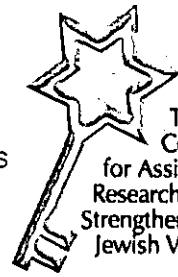




Field
Reports



The Rappaport
Center
for Assimilation
Research and
Strengthening
Jewish Vitality

Jewish Identity Patterns and Assimilation Trends among young adult Jews in Hungary

David Bitter

Jewish Identity Patterns and Assimilation Trends among young adult Jews in Hungary

David Bitter



The Rappaport Center for Assimilation Research
and Strengthening Jewish Vitality
Bar Ilan University - Faculty of Jewish Studies
2005 - 5765

פרסום מס' 2 בסדרה
מחקרי שדה
של מרכז רפפורט לחקר ההתבוללות ולחיזוק החיוניות היהודית

עורך הסדרה: צבי זוהר

#2 in the series
Field Reports of the Rappaport Center

Series Editor: Zvi Zohar

© כל הזכויות שמורות למחבר
ולמרכז רפפורט לחקר ההתבוללות ולחיזוק החיוניות היהודית
הפקולטה למדעי היהדות, אוניברסיטת בר-אילן, רמת-גן

ערכה: רחל אביטל
הביאה לדפוס: איריס אהרן
עיצוב עטיפה: סטודיו גלית גלעד, תל-אביב
נדפס בדפוס: הפיל הורוד, רמת-גן
התשס"ה

© All rights Reserved to the author and
The Rappaport Center for Assimilation Research
and Strengthening Jewish Vitality
The Faculty of Jewish Studies
Bar Ilan University, Ramat Gan, Israel
2005

Preface

The Rappaport Center for Assimilation Research and Strengthening Jewish Vitality is an independent R & D center, founded in Bar-Ilan University in the spring of 2001 at the initiative of Ruth and Baruch Rappaport, who identified assimilation as the primary danger to the future of the Jewish people.

A central working hypothesis of the Center is that assimilation is not an inexorable force of nature, but the result of human choices. In the past, Jews chose assimilation in order to avoid persecution and social stigmatization. Today, however, this is rarely the case. In our times, assimilation stems from the fact that for many Jews, maintaining Jewish involvements and affiliations seems less attractive than pursuing the alternatives open to them in the pluralistic societies of contemporary Europe and America.

To dismiss such subjective disaffection with Jewishness as merely a result of poor marketing and amateurish PR for Judaism is an easy way out – which we do not accept. Rather, a concurrent working hypothesis of the Rappaport Center is, that the tendency of many Jews to disassociate from Jewishness reflects real flaws and weaknesses existing in various areas and institutions of Jewish life today.

The first stage of all research projects of our Center is, therefore, to analyze an aspect or institution of Jewish life in order to identify and understand what might be contributing to “turning Jews off”. However, since assimilation is not a force of nature, it should be possible to move beyond analysis, characterizing and formulating options for mending and repair. This is the second stage of our activities, and these two aspects are reflected in our name: The Rappaport Center for Assimilation Research and Strengthening Jewish Vitality.

The Rappaport Center views the Jewish People as a global community made up of a large number of nodes that link and interconnect in multiple and complex ways. Recognizing and respecting the wide variety of contexts and aspects of Jewish life today, we realize that insights and solutions relevant to specific communities and institutions are not necessarily directly applicable elsewhere.

Yet the interconnectivity of Jews worldwide, enhanced by modern modes of communication, means that novel analyses and responses to problems and issues facing specific Jewish frameworks are of more than local significance. Thus, work carried out at our center can be of benefit to all leaders, activists and institutions motivated – as we are here at the Rappaport Center – to respond creatively to the challenges of assimilation and to enhance and strengthen Jewish vitality.

The Rappaport Center publishes a series titled “Research and Position Papers”, authored by outstanding scholars and experts. These papers present original and

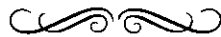
interesting findings concerning issues pertaining to assimilation and Jewish identity. Written at a high level of cultural and conceptual analysis, they are nevertheless not 'ivory tower' research; they bear operational implications for ameliorating and improving real-life situations. The research and position papers of the Rappaport Center are an invaluable and original series, and constitute a significant addition to the collection of any public and research library and to the bookshelves of all individuals interested in, or concerned with, the future of the Jewish people.

We are now happy to launch a new series titled "Field Reports" that provides insights and information with regard to specific issues of Jewish life and gives a voice to local community people addressing those issues in a straightforward manner.

We are pleased to present the second publication in this series:

Jewish Identity Patterns and Assimilation Trends among young adult Jews in Hungary, by David Bitter.

It is our hope that the insights expressed in this publication will motivate Jewish communities and leaders to take a new look at the strengths and weaknesses of the ways in which they have until now related to community life – and encourage them to seriously consider and implement new strategies, better suited to ensuring the future of this ancient people in today's turbulent times.



I would like to take this opportunity to thank all those whose efforts have enabled the publication of this report by David Bitter: Ms. Iris Aharon, organizational coordinator of the Rappaport center, who also took after proofreading and coordinating with press; Ms. Ruhi Avital (text editor); the Galit Galed studio (cover graphics), and Pink Pill press.

For all of us involved in the activities of the Rappaport Center, and indeed for all Jews and people of good will concerned with the vitality of the Jewish people, the publication of this report is an opportunity to acknowledge once again the vision and commitment of Ruth and Baruch Rappaport. It is their initiative and continued generosity that enable the manifold activities of the Rappaport Center – thus making an important contribution to ensuring the future well-being of the Jewish people. May they continue to enjoy together many years of health, activity, satisfaction and happiness.

Zvi Zohar, Director
The Rappaport Center for Assimilation Research
and Strengthening Jewish Vitality

Introduction

Jewish identity and assimilation in modern times are two sides of the same coin – one cannot speak of one without the other. If we wish to understand what makes certain Jews set out on a path of assimilation, we must first understand what and how they think about Judaism and being Jewish. One of the most important tasks is to uncover their cognitive tendencies when reflecting on Judaism. It is also necessary to search for the affective/emotional components of their identity (or the rejection or denial thereof), and to analyze their habits, customs and social behavior.

When trying to outline assimilation trends and their causes, one should not only apply the “Jewish” point of view - however one interprets such a standpoint. We can get a clearer picture of the psychological and sociological aspects of Jewish identity by analyzing the relationship between various dimensions of an identity. For example, how does a person’s cognitive approach to Judaism relate to his or her affective attachment? Or, how do the Jewish and the Hungarian ethnic identity dimensions relate to each other – do they supplement one another, “subtract” from each other, are they complementary, etc.?

In this paper, I will apply an indirect approach to the analysis of assimilation. I will first try to present and analyze the most important aspects of the cognitive approach that characterizes young secular Jews. The principal source for use in these points will be the results of a content analysis of 16 interviews conducted with young Jews (aged 22 – 27). I personally conducted the interviews with the subjects during January and February of 2004. The subjects were all Jewish¹, with no religious affiliation. At the time of the interview, none belonged to any Jewish organization, school or study program.

After briefly outlining the main content dimensions I will then discuss certain psychological aspects of the Jewish identity of young Hungarian Jews. The main source for these arguments comes from data analysis of a social-psychology survey I conducted in the spring of 2001 in the Lauder Javne Jewish Community School in Budapest. In the survey, 60 students of the school’s high school (aged 16-18) filled out three different questionnaires on ethnic identity².

1 They were Jewish according to their self-definition, which with two exceptions coincided with the halachic criteria.

2 The questionnaires that were used: 1) “The Spontaneous Self-Concept Measure” (McGuire and McGuire, 1981); 2) The Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) (Phinney, 1990); 3) “The Jewish-Hungarian Questionnaire” (constructed by me in 2001 for a social-psychology course project).

As can be seen, the respondents are not representative of Hungary's Jews or of the Jewish community as a whole. Consequently, I will write only about assumptions of the identity of Jews that may be applicable to young adult Jews who are at least aware of or explicitly acknowledge their Jewish origin. What makes the Jewish identity of these samples relevant – even considering the theoretical and practical constraints – is that they are of special interest to us in the context of assimilation. These are secular Jews, the majority of whom do not observe any Jewish customs or traditions. Most are not affiliated with any Jewish organizations, and in general, received no specific Jewish education or upbringing from home. They are young and appear to be struggling with their Jewish identity. Thus, understanding their identity issues is a must if one seeks to strengthen their Jewish identity and prevent this specific layer of this generation of Jews from assimilating. The point is not whether a specific identity factor is relevant in one area or another – rather, the goal is to gain insight into their general perception of Judaism and Jewry.

Once I have outlined some of the most important dimensions of these young adults' Jewish identity and way of thinking, I will try to explain what assimilation could mean in their case and what factors might draw them closer to or push them farther away from Judaism. Finally, I will present my conclusion as to why the current methods used by the Jewish community and organizations have not been effective enough in halting assimilation trends in general (even with outstanding minor successes), and how this could potentially be changed in the long term³.

The most important content dimensions of Judaism/being Jewish

The traditional “Jewish question”

It is interesting and astonishing to see just how prevalent traditional Jewish stereotypes are, even among today's generation, e.g.: that Jews are exceptionally good with money; eager to dominate the whole of social and political life; that they show solidarity with and help one another, while at the same time discriminating against non-Jews, etc. *Most young Jews feel that the “Jewish question” definitely exists* – although in most cases, they would be reluctant to call it that.

There are various aspects to this phenomenon. First, it appears that when reflecting on Judaism in general or oneself as a Jew (or a Jewish group), *most Hungarian*

3 Since I haven't been in contact with most of the Jewish organizations for years now, I cannot write on specific details of Jewish community life in Budapest. I rather attempt to outline general trends in thinking about Judaism and only implicitly refer to how certain community structures work and why those might or might not be functional.

Jews still define themselves in terms of the traditional Jewish stereotypes (which they attribute to the non-Jewish majority). Secondly, it is important to note that these stereotypes are based mainly on the anti-Semitic concepts and perceptions that were prevalent in the first half of the 20th century. These are mostly anti-Semitic in nature in that they generally relate to what is known as the “Jewish conspiracy”, discrimination or other kinds of negative traits and attributes. They can be called traditional, because – unlike the new (“modern”) anti-Semitism, which relates mostly to the denial of collective rights to Jews as a people or a nation – they are concerned with “Jewish character”, meaning that at least implicitly, they are based on “species theories”, or some other kind of pseudo-genetic theory that attempts to explain the differentia specifica of “Jewishness” by claiming hereditary factors that create (or contribute to) the “Jewish personality”.

Amazingly, most of the interviewees and participants in the survey do not necessarily deny anti-Semitic accusations. On the contrary, they seem motivated to come up with various examples of “bad”, “arrogant”, “discriminative” or “dishonest” Jews to prove just how unpleasant “they” can be. While theoretically they oppose and reject any form of anti-Semitism in politics or society in general, they seem somehow very concerned with the arguments. They appear not to reject some of the contents of the arguments, and show a surprising tendency to be emphatic and to verbalize their understanding of why “certain people” might come to these “conclusions” about Jews. With some exaggeration, it might be said *there is a major tendency to unconsciously (and unintentionally) internalize anti-Semitism* among a significant proportion of young Jews in present-day Hungary. In some cases, it appears in explicit form, while in others, we can infer it from the implicit content of the arguments.

At this point, we can already draw the conclusion that *most of these subjects are best characterized as being in a state of identity confusion*. In the majority of cases, they speak about “the Jews” as a disagreeable, homogenous group – as if they themselves were not members of that group. On the other hand, they do not deny that “in some way” they are Jewish “after all”. Although they appear to agree with certain anti-Semitic arguments, they are not at all comfortable with the negative connotations they imply. When noticing that their attitude might lead someone (e.g. the interviewer) to think they are anti-Semitic, they paradoxically reach for additional stereotypes– except that this time, they are positive ones (e.g. “Jews are clever”, “Jews are people who love their family”, etc.).

The political and sociological dimensions

Since for most people, reflection on Jewish themes appears to go hand in hand with thoughts on anti-Semitism, this almost automatically raises the political and sociological dimensions of Judaism/Jewry. It seems almost impossible to speak about Judaism/Jewry in present-day Hungary without relating to current political and social issues.

As mentioned above, even those who may have internalized certain aspects of anti-Semitic claims clearly oppose any form of political anti-Semitism. They typically equate the extreme right-wing political parties with explicit anti-Semitism, while referring to the moderate right-wing party as being at least implicitly anti-Semitic. Thus, for these young Jews, being Jewish somehow entails being a “left-winger”, and more specifically, maintaining a – both politically and generally – liberal worldview.

For them, being a liberal also means a belonging to a specific, easily definable sociological group. The majority of these Jews come from upper-middle-class families, many of whose members are involved in intellectual occupations, have several postgraduate degrees and speak various foreign languages. The parents’ generation is traditionally thought of as the “opposition” in Hungary and many were forced to emigrate during the Communist period because of their ideologies and/or activities.

To summarize this point: These young Jews deny or try to ward off almost every aspect of Jewish identity, emphasizing instead the “Hungarian”, “universal” or “liberal” values they espouse. On the other hand, *they seem to be very self- and group-conscious about the socio-economic and political group they belong to.*

Interestingly, this is the point where the arguments come to a full circle for these people. For if most Jews can be said to be liberal left-wing intellectuals, and a significant proportion of liberal left-wing intellectuals are Jewish, then most participants conclude that the two must actually be or mean one and the same. Thus, being Jewish becomes exceedingly relevant to the social-political question, and anti-Semitism is not viewed as something that must be tackled or fought against because it is logically false or morally wrong in principle. Neither is it by default something that concerns these subjects as Jews⁴. Since they deny being Jewish in most ways, there is nothing to be discussed in those realms. On the

4 Of course it is aimed at them because they are Jews – but the point is that many of the interviewed subjects claim that it is not their being Jewish that makes them oppose anti-Semites

other hand, if they do identify as a somewhat distinct and well definable sociological group, then fighting against them politically and socially appears to them to be a normal aspect of democracy⁵. So, in this sense, being Jewish is very much a question of identifying with certain political and sociological reference groups. This, of course, relates to how they view the past, especially Hungarian history – how they interpret Trianon, WWII or the revolution of 1956. I would say that in many cases in Hungary, *you can tell who is Jewish* - not by their thoughts and feelings on being Jewish, but to a far greater extent *by how they relate to Hungarian history and politics*⁶.

Judaism as a religion

There seems to be a general consensus concerning the question of religion. The majority of the interviewees and survey participants view Judaism as mainly or exclusively a religion. In addition, their interpretation of religion is very narrow: The only “valid” or “genuine” religiosity for them is some form of Orthodoxy, which they view as the “authentic” way of being Jewish. In their eyes, only those that observe all the customs and traditions and obey all the religious commandments and statutes count as a “real” Jew. Many of them argue that claiming to be Jewish without being religiously observant is dishonest, or in some sense a deception of oneself. According to this view, religion is something to be respected, because “at least” in it, there is a consistency between one’s identity and one’s actions and lifestyle. On the other hand, they are not at all comfortable with the notion of religion, and often criticize it outright, supposing or implying that being religious is somehow equivalent to losing one’s sanity and becoming a fundamentalist.

Apart from the obvious reasons, it is worth noting some additional points as to why so many define Judaism solely as a religion. First, it is important to mention the historical and political background of the definition of what being Jewish meant in Hungary. During the Communist period in Hungary, it was strictly forbidden to engage in any kind of Jewish activity other than the “accepted” religious practices (which were not looked upon positively either). Jews were officially represented by only one organization, the Hungarian Jewish Religious Community (officially, this is still the only organization in contact with the government as representatives

5 For instance, most Jews defend freedom of speech in the case of anti-Semitic remarks in the media, and are opposed to restricting hate speech by law.

6 This is an example of the mechanism of how anti-Semitic stereotypes are maintained, and how they might influence the political and social affiliations and aspirations of Jews, thus actually fulfilling the original claims in a certain sense.

of the Jewish community; that deals with monetary issues, etc.). After the change in the political system, Jews were given the choice of becoming an official Hungarian ethnic minority. It is hard to tell whether it was the impact of Communism, historical anti-Semitism and the Holocaust, perhaps both or something else, but the majority of Hungarian Jews most firmly rejected even the idea of being considered a minority in any sense. Thus, in Hungary, *Judaism is officially a religious denomination.*

A second reason for identifying Judaism with religious beliefs and practices could be the lack of Jewish education and upbringing in the home. Most young Jews inherited only a negative Jewish identity – to “beware” – not to speak of one’s being Jewish in the presence of non-Jews. Since young Hungarian Jews have very little idea of what it actually means to be Jewish, a large proportion of their knowledge comes from the “educational programs” offered by Jewish youth organizations and camps, the Judaic Studies courses given in Jewish schools, etc. What is common to these programs and courses is that they often place the emphasis on providing lexical information about the Jewish history or the “most important” aspects of halacha and how to be a “traditional Jew”.

The picture drawn of the “typical Jew” in these programs is an idealized-historical version of a Jew that lives in the ghetto or *shtetl*, reads sacred texts night and day, believes deeply in God, practices all kinds of strange customs and enjoys nothing more than to hop up onto a tabletop to dance to klezmer music. According to this view, *the closer you are to this abstract image of the “perfect” Jew, the more Jewish you are.*

A third factor involved in the compartmentalization of Judaism as a religion may be found in the above mentioned implicit identification with the political and social anti-Semitic opinions. Since anti-Semitic arguments are usually concerned with the ethnic and/or collective dimensions of Jews, *emphasizing the religious aspect of Judaism seems to provide a twofold psychological-strategic defense against the charges.* In the general sense, one can theoretically agree with arguments about “arrogance”, “discrimination” etc. not being desirable, while claiming that these arguments don’t actually apply to Jewry, for the concept of Judaism does not concern personality traits, ethnicity or group belonging at all – it is only a way of believing in God. Anti-Semitism in most cases is not anti-Judaism, so a religious aspect can theoretically be respected or at least be of neutral value. And in the case of a secular Jew – claiming that Judaism is exclusively a religion may lift the burden off one’s shoulders of “admitting” or “confessing” to their being Jewish in the face of anti-Semitic attacks.

The historical dimension

There are various studies available on the topic of the Holocaust and its impact on Jewish identity, so I will not expand on this subject here. What is worth mentioning though is that *most participants felt that persecution is a natural concomitant of being Jewish*. According to the internalized anti-Semitic arguments, there is some logical reason for why this is so (we could call this the notion of “confirming the system”), while others arguments fall into a category that is related to the theme of being a victim as one of the intrinsic attributes of Judaism.

Most people think it is important to remember the sorrowful Jewish past with its vicissitudes – though not specifically *because* they are Jewish. It seems more likely that *they generally think of Judaism and Jewry as a “phenomenon” of the past*. In their opinion, talking about enlightened secular European Jewry is a contradiction in terms. The majority believes that being Jewish today is possible only under two conditions: if one is religious or lives in Israel. Since they view Jewish religion as “shrinking” – for they place its locus of time in the historical past – they believe Judaism to be slowly, but steadily “drying out” in Europe. According to this point of view, the small minority of Jews who are outstandingly aware of themselves as Jews will either turn towards religion or move to Israel. This is viewed as a normal and acceptable process, for in the long run, it is not considered desirable for one to maintain an explicit Jewish identity and self-awareness if that person does not “behave accordingly”.

Jewish “mentality” and “inner enthusiasm” for Judaism

The following question must by now arise: If the majority of those interviewed and participating in the survey are unwilling to define themselves as ethnic Jews, are not religious, do not observe Jewish traditions and customs and do not really understand the concept of cultural identification etc. – then which dimension(s) of Judaism/Jewry do they find to bear any relevance to their Jewish identity? According to the interviews and the data analysis of the questionnaires, *the two most important factors of being Jewish for these subjects are “mentality” – “worldview” and an “inner enthusiasm, independent of specific content” (“feeling of ‘connection’”).* Also, these two factors are significantly more important to them vis-à-vis their Jewish identity than their Hungarian identity⁷. It seems still true what Jewish-Hungarian philosopher Béla Tábor wrote in 1943 about the identity

7 The most important factors of Hungarian identity are speaking Hungarian, having been born in Hungary and living in Hungary.

of many Jews: "For them the word 'Judaism' is deprived of all specificity, vaguely floating in fog, but this fog is what they love about it".⁸

The psychological aspects of Jewish identity

It is beyond the scope of this paper to elaborate on this topic, so I will only point out some of the most interesting findings of my surveys. The most consistent pattern of identity seems to be that *affectivity represents a much higher value for the subjects than either the cognitive (developmental) or activity components*. They have an emotional attachment to their Jewish origin, and this is independent of any cognitive aspect. This is consistent with the finding that they see "mentality" and "inner enthusiasm independent of specific content" as the most fundamental aspects of their Jewish identity.

However, the preference for affectivity seems inconsistent with their notion that tradition and customs – and religion in general – are an organic and integral part of Judaism. Psychologically speaking, this contradiction may lead to cognitive dissonance. *This is probably one of the foremost causes of young secular Jews' identity confusion*. They are somehow attached to Judaism – for their affect appears to be relatively high – and they show a preference for maintaining a positive affect; on the other hand they reject the cognitive components, and feel that by not engaging in Jewish activities and practices, they "do not have the right" to identify with Judaism.⁹

Yet there appears to be yet another dissonance in addition to that of affect vs. cognition: one that lies between the Jewish and Hungarian identities. *Most young people do not seem to be comfortable with having double/multiple identities*, with some even showing signs of bicultural stress. They do not want to stand out of the general homogenous majority society in any way; on the other hand, nor do they wish to become "faceless" or "average" people, and lose that "little extra" part of their identity, either.

In general, it can be said that *the Jewish identity or self-concept cannot be measured or dealt with on its own*. We can obtain a much clearer picture of the identity patterns once we relate the two to each other, analyzing not only absolute value levels, but the relative differences as well.

8 Tábor, Béla: Szakzsídóság vagy zsidó világnézet. Original edition in: ARARAT. Magyar zsidó évkönyv az 1943-as évre. Szerk.: Komlós Aladár. Budapest, 1943. (my own translation)

9 It could also be argued that believing so strongly in "inner enthusiasm" and "mentality" as the key factors contributing to one's Judaism is already the result of their prior dissonance concerning religiosity. From this perspective, emphasizing the affective components of being Jewish would "neutralize" their unease with the lack of cognitive and/or behavioral components.

Issues of assimilation

Assimilation: From a narrow definition to a broader concept

Psychologically, it may be said that assimilation is the inverse of marginalization. A person is marginalized when he is living in a society and/or cultural environment that he does not consider his own and is reluctant or unable for whatever reason to integrate into the general society and identify with its cultural values, beliefs and customs (e.g. the person wishes to maintain his identity by means of separatism; the society doesn't let him integrate; etc.). Thus, assimilation in this sense would mean identifying with the majority society and culture by means of totally losing or giving up one's "original" or other identity.

I find the above outlined definition too narrow for use in our case. This perspective of assimilation can be very productive for many social-psychology studies and theories dealing with identity issues. But in the current case of Jewry, I find it either tautological or simply impractical. It is tautological if we are talking of "absolute" assimilation. I would define someone as having assimilated in the "absolute" sense if that person could *potentially* be thought of as Jewish by the majority of Jews, but he either does not know about his Jewish origin, or if he does, it has absolutely no sociological or psychological impact on his life.

I find this notion of assimilation impractical in most cases, for the majority of Jews are neither "absolutely" assimilated, nor are they the "ideal" Jew, "100 percent" Jewish in body, mind and soul. Of course, it is natural for every community to try to draw boundaries, and when doing so, will attempt to define what it requires of a person to have or not to have, to do or not to do, to believe or not to believe etc., in order to be a member of that community. In the current discussion of Jewish assimilation, however, I don't find it useful to start drawing lines of who is and isn't Jewish anymore and who might still be, or to try to give a specific operational definition for assimilation.

I have difficulty with the above notions of assimilation because they are static in nature. They imply that assimilation is an all-or-nothing matter. I find a dynamic approach to be much more productive. According to such an approach, *assimilation is seen as a process rather than a state*: the process of consciously or unconsciously transforming one's identity or identities in such a way as to suit a certain – existing or imaginary – reference group. The relevant aspect of assimilation from this perspective is that it is the consequence of friction or dissonance between identity dimensions or identities. The person tries to resolve that dissonance by opening up to certain aspects of one identity dimension while turning away from others. This dynamic approach implies that a person who claims not to be Jewish is

simply not Jewish, so assimilation is not a topic for discussion. The interesting questions and aspects arise when one starts to inquire why and how certain people actively change their attitudes and identity patterns – even if this change is not based on a prior conscious decision.

Some factors contributing to assimilation and ways to counterbalance them

In the light of all that has been written so far, let us summarize the factors that may lead many young Jews today to slowly – but steadily – drift farther and farther away from Judaism. First, Judaism is taken to be mainly a religion. Religiosity is perceived as either a vestige of the past or an esoteric New Age phenomenon, but mainly as rigid, conservative and divorced from reality. Belief in God in general is perceived as a psychological escape route from reality and rationality. The specific theological claims of Judaism are rejected mostly on scientific, philosophical, social or political grounds. These attitudes towards religion and Judaism seem very stable and explicit, and are deeply rooted in Hungarian-Jewish leftist, intellectual society.

*Thus, most associations of Judaism with religion will yield negative thoughts and emotions in young Jews.*¹⁰ They perceive religion to be a major aspect of Judaism, but do not wish to take part in it. In my opinion, there are two principal means to change this trend. One could be to *totally restructure people's attitudes* concerning what religion is and potentially could be, how it could possibly change and evolve, what its relationship with rationality is, etc. This seems a very difficult and arduous route to choose, for changing beliefs so strong takes a great deal of time and energy, and requires very well trained teachers and organizers. Also, it is a question when and in what context such an attitude-forming process could take place, for people would have to be motivated to bring about such a change, too - not to mention the question of how to make contact with them in the first place.

Another way of changing attitudes towards Judaism could be to shed light on a form of Judaism that at present is not deeply rooted in religious beliefs and practices. If this approach is taken, *local Judaism is in urgent need of elite representatives who can provide it with specific non-traditionalist content*. It would need to be shown that it is possible to be sincerely Jewish without being Orthodox or neo-traditionalist, or by merely grasping at shallow pseudo-nostalgic feelings and a vague "fogginess". It would have to be convincingly argued that modern

10 Or at best they will perceive it to be a respected phenomenon of the past that they are interested to learn about in history classes or Judaic studies.

universal and Jewish values are not mutually exclusive. *A more pluralist approach would also have to be adopted*, in which it is understood that different people may reach different conclusions on the same questions, and that the conclusions may all be sound and true in certain contexts. The greatest challenge in choosing this route would be to open up to new interpretations of the concept of Judaism and what the content of being secularly Jewish could be, without at the same time stripping Judaism of its foremost values and reference points. Theoretically, it is possible to take a pluralist standpoint without adopting a completely relativistic attitude. The question is how to get these points across to as many people as possible without triggering intellectual chaos and the formation of an “anything goes” mentality.

The second important factor of assimilation is connected to the ethnical dimension of being Jewish – and consequently concerns many of the anti-Semitic dimensions. Most Jews think that strong affiliation with one’s Judaism or Jewish identity – or Judaism in general - is in principle discriminatory and an act that intrinsically brings about exclusion. Their “universal” values of the equality of all humankind are taken to be inconsistent with the notion of a people who should “in theory” be separate from the rest of the humankind etc. In my view, *this system of beliefs is so strong and prevalent throughout Hungarian society* that it is impossible to change it solely among the Jewish community. Hungarian society in general must undergo a long process of development regarding what it really means to live and think democratically. Perhaps joining the European Union will eventually have such an effect on Hungarians, and they will come to understand that the general satisfaction of a society is not associated with absolute homogeneity and conformity, but rather that it is contingent on the tolerance and appreciation of plurality and differences between individuals and peoples. The ultimate goal for Hungarian Jews would be not to feel that they need to “choose” between a Hungarian or a Jewish identity (or at least segments of it), but to understand that they can be “100%” Hungarian and European and at the same time Jewish. Moreover, it might be the case that only as *Jews can they fully explore and express their complete identities*. As Béla Tábor puts it in the previously cited article: “But for whom is Judaism an arable land, a personal issue, belief, world view? Who is Jewish because he feels/understands that he can *will* being Jewish freely, with conviction? Who understands that he can not only want the world out of *defiance* of being Jewish or *in addition* to being Jewish, but *by* being Jewish – moreover, that *only* from his “Jewishness” can he desire things great, universal, *everything?*”¹¹

11 Tábor, Béla: Szakzsídóság vagy zsidó világnézet. Original edition in: ARARAT. Magyar zsidó évkönyv az 1943-as évre. Szerk.: Komlós Aladár. Budapest, 1943. (my own translation)

There are several important points to consider concerning the undertaking of the ethnical issues of being Jewish. One of them is the challenge in general of being self-conscious about one's ethnic origin without the feeling that it separates or isolates the person from the majority of people. An issue connected to this challenge is what content to associate with that ethnic origin. Psychologically, it is understandable that most people are uncomfortable with identifying with a social label that is otherwise meaningless for them. Ethnicity without cultural, historical content really is only a social category or label – which, after all, could in itself bring about discrimination. A third point to consider here is related to a previously mentioned one: There must be an ethnically self-conscious Jewish elite with whom the majority of the Jewish people can at least passively identify.

The third factor of assimilation can be traced back to the general lack of knowledge about what Judaism is and what it may evolve to be. As has been mentioned before, most young Jews dismiss most of the cognitive categories related to being Jewish. In my view, this is a serious sign of potential assimilation, for even if this generation still shows a form of attachment to Jewry, their vague concepts and "internal enthusiasm without specific content" are probably not enough to transmit a healthy Jewish identity on to the next generation. *Young intellectual Hungarian Jews are in serious need of specific Jewish content that is closely associated neither with religious affiliation and customs nor with Zionism.* It must be shown that Judaism has intellectually stimulating aspects even in the modern era. With the everyday life and attitudes of the majority of Jews not differing at all from those of non-Jews, one of the greatest challenges is to at least fill in the ever-widening gap of knowledge. One of the key factors in ensuring the ability of the next generation to withstand total assimilation might be to somehow trigger the motivation of this generation to think and inquire about Jewish subjects, themes and topics, and to learn to appreciate the intellectual dimensions of Judaism.

Summary and conclusions: How to react to the processes of assimilation

Taking all the above into account, what conclusions can we arrive at as to how to counterbalance assimilation trends? I believe that the essence of the matter can be reduced to two major points. The first concerns whether the Hungarian Jewish community is potentially able to produce a *representative elite* layer whose life goal is to present a particular Jewish content. It is fairly evident that all the problems and challenges facing Hungarian Jewry are a question of personal coverage: a question of the existence or non-existence of Jewish talents and a

Jewish elite. The second point is related to the question of *what kind of content* this particular Jewish elite represents and what dimensions of Judaism it can opt for.

Clearly, the two points can only be dealt with together. What can be said about the weakness of the current programs, actions and reactions (related to halting assimilation trends) of Jewish organizations is that generally speaking, they are linked to either Zionist or religious ideologies, or concerned with questions of how to tackle anti-Semitism. Evidently, the heads and leaders of these organizations are mainly skilled only in their own fields: They are either well versed in religious studies or highly trained in the psychological machinery of Zionist education (which mainly builds on nationalistic-emotional aspects of identity). Another common aspect of these organizations is that they target mostly young teenagers and adolescents, and in rarer cases middle-aged people who lack any knowledge whatsoever of Judaism (generally due to their own parents' alienation from Judaism as an effect of the Holocaust and/or Communism). As a consequence – and I have referred to this earlier – these organizations are mainly concerned with what we could call “introductory programs”.

So it comes down to the following: The Zionist organizations generally appeal to emotions and try to strengthen people's commitment towards Israel. The organizations that are associated with some religious form or movement try to establish certain Jewish behaviors and beliefs, which are perceived by the members of those organizations as fundamental and indispensable aspects of Judaism. Those organizations involved with dealing with the struggle against anti-Semitism most commonly devise programs aimed at informing non-Jews about “who and what Jews really are”.

What is really missing is a particular content and an adequate elite related to matters and topics with which young intellectual adults coming from secular families can identify with. Secular intellectuals are likely to find existing youth movements boring, intellectually unchallenging and biased and they accuse religious organizations of fundamentalism and brainwashing. What is needed is the presence of Jewish issues in intellectual circles; these issues must be connected with and relevant to modern issues, worthy of debate among people who largely label themselves as liberals who espouse universal values.

I would personally assume that the most effective way to attain this goal would not be through existing Jewish organizations, in view of the fact that a significant proportion of Hungarian Jews would never as much as step foot in any of the official Jewish organizations. Instead, *we need to find and make use of a certain*

Jewish space (as Diana Pinto has worded it), which is there for everyone to take part in. This theoretical *Jewish space* cannot be tied to a specific location, space or organization: It is a space of Jewish content open to everyone to reflect on and debate. It is a space of high-quality intellectual and cultural stimulation. Thus, the evolution of this space would most probably have to be a grassroots, “bottom-up” process.¹² Also, since this process is based on the fundamentals of a democratic and pluralist value system, in order to facilitate and arrive at the evolution of such a space, it is first needed to strengthen democratic views and values in the whole of Hungarian society in general.

If and when such a Jewish space is found and exploited, it might succeed in reaching some of the most important current goals related to strengthening Hungarian Jewry: for Jews to freely and openly discuss Jewish topics; for Jews to freely and openly discuss these topics with non-Jews, too; for Jews to freely and openly represent Jewish values and a Jewish worldview when talking with non-Jews about any kind of issue.

In my view, only through the process outlined here – by creating a space open to everyone and with a content that is profound enough for the elite to be motivated to uncover all the specifics of that content – will it be possible to stimulate and revive a meaningful and vibrant Jewish life in Hungary.

12 By a “bottom-up” process I am referring to a development or structuring of this Jewish space without any organizations or leaders or people from the “top” trying to trigger or implement specific ideas, official activities, etc. The process starts from the “bottom,” the grassroots, through everyday conversations, debates, etc. between people. After a while – with only minimal outside help – people start to organize themselves and their activities, and only after a significant time does it reach the level at which it can be declared that such a space actually exists...

AFTERWORD

A year has passed since I wrote the first version of this research report for the Rappaport Center for Assimilation Research and Strengthening Jewish Vitality. I also gave an oral presentation of the most important findings and conclusions of this paper at the Paideia Alumni Conference in Stockholm (May, 2004). Since then, numerous people have read the draft, many of whom have given me feedback on it. After various discussions and debates, I arrived at the conclusion that some points needed more elaboration, certain arguments needed to be formulated differently (in order to communicate my thoughts better) and some inconsistencies needed to be resolved.

Since I decided not to change the contents of the original text for this publication (the only changes made were due to language editing), I feel the need to clarify and reflect on some points and arguments in the text. Accordingly, below is a brief collection of comments that should be treated as “post hoc footnotes” (the numbers do not refer to the numbers of footnotes in the text).

I feel I need to emphasize once more that my research samples are *not statistically representative* of the Hungarian Jewish community as a whole. I do believe that certain hypotheses and tentative generalizations can be formulated from the results, but what I wrote about is primarily applicable to the specific sample of people whom I interviewed and surveyed. Naturally, since in most cases I was trying to outline tendencies, none of the presented results hold true for *all* of the subjects, nor are all of the outlined dimensions based on statistically significant results.

It should be taken into account, that while both the interviews and the survey were done according to methodological standards of the social sciences, my *interpretations* of the results *could be fallible*, as are all interpretations of data. Consequently, they are *tentative*, in the sense that further research may modify them. Since this paper was written as a field report for the Rappaport Center and not in the format of a social or behavioral scientific journal, I felt it was most important to focus on the *problematic or emblematic aspects* of the topic, leaving out many of the “boring” details. It is also important to note that, as in many other social-science endeavors, my conclusions do not necessarily derive from the presented results. Rather, they are my best interpretations and conclusions, in relation to the presented topics and arguments.

Many people have asked me whether I truly believe that the outlined content dimensions of Judaism exist and function in the way I wrote about them. That is a very hard question, and I don't think I can answer it at this point without having

any second thoughts. These dimensions – or cognitive, emotional and behavioral patterns – are shown to “exist” by a quasi-objective observer (me, in this case) using certain methodological tools. Therefore, they primarily represent a *model of reality*: a slightly fuzzy “map” that helps us explain the results in the most effective way. Thus, for example, the interviewed people might not “actually” be “Jewish anti-Semites in their unconscious,” but characterizing them as somehow involuntarily and unconsciously holding internalized anti-Semitic views makes a lot of sense when trying to interpret the research results.

I explicitly stated that for this group of people, being Jewish somehow entails being a “left-winger,” and more specifically, maintaining – both politically and in general – a liberal worldview. This might not exactly be true anymore, and I have a suspicion that *different age groups might have varying views* in this respect. My impression is that the neo-Conservative ideologies of the current U.S. government and the neo-Zionist ideologies of the current Israeli government – and the global political changes in general – are shifting the political views of more and more Hungarian Jewish individuals, too. It would be very interesting to find out what effect this change in social and political attitudes may have on these people’s social/group identities.

Concerning the topic of how most Hungarian Jews react to political anti-Semitism, I stated in a footnote that many of the interviewed subjects claim that it is not the fact that they are Jewish that makes them oppose anti-Semitism. It should be stressed that these types of claims might result from the specific way the question was formulated. I would also point to the fact that if we follow the logic of the “mainstream” (of my samples), they shouldn’t really oppose anti-Semitism intellectually or “theoretically” (for it is seen as a quasi-legitimate – albeit undesirable – social/political view). On the contrary, their single “problem” should be that it is aimed against them!

I wrote that young Hungarian Jews have very little idea of “what it actually means to be Jewish.” Under no circumstances did I intend to imply that there is a single true or absolute meaning by which we can measure all meanings and identities. What I meant was that these people have very little idea of what it *could* actually mean, or that they lack significant knowledge on the *spectrum of meanings it already has* for different people.

In line with the above point, the following sentence also needs some clarification [according to the subjects of the samples]: “It is not considered desirable for one to maintain an explicit Jewish identity and self-awareness if that person does not ‘behave accordingly.’” This statement, in itself is a bit of a tautology. The question

is rather: *What counts as consistent behavior?* It is quite clear that most subjects share the view that identity “in itself” is only an abstraction that needs to be “backed up” by certain actions in order to gain stability and escape inconsistency. So, opening up the possibilities of the interpretation of “behaving accordingly” and the notion of consistency in relation to identity could potentially, in my view, have great impact on these people’s Jewish identities.

I wrote: “With the everyday life and attitudes of the majority of Jews not differing at all from those of non-Jews, one of the greatest challenges is to at least *fill in the ever-widening gap of knowledge*”. [italics added now] I should add that the challenge is not just about ways of transmitting knowledge. What if some people do not want that specific kind of knowledge in the first place? How does one create the *motivation to be receptive* to those intellectual layers of Judaism? And even supposing that the problem of the lack of knowledge has been solved, we still face the possibility of non-motivation, for *knowledge in itself could lead to rejection, antipathy or denial*. So the cited sentence should be read in the context of the following sentence in the text: “... to somehow *trigger the motivation* of this generation to think and inquire about Jewish subjects, themes and topics, and to learn to appreciate the intellectual dimensions of Judaism.” [italics added now]

There is at least one important point in the text where I appear to contradict myself. On the one hand, I defined a person as being “absolutely” assimilated if that person could *potentially* be thought of as Jewish by the majority of Jews, but either doesn’t know about his Jewish origin, or if he does, it has “absolutely no sociological or psychological impact on his life.” This definition implies that – from the sociological or psychological perspective – the fact of one’s being Jewish could have an influence on one’s identity *without* the person having *explicit attitudes* about it. On the other hand, I stated that the dynamic approach of assimilation implies that “a person who claims not to be Jewish is simply not Jewish, so assimilation is not a topic for discussion”. This sentence is a misstatement and contradicts the very context in which it can be read. As noted above, we can imagine a situation in which one *verbally denies* being Jewish, but from a third-person perspective, the “Jewish factor” can be shown to influence the person’s identity. I do not wish to elaborate on the very challenging issues of implicit attitudes or non-conscious identity patterns here; I only wish to point out, that in my survey and interviews, even though I only evaluated data from persons who stated that they were Jewish, I don’t agree in general with my former statement that assimilation is not an issue in the case of people who deny being Jewish, but who do have a Jewish ancestry and heritage.

Probably one of the most daring suggestions I made in my paper is the notion that we need to search for a kind of Jewish content that is primarily based on neither religion nor Zionism. I have to acknowledge that this is a very tentative view that *can and might be challenged* from different perspectives. To give only one important example: Can we really still talk about *specifically Jewish* values once we have stripped Judaism of its traditional and nationalistic aspects? Any “yes” answer to this question could easily be taken to imply that there is some sort of “core Jewishness” that underlies culture, religion and nationality (although this is not the only way that it can be interpreted). Take note: I also implied that modern universal values need not run counter to specifically Jewish values. But to talk about “core Jewishness” without tradition etc. could lead to notions of biological essentialism (identities based on pseudo-genetic theories), which are non-starters in that they are inconsistent with modern universal values. So the issue is more challenging than might have seemed at first glance: We are in search of values that are somehow distinctly Jewish, but at the same time neither traditionalist nor nationalistic, and do not imply any form of biological essentialism.

I’d like to thank Hilary Putnam for pointing out to me that the concept of “elite” (“local Judaism is in urgent need of elite representatives”) is not quite politically correct any more. He suggested I should replace the word “elite” with “charismatic”. Without elaborating on his arguments (and my views on them), I only wish to clarify that by “elite” I did not intend to imply a specific group of people that could be characterized as an “intellectual aristocracy”. Instead, the notion of elite I had in mind implied people who are *very well trained and educated* in Jewish intellectual fields, and who are generally accepted by the Jewish community (and hopefully by the non-Jewish “elite” as well). So if I had to replace the expression “elite representatives”, I’d most probably choose “professional representatives”.

Last, but not least, I would like to comment on the notion presented regarding the evolution of a Jewish space. I do believe that this process has to be bottom-up, starting from the grassroots. This, however, does not mean that I feel that outside help and stimulation of Jewish life are undesirable or unnecessary. Rather, my point is that identities cannot be “created” or “imposed” through activities organized by official institutions and organizations. A Jewish space open to everyone can only evolve in an environment in which the necessities of a society are allowed to rise to the surface in a “natural” way. What organizations and institutions involved in strengthening Jewish identities can do is *to try to understand the motivations* of people for acting in the way they do, and *help them formulate and express their desires* in a constructive way that will enable them to engage in social interactions in which the abovementioned Jewish space can be explored

and filled with content. Projects by organizations should fit the real needs of local Jews in such a way that they look upon the offered content as *tempting*. Instead of “accepting” help, they should “seek it out”. Let’s not forget: If Jewish identities are not to be ultimately anchored in a belief in God and/or “absolute” values, any action from the “top” that doesn’t enjoy at least the passive consent of the majority of a community, will always be interpreted as imposed.