering, he told me that he didn't know very much about Judaism, but thought I might. Then he told me that he thought some ancestors on his father's side might have been Jewish.

"How nice for you," I thought. Some of my best genes are Jewish?

... this "getting into being Jewish" fashion worries me a bit. Not that I don't partake of it; that's why my words are printed here.

What does it mean to be Jewish? You're asking me? I won the award in my high school for "Most Assimilated."

Oh, you know, both of my parents are, and my grandparents, too, and my brother, and I look Jewish, sort of, and I know a few Yiddish words, and sometimes as a kid I went to temple on High Holidays with my cousins, and I worry about myself a lot, and I'm afraid bad things are going to happen to me, and I have a good sense of humor, and I don't take much for granted, and oh you know, I just am.

The time I came the closest I ever came to giving up all pretense to a Jewish identity, it was Meir Kahane's fault. He had me with him all the way until the last chapter of a book called Why Be Jewish? that he wrote six or seven years ago. He was arguing that halfway measures simply would not cut it, and the only logical, decent and moral way to be Jewish was to go whole hog, that is to say, whole brisket. But he had me pretty well convinced for a while that because I had no intention at all of converting to Orthodox Judaism, I might as well give up my shabby, pathetic excuse for Jewishness and at least be an honest person about it.

Kahane's argument went like this: Why do young people intermarry and assimilate? Why are they such lackadaisical Jews? Because they never learned what true Jewishness is, and there is no reason to hang on to the anemic, wishy-washy ghost of a religion that they learned as children. And without religion, what is Jewishness but racism and cultural chauvinism?

Gosh, Meir, you really think so? Sure, he said: if the Bible is mythology, if Judaism is merely a rational desire for justice and progress and community, well, there are plenty of ways to satisfy that desire. Why else move to Berkeley? Why bother with Judaism?

All that ties today's Jews to Judaism, according to Kahane, is the memory of the Holocaust and nostalgia for the old, real Jews of the past. And even those ties are unraveling for the younger generation—it's all too far away and long ago.

"To remain Jews out of mere pride, or fear, or jingoism, or habit, to cultivate a Jewish consciousness while ignoring or disbelieving or glossing over the ideas and doctrines which constitute the Jewish heritage—this appears to be both illogical and unintelligent," he wrote.

I'm a sucker for logic. OK, I thought, I'll stop living a lie. Then I read his prescription. Oh, no! It turns out the guy's insane, and a racist, too! The world exists for the benefit of the Jews, he said. Only belief in the biblical God will save them. The commandments in the Torah must be performed simply because they are commandments, and when God tells you to do something, you do it and no back talk. Everyone should emigrate to Israel, bomb all the Arabs back to the Stone Age, take over all their land, and wait for the Messiah. After I had read that, I had second thoughts about the rest of his theories. Being reactionary can be comforting, I decided, but in the long run, it's just not satisfactory.

Listen, Meir. My grandparents assimilated, 60 years ago. They did it on purpose, too. It seemed like a good idea at the time. It is far too late for me to undo that. I am that.

On the other hand, this "getting into being Jewish" fashion that has become popular with radicals worries me a bit. Not that I don't partake of it; that's why my words are printed here. But identity is, or at least is presumed to be, terribly fluid these days. We embrace different identities as if they were new lovers, thinking, "This is the one, the one that brings it all together." Later, we become disenchanted and go looking for another. That's exhausting; in fact, our fatigue is one reason that old-fashioned, comforting identities such as being married, being a parent, and being Jewish are popular now with former radicals. But I want an organic, truthful identity, not one more coat of paint.

I do not embrace a Jewish identity that means it's all right to be exaggerately touchy about being Jewish. I heard a woman confess to a group of Jews that she was prejudiced against gentiles, that she didn't like them very much. Perhaps I'm being uncharitable (or charitable), but I didn't believe her. I think she enjoyed the outrageousness of that confession and knew it wouldn't elicit the same disfavor as a statement that she didn't like black people, for instance. There's a difference between fighting injustice and enjoying the feeling of being an underdog. So maybe I'm not sure I want to be "radical" about being Jewish, either.

Andrea Behr grew up in Skokie, Illinois, a Chicago suburb which acquired the journalistic epithet "Predominantly Jewish" when a neo-Nazi group tried to demonstrate there in 1978. She is currently a copy editor for the San Jose Mercury News.
I am grateful for the opportunity offered by SHMATE to explore my relationship with Judaism and my perspective on living a Jewish life in today's world.

First of all, I accept as inherent in the nature of Judaism and the nature of American life that there are many versions of what it means to be Jewish and a wide range of Jewish identities among us. This is a fact of life and as such I find it foolish, even chelmish, to deny or bemoan it. For some people, being Jewish permeates their daily lives — whether they are ardent Zionists or religiously observant. For others, being Jewish is marginal to their lives. Some are even unhappy about their Judaism and still others realize they are Jewish only when they are up against anti-Semitism. It's true that we all have our attitudes about each other; the way some people are as Jews creates problems and suffering for others. So do storms, tides, and hot weather. Nevertheless these latter are all part of nature and entitled to respect. I believe the varieties of Jewish identity are all part of history and likewise entitled to respect, if not approval.

For myself — and I suspect others are with me in this — being Jewish is one among several important aspects of life, which in my case includes artistic aspirations, political vision and commitments, sexuality, personal relationships, and recreational activity. The supreme challenge I face is that of integrating these into a balanced working unity. I do not expect to achieve a stable balance soon, if ever. It may be that my very striving to evolve in that direction is what creates the meaning in my life. Two or three generations ago I would most likely have accomplished the integration of all other aspects of my life within the frame of Judaism. That is not possible for me today.

There are good reasons why many of us face this challenge. If I may be permitted a few sentences on history and sociology: since the Renaissance, the western world has undergone an erosion of community and family cohesion, and along with this a loosening of obligatory codes of behavior, as well as the philosophical and ideological attitudes governing them. In the 20th century Asia and Africa have also been affected by this process. As each decade passes, people look back wistfully, seeing it as possessing certain familial, civic, or moral values that have since disappeared. Hence, nostalgia. How can we think that Jewish life would be exempt from this situation? We live in an assimilationist culture; regardless of our upbringing and the degree of Jewish knowledge any of us has, in order to come of age we each find that we need to define our priorities, our allegiances — define ourselves. Ultimately each of us does this alone. The compulsory or coercive social and group norms that limited (or, seen differently, assisted) our greatgrandparents in their process of self-definition, have been weakened with each succeeding generation.

The compulsory or coercive social and group norms that limited (or, seen differently, assisted) our greatgrandparents in their process of self-definition, have been weakened with each succeeding generation. Community spirit that has attracted so many westerners, Jews among them. Many of us are estranged from Jewish religious and secular communal institutions, which we regard as spiritual husks without Jewish life or passion in them.

I need to acknowledge here that my perspective on these matters has been shaped by my own upbringing. I come from a secular Jewish cultural background; my parents were strongly involved in Jewish communal life and also in political organizing activity dedicated to justice and peace. I am neither a Zionist nor a religiously observant Jew. However, my own path has taken me from a childhood with almost no exposure to religious Judaism toward an awareness that I, like my people, move through precarious history in alliance with a generative source, a source that is ultimately nameless; at my best, I am filled with the strength and joy of its being; at times, I fear what that voice of truth may demand of me.

I apprehend the greatness of the Jewish people on many levels, not least in opening up for all peoples a channel of profound reverence for the life of this world. Through this channel, creativity and discovery of all kinds have poured forth, including intellectual and artistic visioning that has touched all humankind, doing so in terms not strictly Jewish at all. Yet, for me, Einstein, Freud, Marx, and innumerable Jewish artists, scientists, and other revolutionaries have been possessed of as authentic a Jewish spirit as the great hassidic and mitnagid masters.
Although my own inclination does not lead me to join the return of the Baal Tshuvah to orthodox Judaism, I respect those whose inner dictates have led them to take such a step. I regard with great skepticism, however — in the Jewish world as outside it — the subordinating of one's own individual mind-heart to the interpretations of reality presented by an "authority". I include such figures as Der Alte Rebbe in that category. And I feel the charisma exerted by a strong mind, resting on a world view that excludes so much of present day reality as not Jewish or as antithetical to Judaism, does not bode well. It does not serve our tradition, which must now, as always, evolve in the ways it embodies its core teachings in a changing world, while preserving its community. There is an immense temptation to reduce reality to a few easily accessible and comforting points on the vast matrix of world experience and knowledge.

Likewise, although I respect the passion for justice and Yiddish culture which many secular Jews have represented, I have also come to see the atheist perspective, no matter how Jewishly identified, as reductionist and impoverished, not primarily because it denies the existence of God as such, but because it negates the generative presence of the non-rational component of human life. By presenting the world as essentially rational and planable and by being obsessed with identifying the human culprits who impede progress, the way has been paved for the efficient machines of human destruction that have been perfected in the course of this century.

There is also a reductionism of another sort. Those who are professionally involved in Jewish communal organizations tend to equate the number of meetings they attend each week, or the number of machers they've reached, with their sense of being Jewish. Institutions often squeeze out people, Jewish institutions not excepted.

By contrast, my experience with converts to Judaism has done much to revitalize my concept of my own Jewishness. Those "choosing" to be Jewish are taking a step far more serious and committed than those "born" Jewish have had to do. While they may not quite share in the tam — of style, intonation, cultural background, they perceive in the knowledge and experience of our people a vitality without which they cannot live. The approach of many converts to this knowledge and experience is refreshingly innocent; it has the enthusiasm of a beginner's mind (even when more knowledgeable than I).

I have mentioned the diversity of Jewish cultures and identities. Such diversity extends into the past. Hassidism and the Haskalah are equally Jewish. Jews have known how to borrow and adapt from other cultures. The genius of absorption is reflected in the Modzitzer Hassidim who transformed the Austrian waltz into a pious nigun and, conversely, in the great thinkers who enriched the world's mind with dialectical thought that had its origins in the Talmud. This process continues, and I feel it is incumbent on me, also, to select and develop strains of the Jewish heritage that I am close to.

What, then, are those sources that have been important to me, those upon which I continue to draw in my life?

In contemplating this question, I have come up with several principles. I view these as fields of action containing much space for continuing exploration and growth.

First, "Ye shall choose life," which I rephrase as respect for one's fellow living creatures, human beings not excepted, however different from ourselves and however we may dislike some of them. As a step toward this respect, I attempt to cultivate my attentiveness to others. Such a process frequently entails suspending judgment, keeping silent, and opening all the pores of my being in the presence of others. Attentiveness is a midwife to art. Attentiveness is the perfect state of being, while in the presence of art. Jews have developed discourse into a great skill, but we don't listen that well. I, and we, need to work on our listening ability.

Second, we are enjoined to be a "light unto the nations." I take this to mean that the entire world is our concern, not only our own people. In the present day, as the world drifts toward global catastrophe, I see the fate of all Israel, including myself, as part and parcel of the fate of the planet. This principle challenges us, for example, to know that the Palestinians are also God's people (remember, He rebuked Miriam for rejoicing at the destruction of the Egyptians) and to empathize with their aspirations for self-fulfillment and self-definition. It also means, that as we are with each other, so do we believe the world may come to be. Thus, we are enjoined to perfect our own relationships with our intimates, our colleagues, and the institutions of our society. To be a light to the nations does not mean we have a swelled head; we are a light, not the...
others may also be lights. It enjoins us to do what we can to bring onto earth the harmony and peace we understand to reside in transcendent spheres — and in the seeds of the human spirit.

Third — and this is crucial and much ignored — we are to remain alert against idol worship. If you think this issue was solved once and for all by our ancestor Abraham, think again! Remember King Ahab and the prophet Elijah? Why does the legend have it that Elijah returns inconspicuously and disguised, over and over? I believe it is in order to test us (in our own eyes): are we ready to penetrate to the essence beyond all coveting, fixation, and attachment to our expected and conventional world? Our idols may be the elements of material well being; they may be scientific achievements, or objects of art; they may be our favorite (and hence uninvestigated) preconceptions; they may be books and, yes, they may even be Torah. In my view, all books have been scribed by fallible humans. Even our desert fathers were fallible. Few if any of our prophets and leaders have been presented as faultless. They heard the voice of Yahweh as they were able to, given the conditions of their place and time. Martin Buber said of God's presumed order to Samuel to have the Amalekites slaughtered to the last man, woman and child, — including all their cattle: Samuel, great man though he was, did not understand Him! Unquestioning identification with any object — including Torah — is an idol in that it impedes our relationship with the One "that is (will be) as he is". Pride in being Jewish, itself, can be an idol; so can the State of Israel. Everything is evanescent, except for that most ungraspable of thought-feelings: the spirit with which we are in covenant.

Fourth, and finally, the foregoing thoughts remain abstract principles (of which modern intellectuals have had more than their fill), unless I spend time with other Jewish people sharing our overlapping and evolving identities, allowing thoughts to become flesh. I seek ways to experience my Jewish soul in community, both consciously and spontaneously-intuitively: welcoming Shabbat together, taking walks in nature, davening, involving ourselves in mitzvah-action, celebrating festivities in dance and music, and being moved and grieved at solemn times. With others we get to experience the oneness that is the counterpoint to our diversity. Without the people-gathering occasions our history and calendar have provided, tradition fades and our own renewal cannot take place. The flesh falls from the bones before its time.

In sum, I feel this way: within me, waiting for me to discover and be rooted in it, is the Commandment that can mobilize my life. And, while remaining rooted in my own being, I step out to encounter other people, my personal network, the larger community, the fate of the planet. There is ample room in Judaism for many versions of self-discovery and ethical relationship. There are many figures in Judaism, from biblical days on up to the present, that may serve as models in our quest. The source is within each of us; to connect with it we need to be attentive, to recognize it when we encounter it, and to move.

Jacob Picheny is a founder of the Jewish Artists Community of The Bay and editor of J.A.C.O.B.'s Letter, a magazine discussing, reviewing, and reporting on Jewish arts in the Bay Area. He is a writer and a South Indian Classical Dance Performer.
There are always two forces defining someone as a Jew. One is external. As many deracinated women and men, who thought of themselves as being only of Jewish ancestry rather than as being Jews, discovered once the Nazis had come to power, they were still, and thoroughly, Jews in the eyes of non-Jews.

The other force is internal. If someone tells me she is a Jew, I do not understand someone else saying that that person is not a Jew. In the letter in which we were invited to participate in this forum in the pages of SHMATE, there was mention of one Bay Area group's questioning whether another group should be considered “real Jews.” I find this kind of snobbery among the oppressed foolish and self-defeating. A Jew may be anyone the society defines as a Jew and anyone who defines herself as a Jew.

There is no test of faith of blood or language that can define us. Jews have obviously intermarried regularly over the centuries; otherwise you must believe in willful evolution (all those Lamarckian giraffes rising every morning to stretch their necks) to explain why Hungarian Jews look more like other Hungarians than like Moroccan Jews and why Jews from Kazan have epicanthic folds while Sephardic Jews from Holland do not.

In me the identity as a Jew is descended on the maternal side, and I am given my Jewishness in a direct line from my mother Bert (Bedonya) as coming from my grandmother Hannah before her. Both of them formed my sense of myself as a Jew in my childhood, with precept, with tale, with the transmission of an oral culture. My grandmother gave me my Hebrew name, Marah.

Now as Cynthia Ozick in her essay Notes Toward Finding the Right Question points out, the only place in the world in which she (and I) are not defined as Jews is in the synagogue, where only males are truly Jews. I am extremely interested in remaking Judaism as a more just, inclusive, and female religion. I have no choice about this attempt. As a Jew I must strive for justice, and if that means sometimes striving with other Jews and wrestling with forces of great power and antiquity, that is the task set me. Over my computer where I write is a card upon which is the quotation from a translation of the Talmud, “It is not incumbent upon thee to complete the task, but neither art thou free to desist from thy part.”

I first understood the power of Jewishness to me when I first visited Europe in 1957. At that time the wounds of war were still apparent in every major city. I had married into a family of French Jews — that is, my first husband had French citizenship (which I acquired by marrying him), although his family was spread over three continents. Aunts, uncles, cousins, second cousins had English, American, Belgian, Australian, Polish, Dutch papers. His own parents had had three nationalities (Polish, German and then French). At the monument in Paris to the unknown Jew I perceived passionately and finally that being a Jew would be a necessary part of my work in the world and that it would not be something decorative or optional or incidental to my being in the world. If I have sometimes forgotten that understanding over the years, I have never forgotten it for long.

At the National Women's Studies Conference in Columbus Ohio, last June, where I gave a poetry reading, I experienced some of the all too usual shocks of anti-Semitism. They are more common in all groups today than ten or so years ago, although not nearly as pervasive as they were in my childhood, when anti-Semitism was even more blatant, violent, and omnipresent. But far more importantly, I experienced a religious event, led by Rabbi Lynn Gottlieb, that moved me to tears and beyond.

[My mother and grandmother] formed my sense of myself as a Jew in my childhood, with precept, with tale, with the transmission of an oral woman’s culture.

At the Hillel on campus she led a women's ritual grounded in ancient Judaic sources and thoroughly feminist — for once a totally healing religious experience in which none of the parts of me needed to apologize to any of the other parts. All of my experience, my politics, my religious identity was fused and fed and exalted. From that experience I carry hope in my life.

I felt the same way about my husband Ira Wood's and my marriage, which we worked out with Rabbi Debra Hachen. One of the poems I wrote for that ceremony is being printed in Lilith. That experience, too, was one in which there was no compromise.

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There has never been a time in my life when I failed to appreciate or failed to nurture my Jewish roots. Such consciousness did not originate genetically, nor did it spring spontaneously from spiritual sources. No, in my youth we didn't maintain a kosher cupboard; we never lit any Sabbath candles; Dad never went to a synagogue; Mom never belonged to a Temple sisterhood; I never had a bar mitzvah; Israel was a bit of land governed by the Balfour Declaration. Yes, I did attend a secular Jewish school to learn Yiddish; I read the classics of Sholem Aleichem, Peretz, Mendelsohn and others; I conversed freely with older people in Yiddish; I wrote Yiddish poems and essays; I learned about Jewish-Americans from the Colonial days to the present. Most memorable for me was my interest in the gradual creep of Nazi domination and its effect on European Jews. Indeed, in my childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood I felt thoroughly like a Jewish-American, because I was at home with both sides of the noun.

Despite occasional insults, debates, and fistfights generated by my identity as a Jew, I never did experience overt or brutal anti-Semitism. But I was taught early in life that Jews must be cautious. I grew up in New York's Greenwich Village in the 1930s, a member of the only Jewish family on my street. My parents were involved with other Jews in the trade-union movement and Jewish fraternal organizations. My brother and I attended a secular Jewish school and became active in secular Jewish youth groups. Probably as a concession to fears first learned by my parents in Imperial Poland, these activities, though rich and rewarding, were conducted in semi-secret. My brother and I never told our friends we went to a non-religious Jewish school; my parents never told the neighbors of their activities. Our cover was protected by the fact that all of our Jewish activities took place on the East side—a few miles from Greenwich Village.

Instilled with pride and guided by caution, my interests never failed to include subjects relevant to Jews as I became a young and older adult. World War II, the Holocaust, the creation of Israel and anti-Semitism overseas and in the U.S. not only captured my attention and fortified my feelings as a Jew, but created within me a family feeling, a mishpochkeheit with all Jews throughout the world.

However, it would be incorrect to assume that Jews and matters relating to Jews were my singular interest. It was very early in my young adult life that I recognized the importance of the times I lived in. In 1931, Japanese troops slaughtered Chinese women and children. In 1935, Italian troops and bombs ripped open Ethiopia. In 1936, German bombers ripped open Spain, as Spaniards and their friends fought other Spaniards and their friends. In 1938, a new union of auto workers closed down the plants of Ford and General Motors.

While these and other events were not exactly highlights in Jewish history, they captured my interest and sympathy for the oppressed. Why? There is no question in my mind that my consciousness as a Jew has contributed greatly to my identification with the underdogs in these and other events.

I find my life and outlook less complicated because of my refusal to place national or social borders on my world outlook. The pacifism I have embraced since the advent of the A-bomb is no more inspired by scenes of Israeli soldiers shooting and killing than it is by the rampages of any other nation's soldiers. The repugnance I have developed toward racism as a result of the Holocaust and the experience of blacks in the South is not put aside for the arrests of Palestinian mayors or occupation of their towns. The rage that develops within me when I see photographs of Jews in the German death camps is fanned aflame by accounts of Israeli "detention centers" for Arabs.

Probably as a concession to fears first learned by my parents in Imperial Poland, Jewish activities, though rich and rewarding, were conducted in semi-secret.

In 1948, when the state of Israel was created, the composite me cheered. At last, a homeland for the homeless. By the middle '50s I grew concerned over the direction this new state was taking. Now some of that concern has matured to selective opposition to its involvement with chauvinism and oppression of others on the basis of skin color, religion and heritage.

In the past, such opinionated concerns would merit no more than agreement, mild opposition, or debate. But that was when the Jewish community was comfortable with its diversity, when most members accepted, even thrived on, diversity. Then, the community itself was more diverse. We were foreign- and American-born: middle- and working-class; skilled and unskilled; our commonality was broad-based and expressed itself through a variety of organizations. Today the Jewish community no longer fits that description. Most Jews were born here; few have experienced any form of anti-Semitism; most are middle-

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JULTY: continued

...and upper-class or professional. The many organizations that once served the diverse needs of secular Jews have eroded or disappeared, and the Jewish Center as emerged as the “in” gathering place. A diversity of views has been replaced by an uncritical support for Israel, often to the extent of measuring one’s Jewishness in terms of the degree of such support.

I am distressed that many fellow Jews seem to have developed a much narrower basis to accept me — my uncritical support for Israel.

All this leaves me and people like me in a lonely place. My world view was shaped by a blend of energies from my parents, my Jewish training, the Great Depression, and pre-war Europe. My world view was matured by such diverse events as post-war Europe, the Holocaust, the Cold War, the McCarthy Era and the creation of Israel. I accept myself as a product of my times; I am distressed that many fellow Jews seem to have developed a much narrower basis to accept me — my uncritical support for Israel.

As an individual, the price is too high, because to go with the flow means to surrender those personal experiences and historic factors that have shaped my world view. As a Jew the risk is too great, because it means abandoning the eclectic character of the Jewish community — our key to survival over the centuries.

Sam Julty of Berkeley, California, is a writer who specializes in issues concerning men’s health. He is a former Editor of the Berkeley/Richmond Jewish Community Center Voice.

PIERCY: continued

necessary to express in Jewish ritual my female experience and my feminism, a sense of oneness rooted and grounded in political, cultural, and religious identity. Those identities in the two instances I have cited I was able to join without contradiction, without blurring, without silent reservation or smothered indignation, but wholeheartedly and clear-mindedly. In such situations, ritual truly functions for us.

Marge Piercy is an author and long-time feminist and leftist activist who lives on Cape Cod. Her published works include Small Changes, Dance The Eagle To Sleep, The Moon Is Always Female, and Vida.
A Jew is one who identifies as a Jew, regardless of how he or she came to that state of identification. As a Jew-by-choice, I reject the notion that only the accident of birth defines who may and may not identify as Jewish. However, I am also uncomfortable with the notion that the level of one’s religious observance should be a deciding factor. For me, being a Jew is a state of mind, a state of being, and a process that began somewhere in my childhood.

Although I suspect that I have Jewish ancestors not too many generations back, the only evidence I have to verify this part of my pedigree is my father’s notion that the level of one’s religious observance of his grandfather always did. At times I feel angry with this unknown ancestor, who married a non-Jew and began the process of assimilation. I feel cheated, as if a very important part of my heritage had been taken from me without my consent. I feel angry, too, at our pseudo-pluralistic society that made it so easy to ignore the loss of that heritage in favor of the majority opinion.

For me, the process of becoming Jewish has been like coming home. I could do nothing else. As a child and young adult, my spiritual journeys left me feeling bereft and unsatisfied. I was drawn to Judaism both spiritually and culturally, but was never given any encouragement by Jewish friends to pursue my heritage in favor of the majority opinion. I remember a very early conversation with a rabbinical student who cautioned me not to take the final steps in becoming a Jew until I could gladly, and with an open heart, consider every other Jew in the world my family, regardless of their behavior, politics, or attitudes toward me, as a convert. I often remember those words when faced with unpleasant or difficult situations involving other Jews. Even in the midst of struggle, I find myself recognizing that these are my people and I am one of them.

Hebrew sounds familiar to my ear. The ritual, the prayer, the celebration evoke an ineffable response somewhere deep inside. The process is a mystical one on many levels. As I light the Shabbos candles each week, it becomes harder and harder to imagine a time when I did not do it. In short, there is no other way of life, set of beliefs, or culture that speaks to my condition the way Judaism does. Therefore, I identify myself both internally and externally as a Jew. I do this in humility, recognizing that it is a privilege and a responsibility to take on the creation of a Jewish life. I do it, also, in great joy. My gladness stems partly from the feeling of homecoming and partly from an awareness and appreciation of the richness of the Jewish heritage. I am grateful that there is a history of precedence for people like me who have found Judaism irresistible, and I am proud that Jews-by-choice have involved themselves in every aspect of our long history.

I do not know what it is that “makes me Jewish.” In answer to those who reject the concept of conversion, I can only say that they are entitled to their opinions. Being a Jew is much more than having Jewish parents. It is an ongoing process that encompasses my entire being and requires a great deal of time and attention. At times, I remind myself of a very young child, whose main business in life is to discover the world and incorporate it into her environment. Judaism is a whole new world to be discovered. One of the major frustrations in my life is the limited time I have to study the new things I’m continually discovering about Judaism.

Being a Jew... is an on-going process that encompasses my entire being and requires a great deal of time and attention.

I become acutely uncomfortable when born Jews suggest that Jew-by-choice are in some way “more” Jewish than they are. Growing as a Jew is similar to the growth of a tree. The tree begins as a seed. The potential for growth is present, but in order for it to occur, a nurturing environment is necessary. If that seed is cared for properly, it becomes a sapling and then a tree. At no time is the tree more or less of a tree; its essential “tree-ness” stays with it throughout its life cycle. If given good care, it will become strong and vibrant and bear good fruit. A Jew who is nurtured and cared for will also be strong and vibrant and will be a valuable member of the community. As a new Jew, I was fortunate enough to live and work in a varied and dynamic Jewish community, that supported me and allowed me to explore my own Jewishness in many different ways. I had good experiences with the Jewish Community Center, the synagogue, the havurah movement, and the political groups in my area. I was insulated much of the time from the non-Jewish world by my involvement. It was a comfortable environment.

Having these early experiences has enabled me to cope with the situation in which I now find myself. There are few Jews where I now live, and I have discovered that it is very difficult to be Jewish in a
GOODMAN: continued

vacuum. It does not make one less Jewish; if anything, it strengthens one's ties to whatever community exists. But it can make one lonely. I find myself much more aware of other Jews than before. The creation of a strong and supportive community is much more difficult in a place where there are fewer resources and more hostility from the outside. The unique rhythm of the Jewish year is easily lost in a community that focuses completely on the Christian calendar. The Sunday closing laws make life harder for those wishing to observe Shabbat in a traditional manner, and the nearest kosher butcher is several hundred miles away. Outside the religious community, Jews who are involved in community or political work often find themselves isolated. I have noticed that some of the unhappiest people I've met here have been Jews with little or no involvement in the larger Jewish community. It is as if they had deliberately cut themselves off from the source of their power.

I do not fully understand the nature of this power. I do know that it enables Jews to recognize one another, to come to one another's aid in times of trouble. It provides one with a particular way of standing in the world, a way that marks one as a Jew regardless of one's level of religious observance or political stand on the Middle East. All people who identify as Jews have this quality to some degree. It is remarkable in that it provides a sense of community in and with the Jewish people, a sense of community that exists nowhere else in the same way. I have a passion for this power and its expression that runs deeper than any love affair I have ever known. Although it is out of fashion to be a martyr, I would die for my faith sooner than for any other cause.

Judaism is more worth living than dying for, however. As a religion, it has a flexibility and a dynamism that extend into all areas of human endeavor. Because of its questioning nature and precedents for growth and change, it has the best possibility of incorporating feminist values of any religion practiced in this country. As a culture, it offers intellectual, artistic, and literary diversity. Its broad range of traditions offers the possibility of continuing development to meet the needs of people who are evolving to face the challenges of their time.

Although being a Jew does not require that one maintain any particular level of religious observance, it is important to recognize that Judaism's unique power to involve those who identify with it as a people does stem from a religious tradition of beliefs and practices. It is within these beliefs and practices that my identification as a Jew is rooted. One of the challenges I face as a Jewish woman in 20th-century America is incorporating traditional Jewish ritual into my daily life in a meaningful way. This, also, is an ongoing process. As I learn more about the origins of various rituals, I find myself moving toward greater involvement in them. I become less critical of their failings and more determined to work with other Jews in formulating ritual that includes both men and women in meaningful ways. Rather than rejecting the entire Torah-Talmud tradition as hopelessly outdated and sexist, I am learning, through study, to appreciate the depth of commitment to the Law and its relationship to the Jewish people. There is much there to cherish and preserve, as well as much to question and change. I look forward to being a part of the process.

When I completed my conversion process, I took the name Galia. The translation that I like the best is "G-d's waves." Tradition requires Jews-by-choice to adopt Sarah and Abraham, the first Jews, as their Jewish parents, so my full name is Galia Bat Sarah v'Avraham. When I am called to the Torah, and my name is read out loud for everyone in the congregation to hear, I will go proudly, knowing that I am one of many who have adopted Sarah and Abraham as their parents... [T]hese first of all Jews also chose to be Jewish.

many who have adopted Sarah and Abraham as their parents, and that these first of all Jews also chose to be Jewish. It is not only the born Jews who have made Sarah and Abraham the parents of a great nation, but all who feel love and loyalty for Judaism and the Jewish people.

Gerre Goodman is a freelance artist, papercutter, and calligrapher living in Durham, North Carolina. She is involved in local women's politics, the Reconstructionist Havurah, and the East Coast Jewish Feminist Conference. She was born and raised in Colorado where the Jewish National Fund got her mother on a list. As a result Gerre had more trees in Israel than any goyishe kid on the block.
When I was a child in pre-Hitler Germany, I knew I was Jewish, because my father told me ancestor stories dating back to the 12th century. We also ate special foods at different times throughout the year, matzos and challah, sweet and sour carp, and herring in sour cream. When I became old enough to go to school, I learned the Sh'ma at religious release time. I saw anti-Semitic cartoons on public billboards on my way to school, and the jeering gangs of boys who walked me home were reminders that I was a Jew in an unfriendly world. When we left Germany, and later France, because we were Jews, those departures reinforced for me what was special about us: people didn't like us, so we had to leave countries we called home, and move to places we didn't know, because people might like us better there.

When we left Germany, and later France, because we were Jews, it reinforced for me what was special about us: people didn't like us, so we had to leave countries we called home.

I went to my first Seder at 14, in San Francisco. It was a strange yet pleasant ritual, most of which I didn't understand. But three years later, we left for Wisconsin, because the “local” government was interning the Japanese, and we thought we might be better off, safer from internment, in the middle of the country.

A group of us, Jews and non-Jews, tried to have the University of Wisconsin adopt a non-discriminatory housing clause. We lost our case because the police staked out and arrested a local Black married man and a Jewish graduate student from N.Y. in bed together. This news was splashed all over the local paper and, because of this, the gentile professor, who was to be my witness during naturalization proceedings, told me she couldn't vouch for my good citizenship. A prestigious Jewish state official became my witness instead. My own Jewish identity wasn't enhanced by these experiences, but my anger increased. By now I staunchly believed in my right to be whoever I was, though I continued totally non-observant of both religious and secular ritual.

During a year as a researcher for the Nuremberg Trials, I learned about prejudice carried to the ultimate and developed a passion for universal justice. Marriage to a “lapsed” New York Orthodox Jew with a Russian background (and from a pogrom decimated family) changed us both. After we moved to California, we began to create Seders for us and our young daughters. We joined a synagogue so our girls would know they weren’t the only Jewish children in the world. Sunday school was boring and the services didn’t move us, but our Seders improved, and new participants became part of our extended family.

During the 60s, our wish for a larger Jewish community — which would also speak for civil rights, free speech, and the farmworkers’ right to organize — involved us in attempts at “meaningful” personal prayer and homemade High Holiday services in a local mountaintop park. We produced family slogans, such as “Jewish is joyous”, when Black activists said “Black is beautiful”. We participated in Jewish community organizations, went to Jewish consciousness-raising weekends, learned about Reform’s concept of Prophetic Judaism, and understood our own pursuit of justice as a Jewish act. We supported our congregation’s participation in draft counseling during the Vietnam War, reminded our School District before Christmas about the separation of Church and State, and worked for voluntary school integration. Of all the phrases at our disposal, the one from the Hagadah, “for we were slaves in Egypt” seemed the clearest explanation for our activities.

When my husband was killed in an industrial accident two days before Passover, our daughters and I conducted our Seder with both joy and grief, as if we had always led the Passover Service. When we needed the right words for Saul’s memorial service, we reached for the following statements. They described our beliefs, and his life.

“What does the Lord require of thee, but to do justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with thy God?” (Micah)

“You are not required to complete the work, but neither are you at liberty to abstain from it.” (Pirke Avot)

“I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life...” (Deuteronomy)
Jewish identity is a peculiar "bird." We feel it; we sense it; we live with it. But we really cannot define it. Nonetheless, in typical Jewish fashion, we talk about it. So let's!

First, Jewish identity is peculiarly our term. Christians do not talk about Christian identity. They talk about Christian faith, Christian belief. They have doctrines and creeds that help them delineate who is and who is not a Christian. We have halacha. Traditionally, if one's mother was Jewish, that person was Jewish. Reform now includes fathers too (men's lib). Today Jewish identity has many currents and eddies.

... Jewish identity is peculiar because Judaism is a religion, but it does not require a test of faith in order to get in or remain in.

Second, Jewish identity is peculiar, because Judaism is a religion (it has Scripture, ideas about God, humanity, and the world, worship services), but it does not require a test of faith in order to get in or remain in. Our ticket of admission is that we all somehow affirm that we participated in the Exodus from Egypt and stood at Mt. Sinai together. The interpretation of these events (theological or non-theological) is left up to the individual. There are Seders every year even in the most non-religious Kibbutzim in Israel.

Third, Jewish identity is peculiar because it can lie dormant for a long while and then suddenly be triggered by the most unexpected circumstances. Closet Jews surfaced all over the place in June, 1967, as a result of the Six Day War. A chance anti-Semitic remark can bring about a reaction from an assimilated Jew, who has not been in a synagogue or contributed to the Jewish cause in years. As a rabbi in a part of the country with relatively few Jews, I constantly find that my appearance in a small Kentucky town will bring out to meet me one or two Jews who live there.

And fourth, Jewish identity is peculiar because it can be lost, not by loss of faith (we have many Jewish atheists), but by intermarriage and separation from the Jewish community. Thus, the topic remains high on our agenda of concerns, as the subject of this symposium clearly indicates.

Why, then, this interest in Jewish identity? Primarily because Jewish identity is central to being Jewish. The way it works for us is that each Jew, through his conscious self-identification with the Jewish People, comes into his Judaism, his "religion", not in the Christian understanding of faith or belief, but in the Jewish understanding, which entails behavior, ideas and the Jewish People so intertwined that we cannot separate one part from the others and still have Judaism.

As a result of the centrality of our Jewish identity, when someone says "Jew", we respond in the first person — "he is talking about me", "he is talking about us". The non-Jew uses the second or third person, you or them.

As a result of our Jewish identity, we feel no need for theological agreement. Such agreement is not what gets us in or keeps us out, as it does for Christianity, which has had to deal with many heresies over the centuries. We can live very easily with theological differences of opinion. Conformity to a belief is not the test for one's being Jewish. When we affirm who we are, we tend to say, "I am"; the Christian equivalent is, "I believe".

As a result of our Jewish identity, the State of Israel is a "religious" concern for us. It involves who and what we are, specifically in the international political arena. When something happens vis-a-vis Israel, we respond through our identity as Jews — something is happening to a part of me and I had better do something. This response quickly moves into the area of economic, military, diplomatic, and even personal assistance. The Christian is often confused by our reaction, because he lacks a similar form of Christian connection with any specific piece of geography.

When we affirm who we are, we tend to say, "I am"; the Christian equivalent is, "I believe."

Furthermore, when we go to Israel, we look at the antiquities and say, "This is where my ancestors . . .", and we respond to the modern aspects of that country with, "My goodness, look at what we have done here." The Christian going to the same geography goes primarily to see where Jesus lived and to the modern things, says, "My goodness, look at what they have done here." A different pronoun.

As a result of our Jewish identity, we have difficulty with the "Jews for Jesus". We see them as "traitors"; they see themselves as "completed Jews". On a gut level we understand what Jewish identity is all about, even though we do not define it; they do not understand. Jewish identity precludes the Jew from affirming the central tenet of another religion and
LEFFLER: continued

remaining Jewish, not so much because the idea is inimicable to Judaism (we have lived with peculiar concepts over the centuries), but because we understand that no matter how much the "Jew for Jesus" wishes to function within the Jewish community, he cannot be "for Jesus" and remain within Judaism. We learned this 1900 years ago, when the two religions went their separate ways. He
doing things, of "being" in the very fullest sense of the word. It is not a philosophy, a theology, or a set of beliefs. It is a process, manifest in who and what a Jew is, as he lives his life as part of the historic Jewish People.

Jewish identity . . . is not a philosophy, a theology or a set of beliefs. It is a process, manifest in who and what a Jew is as he lives his life as part of the historic Jewish People.

disregards history. Furthermore, we need to ask, who will his children marry and what will their identity be? They cannot maintain a Jewish identity and be involved with what Jesus has come to mean either for Jews or Christians; their faith in Jesus subverts their Jewish identity.

Jewish identity is important for us. It is first and foremost what brings us into our religion — as we understand the word. But it must have substance; it has to have meaning in the life of the individual Jew; it needs to be translated into a way of living, of Doing things, of "being" in the very fullest sense of the word. It is not a philosophy, a theology, or a set of beliefs. It is a process, manifest in who and what a Jew is, as he lives his life as part of the historic Jewish People.

Rabbi William Leffler is the Rabbi of Temple Adath Israel in Lexington, Kentucky. He serves as Contract Jewish Chaplain for the Federal Prison in Lexington, Trustee of the Lexington Public Library, President of the Friends of Kentucky Libraries, and member of the Religious Advisors Staff at the University of Kentucky. At present he is working to develop an increased awareness in the Jewish community of the needs of Jewish prisoners.

SHERMAN: continued

My beliefs have not changed much since that time. Sometimes ritual moves me, more often it does not. An old man's voice chanting a blessing sometimes makes me see generations of davening old men, clear back to my 12th century German-Jewish ancestors. An

When one of my daughters chants Torah, when they both sing Hebrew songs . . ., when their sense of justice embraces both a nuclear freeze and abortion rights, I see us all in a continuum, connected backward and forward in time.

impersonal High Holiday service suddenly evokes images of thousands of congregations around the world saying the same words, and the thought warms me. When one of my daughters chants Torah, when they both sing Hebrew songs in harmony, when their sense of justice embraces both a nuclear freeze and abortion rights, I see us all in a continuum, connected backward and forward in time. Then I stop trying to explain why or how I am a Jew, and just accept it.

Ursula F. Sherman is a children's librarian, University of California Visiting Lecturer on children's literature, and a specialist on Holocaust literature for children. Her avocations are community organizing and networking. She is currently working on a book about growing up Jewish in pre-World War II Germany.
It would be foolish, if not presumptuous, to try to articulate an analysis or description of the essence of "Jewishness" from the articles in SHMATE. However, a collection of brief quotes from those articles can, I believe, help to give one a handle, an overview of what has gone on in these pages.

Being a Jew... is an ongoing process that encompasses my entire being and requires a great deal of time and attention.

[Judaism] has the best possibility of incorporating feminist values of any religion practiced in this country.

I am one of many who have adopted Sarah and Abraham as their parents... [T]hese first of all Jews also chose to be Jewish.

The compulsory or coercive social and group norms that limited (or, seen differently, assisted) our great-grandparents in their process of self-definition, have been weakened with each succeeding generation.

... Jewish identity is peculiar because Judaism is a religion, but it does not require a test of faith in order to get in or remain in.

Organized religion, Israel, [and] the reaction to anti-Semitism are negative images.

It seems as if a cover-up took place by people who wanted to make us identify with one of the most anti-Semitic and twisted images I can think of: the Jew as Victim/Martyr.

As I think about nuclear war, about death, and as I struggle against a notion of finality, ritual — once utterly unimportant to me — has been more important.

... keeping a low profile was a survival skill, or so I was taught; you should be Jewish, but not too Jewish, you shouldn’t be loud or assertive, though it was okay to be smart, even too smart — as long as you were a boy.

... to be chosen means to be emblematic of humanity. We... have been chosen the way an illustration is chosen, not the way a king is chosen.

And the inequality of women in Jewish tradition... what does that mean? Maybe it means Jewish women are chosen to fight it.

... As there were great events in Jewish history that formed Jewish consciousness and shaped Jewish unity, so there are events in the life of the individual that serve as the symbols or causes of an awakened Jewish identity.

[My mother and grandmother] formed my sense of myself as a Jew in my childhood, with precept, with tale, with the transmission of an oral woman’s culture.

In our humanism we were universalist, in our politics, internationalist, in our “enlightenment,” anti-traditional. Our Judaism was, we felt, rather incidental.

We were, in fact, so many of the things that anti-Semites and Zionists both have accused the Jews of the Galut of being: cosmopolitan, cerebral, detached from “blood and soil” and traditional particularist loyalties.

A Jew was not supposed to know what happiness meant. That was for the beasts, the Goyim and the Grubbe Yungen, those who went around town acquiring clap.

I don’t know of any practicable solution to the problem that there is no way for a secularist to convert to Judaism...

When we left Germany, and later France, because we were Jews, [it] reinforced for me what was special about us: people didn’t like us, so we had to leave countries we called home.

When one of my daughters chants Torah, when they both sing Hebrew songs... when their sense of justice embraces both a nuclear freeze and abortion rights, I see us all in a continuum, connected backward and forward in time.

... my own path has taken me from a childhood with almost no exposure to religious Judaism toward an awareness that I, like my people, move through precarious history in alliance with a generative source...

Now in my middle age... I find my Jewishness a great comfort.

There is no question in my mind that my consciousness as a Jew has contributed greatly to my identification with the underdogs...

I am distressed that many fellow Jews seem to have developed a much narrower basis to accept me — my uncritical support for Israel.

... being a Jew means understanding that it is next to impossible to be a Jew in isolation...
We are familiar with scenes of “born-again” Christians gathering in a room and offering to each other testimony as to the key experience that saved their souls. In evangelical terms, they are called upon to “witness,” to share with the others the nature of that magical moment when “truth” entered their hearts and they became truly Christian.

It is my guess that we Jews would have some difficulty duplicating the drama of this scene. I wonder how many of us could point to one experience as the experience that made us Jewish, or one event that gave us our Jewish identity. Historically speaking, Jewishness has been a complex mixture of family, tribal, and religious associations woven together by a shared historical memory and a belief in a common destiny. According to the late Rabbi Mordechai Kaplan, Judaism was always more than just a religion, it was a complex, evolving civilization, the expression of a people as it wandered through history and encountered the world. This mixture of diverse influences on Jewish identity is found both in the life of the community as a whole and in the life of an individual Jew. Few of us could point to one event as the event that made us Jewish unless that event was one’s own birth or, in the case of converts, the act of joining the Jewish people.

Yet this does not mean that we don’t have dramatic Jewish stories to tell each other. For as there were great events in Jewish history that formed Jewish consciousness and shaped Jewish unity, so there are events in the life of the individual that serve as the symbols or causes of an awakened Jewish identity. In the story of the Torah, the Exodus from Egypt is seen as the crucial event in Jewish history that started the Jews on their journey, a people entering the desert with both the memory and promise of redemption. And the second crucial event of the story is the revelation of Torah at Sinai, the acceptance of a collective responsibility by an entire people, the covenant that Jews would help the Creator redeem this world.

If the Passover Hagada states that each of us should feel that he or she personally is going out of Egypt, then it is also telling us that there are moments in our lives what serve as personal myths for the experiences of Jewish birth and liberation. And there may also be moments that serve as our Mount Sinai, events that awaken in us the desire and the responsibility to act on our Jewishness, to make it a living and not just a passive experience.

These kinds of myths we can enjoy and share with each other, knowing that being Jewish is an ongoing process, with new stories emerging to be told.

My own identity began with my parents, radical socialists who were proud of their Jewish identity and the role that Jews played in struggles for social justice. As a child I knew that Jews and blacks were among the groups that were not liked by racists, right-wingers, and other reactionaries, and my father shared with me some of his experiences encountering the victims of the Holocaust. When I was seven years old, my father read to me the letters that Ethel and Julius Rosenberg had written to their sons, and I felt that their tragedy was also part of being Jewish. My father also spoke with pride about the large numbers of Jews who went up to Peekskill, N.Y., to help protect Paul Robeson during a concert when mobs of drunken racists were threatening his life. And so from my parents I learned that Jews were victims, but that Jews also were a people that fought to prevent others from being victims.

I felt that the tragedy [of the Rosenbergs] was also part of being Jewish.

It was at the age of nine that I had an experience that profoundly affected my feelings about being Jewish. We had just moved from Brooklyn to Rockaway Beach, and my mother had enrolled my sister and me in the local Hebrew school of a nearby Orthodox synagogue. After several months of attending late-afternoon classes, the Rabbi announced that we would all be required to come every Saturday morning at 10:30 for a junior congregation. For me, Disaster had definitely struck. Saturday morning was the highlight of my week, the time when the best cartoons were on T.V. Junior Congregation did not seem like an acceptable substitute, no matter what the rabbi promised. Nevertheless, the school did not offer us a choice.

The next Saturday morning, I arrived a half-hour early, having mistakenly thought the starting time was at 10. Not finding anyone in the schoolroom, I wandered to the back of the synagogue where the regular morning service was taking place. As I entered the sanctuary, I found myself standing in a group of mostly elderly Jews who seemed to be weeping. The ark was open and the old cantor was facing the ark, chanting in a sobbing voice. But it was the melody, the chant, that I remember most clearly. The song was both sad and deep in a way that made it seem to have come from an earlier place and time. And in the chanting of the old men, I began to hear other voices, echoes of Jews who had sung this chant before. I

CONTINUED NEXT PAGE
did not understand the words, yet I felt that I was standing at the end of a long line of weeping and praying Jews, generations of Jews that had gone before us and were now chanting with us before the ark. As these voices were entering my imagination, I noticed the cantor take the Torah from the ark and hold it in his arms in a loving embrace. Suddenly, both he and the congregation were shouting "Shma Yisroel," and I was shouting with them.

To this day, I can't remember what happened after that or what took place during that first session of junior congregation. I do know that every Saturday morning after that first visit, I returned to the synagogue around the same time, so that I could once again hear the voices chanting. As I stood each time before the open ark, I knew that I had discovered my people and that these old men standing with me were not really strangers. We were on some kind of mysterious journey together, we and all the Jews who had once chanted these prayers. And we were asking God to see our pain and remember us — to bring us at last to the good awaiting us at the end of the journey. That much I had understood from the prayers.

It is almost three decades later, and during these years I have encountered Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, reconstructionist, and secular Jews. I have explored the world of the yeshiva, studied hasidic writings, joined a havurah, and attended gatherings of young Yiddishists. When I was sixteen I joined a religious Zionist group, B'nei Akiva, and when I was thirty-six I joined the New Jewish Agenda. I have been exposed to many definitions of Jewish identity and peoplehood, all arguing over the meaning of being a Jew and all arguing that being a Jew has meaning.

And through all these encounters, I still carried within me the experience of the nine-year-old boy and the memory of the chanting. And when this nine-year-old boy would hear all the arguments, he would smile, for he knew that we Jews were on a journey together and we, and all those who would join us, would soon arrive at that special destination.

At another time and in another article, I would argue the meaning of our journey, the nature of its destination, and the secret it may hold for the entire planet. But for now I have described the meaning of my Jewish identity through the experience of an emotional young boy — a boy who found his way to the holy mountain and received his Torah through a song.

Jeff Oboler lives in the two world of Berkeley and New York. He is a member of the Acquarian Minyan (take a guess which city that's in), Director of the Martin Steinberg Center for Jewish Artists, and an activist in the national havurah movement. He is also co-editor of the New Jewish Times, a newsletter relating Jewish teachings to issues of planetary concerns.
W ith so many Jews uniting around common political perspectives and sexual preferences, Jewish rituals are constantly undergoing revision, revival, and even reinvention to make them relevant and responsible to contemporary and minority practitioners. The Passover Seder provides a fertile ground for these efforts. The major themes of Passover—liberation from oppression, renewal, spring, the birth of a minority nation in the midst of an empire—are affirmative, relatively free of theological assumptions, and particularly relevant to politically committed Jews. The celebration of Passover is centered around the Seder, a festive meal of family and friends, and is thus independent of centralized Jewish institutions. Every Seder is a unique “happening,” differing from household to household and from year to year. And the Hagadah itself, the written component of the Seder, is a compilation of texts from different ages and places, rather than a single canonized work; it is a blueprint for celebration, incomplete by nature. It even states that, “The more we tell of the departure, the more we are to be praised.”

Unlike many new Hagadot which center on particular political ideologies or concerns, THE TELLING: A LOVING HAGADAH FOR PASSOVER, edited by Dov ben Khayyim, is, in its own words, “non-sexist, yet traditional.” It features most of the traditional prayers and blessings, but includes alternate invocations to the Shekinah, the Divine Presence, which are in the feminine grammatical form to balance the masculine grammer of the traditional Hebrew. The English translation and narrative uses non-gender specific names for God. Also, the narrative of the Pesach story has been reworked to give recognition to women, such as the prophet Miriam and the midwives who refused to participate in the Pharaoh-ordered infanticide, who played important roles not acknowledged in traditional Hagadot.

One problem facing Jews who want to develop forms of Judaism which are more meaningful or more acceptable to them is that we all want Judaism to reflect our ideals. Judaism has developed a process of accretion. Bronze age nomadic traditions were overlaid with the customs of sedentary Canaanite tribes; Solomon added ideologies of monarchy and imperialism borrowed from Egypt, and instituted centralized worship. Through the ages, each period has added another layer of customs and meanings.

The Hagadah, which has developed by the same process, reflects the richness, diversity, and contradictions of Judaism. It contains Biblical quotations and commentary, Talmudic discussions, Kabbalistic gestures, statements about the universal dignity of human beings, and outbursts of anger at the oppression of Jews throughout history. It is universalistic and nationalistic, broadminded and narrow, trivial and profound.

If we want to revise or reinvent Judaism, we have to grapple with the fact that a Bronze age patriarchal deity and other Jewish rituals and concepts may not be acceptable to us now. In addition to adding new beliefs and customs, we must also integrate or deny any aspects of Judaism which may be archaic or meaningless to us.

THE TELLING de-emphasizes the theological and nationalistic elements present in the traditional Hagadah, and emphasizes the universal themes of Passover—freedom, the celebration of spring, a general human-centered spirituality. It omits a number of passages found in the standard text, including Talmudic discussions and many psalms of praise. Also, there is no translation or transliteration of the Grace After Meals, and the Hebrew is printed so small that it is nearly unreadable. One particularly nationalistic prayer, “Pour out thy wrath upon the nations…” (which invokes divine retribution against non-Jews who have oppressed Jews) has been omitted, and another prayer, “…who distinguishes between the sacred and the secular,” has been translated in universal terms not found in the original Hebrew (which has been omitted).

THE TELLING also enriches the traditional Hagadah with several additions. Many drawings and photographs illuminate the text, including Kabbalistic diagrams and photographs of Seder pictures by Ashkenazi, Sephardic, and Mizrahi Jews. A section in remembrance of the Warsaw ghetto uprising includes a Yiddish freedom fighters’ song and a poem by Hannah Senesh. Also, the inclusion of selections from the Song of Songs, traditionally read by couples during Passover, revives a celebration of love and sensuality, which is often missing from contemporary Seder.

In spite of a somewhat confusing and sometimes sloppy layout (e.g., Hebrew and English appearing so far apart from each other as to seem unrelated), THE TELLING is a fine text on which to base participatory, non-sexist Seder in which universal themes are emphasized within the framework of tradition.

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