THE JEW WITHIN

Self, Family, and Community in America

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FOR ADAM, EDEET, SHULIE, AND NATHANIEL

INTRODUCTION

The American Jewish community, rocked by reports of soaring intermarriage rates, rampant assimilation, and diminishing population, has been more concerned of late than ever with issues of Jewish identification and "continuity." Anxiety about the Jewish future has led to increased interest among scholars, communal leaders, and laypeople alike in the factors which shape, nourish, and sustain Jewish commitment. How does one nurture, engage, and mobilize actively involved Jews? What leads some Jews to place Jewish commitment at the very center of their lives, while others are content—or driven—to leave it at the margins? Are experiences during childhood the most critical in preparing the ground for Jewish commitment—or can adolescent or adult experiences prove of greater or equal value? And—last but surely not least—to what degree are American Jews similar to or different from other American ethnic and religious groups in regard to these issues? Are Jews as distinct as they sometimes claim or wish to be—or as typical as they claim or wish to be at other times, for other purposes?

These questions, we believe, are urgent. They have long engaged both of us not only professionally but personally, Cohen as a sociologist of Amer-

ican Jewish attitudes and behavior, Eisen as a student of American Jewish religious belief and modern Jewish thought and practice. However, we have suspected for some time that the answers generally proposed to these and similar questions are off the mark. American Jews at century's end, we believe, have come to view their Jewishness in a very different way than either their parents or they themselves did only two or three decades ago. Today's Jews, like their peers in other religious traditions, have turned inward in the search for meaning. They have moved away from the organizations, institutions, and causes that used to anchor identity and shape behavior. As a result, scholars too must revise their thinking. New research questions and new methods of pursuing these questions are required.

Three convictions guide and shape the present study. We shall argue that the discovery and construction of Jewish meaning in contemporary America (as of ultimate significance to life more generally) occur primarily in the private sphere. American Jews, we believe, enact and express their decisions about Judaism predominantly in the intimate spaces of love and family, friendship, and reflection. These are the spaces in which late-twentieth-century American individuals—Jewish or Gentile, religious or secular—are in their own eyes "most themselves" and least the creatures of roles and obligations imposed from the outside. "Faith is considered a private matter" in America, writes Robert Wuthnow in a recent study. "It is practiced mostly in the quiet recesses of personal life" (1998, p. vii). That is certainly true for the Jews we interviewed. By contrast, the importance of the public sphere—the organizational life which previously nourished and molded Jewish identity in this country, whether focused on philanthropy, social causes, support for Israel, or the fight against antisemitism—has severely diminished. The institutional arena is no longer the primary site where American Jews find and define the selves they are and the selves they want to be. Roles played in public settings, and the behavior on display there, are often regarded as just that: roles and displays that do not reveal, and certainly do not constitute, their true selves, the essence of who they are.

The principal authority for contemporary American Jews, in the absence of compelling religious norms and communal loyalties, has become the sovereign self. Each person now performs the labor of fashioning his or her own self, pulling together elements from the various Jewish and non-Jewish repertoires available, rather than stepping into an "inescapable framework" of identity (familial, communal, traditional) given at birth. Decisions about ritual observance and involvement in Jewish institutions are made and made again, considered and reconsidered, year by year and even week by week. American Jews speak of their lives, and of their Jewish beliefs and commitments, as a journey of ongoing questioning and development. They avoid the language of arrival. There are no final answers, no irrevocable commitments. The Jews we met in the course of our

research reserved the right to choose anew in the future, amending or reversing the decisions made today, and defended their children's right to do so for themselves in turn. Personal meanings are sought by these Jews for new as well as for inherited observances. If such meanings are not fashioned or found, the practices in question are revised or discarded—or not undertaken in the first place.

In order to get at behavior which takes place in the private sphere, and probe attitudes buried deep within the self, one must turn to a research method capable of taking us beyond the reports of public behavior and unreflective attitudes which are generally reflected in the results of questionnaires. Existing survey research into American Jews, which we shall draw upon extensively in the present work, along with studies of American religious behavior generally, has established that Jewish adults vary significantly in the extent and nature of their involvement. Survey data have provided an operational definition of Jewish identity and some sense of how to measure it. Adult involvement has been convincingly correlated with factors such as Jewish schooling, camp, and Israel experiences.

But research to date has not provided systematic knowledge of the complex ways in which Jews express and enact their Jewish identities. The highly personal factors that lead Jews to opt for serious Judaism have yet to be clarified. We know, for example, how often American Jews come to synagogue or visit Israel, but have not yet clarified the sense that Jews make of what transpires in these visits or how these experiences of being in synagogue or in Israel fit into the larger fabric of their personal Jewish meanings. Quantitative methods alone cannot grasp the ways in which contemporary American Jews follow and depart from the attitudes, behaviors, and conflicts that they witnessed as children. They cannot measure how being Jewish impinges on and reflects the ways they rear their own children, work out the division of household roles with their spouses, consider the ultimate matters of existence, express their love. Social scientists who work in this field would be the first to admit that such nuances and subtleties, critical to the understanding of American Jewish identity in its many varieties as well as to effective intervention in the formulation of identity, have yet to be adequately explored.

Understanding these matters is precisely our aim in the present study, and so we have followed in the footsteps of other scholars of contemporary American religion, most notably Wade Clark Roof (1993) and Robert Wuthnow (1989, 1994, 1998, 1999), a group which now includes feminist scholars of the Jewish experience who have stressed the importance of first-person narration (Davidman 1991; Kaufman 1991). All these researchers have integrated survey data with case studies based on extensive personal interviews. We have had their example very much in mind as we sought to document and explicate the habits of American Jewish hearts.

OUR METHOD

With the help of several associates, we conducted almost fifty in-depth interviews around the country over the past few years, most taking place over two sessions. Interviews of this length gave us access to meanings and motivations rarely uncovered through quantitative methods. No less important, they gave each respondent the opportunity to describe his or her Jewish development in some detail, and to do so in his or her own words.

Our interview subjects were suggested by contacts in synagogues, Jewish Federations, Jewish community centers, or other agencies. For reasons discussed below, the contacts were asked to recommend names of articulate men and women between the ages of about thirty and fifty who were members but not activists in their own or other organizations, or had become active only recently. We met with women and men in equal numbers, took care to interview Jews living in major centers of Jewish population as well as those in smaller cities and in suburbs, and conducted conversations in a wide variety of locales throughout the United States, from the Bay Area and Los Angeles on the West Coast through Chicago and Detroit in the Midwest, to Boston, New Haven, Manhattan, and suburban New York in the Northeast. Jews living in or around large urban centers predominate in our sample, as they do in the American Jewish population as a whole. In several cases we intentionally interviewed individuals whose involvement fell "over the line" of moderate affiliation on either side. We also interviewed three individuals who had come to study for a year at the Pardes Institute in Jerusalem.

The use of interview data has obvious advantages, affording insight into meaning, motivation, and conflict not easily attained through yes and no questions or rating scales that run from one to five. At the same time, we should be aware that the past may not have been exactly as our informants describe it. Grandparents in particular seem to be idealized in memory, while parents are recalled no less selectively but with significantly less positive valence. Our interviewees sometimes lend to their own thoughts or events in their lives a degree of clarity in describing them to us that was not present when the thoughts or events actually transpired. At other moments, precisely the opposite occurred: lacking the ability to articulate thoughts or feelings, even the most thoughtful people in our sample became tongue-tied, stumbling where one would have expected them to be sure-footed. Interviews, as Wuthnow warns, do not constitute "a portal through which we can view the past as it actually happened." Nor do they offer "a peephole into the inner consciousness of those giving the accounts." Indeed, "the language of spiritual journey" to which our subjects naturally gravitated in response to our questioning has itself "become a kind of genre," causing the speaker to "emphasize changing conceptions

and experiences of faith" while downplaying the importance of that which is inherited, static, or routine (1999, pp. xxxiii–xxxiv).

Our focus on the baby boomer generation (with the exception of several individuals selected intentionally in order to explore generational differences) follows recent research into patterns of Christian belief and practice in this country. The demographic significance and societal influence of this cohort in the Jewish community are comparable to its significance and influence in America generally. Baby boomers make up nearly half of the adult population of American Jewry. What is more, comparison has been part of our purpose in this study from the outset. We wanted to test the degree of uniqueness in American Jewish attitudes and behavior vis-à-vis other American ethnic and religious groups that likewise find themselves on the boundary between "modern" and "postmodern" forms of commitment.

Recent scholarship on religion in the United States, for example, has demonstrated a steep decline in the membership of liberal churches, the erosion of denominational boundaries, the privatization of religious impulse, and a pervasive consumerism when it comes to church membership and attendance. Would we find these developments among moderately affiliated Jews? Recent scholarship on ethnicity has shown a decline in the social bases for ethnic loyalties along with the persistence of a superficial, noncompelling affiliation motivated in large part by nostalgia. Would Jews, too, exhibit such patterns? The answer in both cases turned out to be yes—though not without important nos, qualifications, and complications that we shall seek to elucidate. We want to give full weight to the uniqueness of the American situation and the Jewish beliefs and practices it has called forth, as well as to the "rules" of modern life that have limited Jewish options in every modern Western diaspora, and continue to do so to no small extent in America.

We concentrated on the "moderately affiliated Jews" who make up the great bulk of American Jewry, in large measure because they *are* so significant numerically. The "core group" comprising those who are most active Jewishly is estimated to constitute about 20 percent of the American Jewish population, while those who are completely uninvolved in organized Jewish life, hardly ever setting foot in a Jewish communal setting throughout the entire course of their lives, account for another 20 percent. Operationally, we have defined "moderately affiliated Jews" as those who belong to a Jewish institution (a Jewish community center, synagogue, or organization) but are not as involved, learned, or pious as the most highly engaged 20–25 percent of American Jews. (We employed scales of ritual observance, institutional participation, and belief in order to identify members of this target group [Cohen 1991b].) Our aim was to get to know the average members of Reform and Conservative congregations, Hadassah chapters, and the like. These individuals, for at least a significant portion

of their lives, are at least somewhat involved with Jewish institutions and traditions. And precisely because they are neither firmly committed to active Jewish life nor firmly ensconced in non-involvement, they are for our purposes the most interesting, exhibiting both thoughtfulness and fluidity as they chart their way to Jewish attitudes and behaviors with which they feel comfortable.

The National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS), the authoritative study of American Jewry sponsored by the Council of Jewish Federations in 1990, provides several parameters which support this choice of subject (Kosmin et al. 1991; Goldstein 1992). Of married Jewish adults between the ages of thirty-five and fifty, our target generation in this study, fully three-quarters identify as Reform or Conservative Jews, as do the bulk of our sample. Just over one-quarter reported that they attend worship services monthly or more often than that: those who do so would tend to be numbered among the "activists" rather than the moderately affiliated, and thus would fall outside our target population. About a quarter of the NJPS sample were married to non-Jews, and most of this group belong to the unaffiliated segment of American Jewry, who fall outside our sample on the other end. Only a handful of our respondents are intermarried.

All our subjects, as well as their spouses or significant others, are cited or described in this study with fictitious names meant to protect the privacy we promised them. All the interviews were taped, and then either transcribed verbatim or extensively summarized. The interview protocol is presented in appendix A. One-on-one conversations were supplemented at the outset by two focus groups that followed the same protocol but allowed for collective give-and-take.

The survey data on which we shall draw derive from a mail-back questionnaire (also reprinted in appendix B) which was completed by 1,005 Jewish respondents throughout the United States. The survey was carried out in June and July 1997 (after interviewing for our study had been completed) by the Washington office of Market Facts, Inc., a national survey research company. Respondents belong to the company's Consumer Mail Panel, consisting of about 368,000 Americans who have agreed to be surveyed from time to time on a variety of concerns. Of those, about 8,400 individuals were potentially eligible for sampling for this study. Questionnaires were sent to the Jewish members of 1,400 households.

Market Facts drew the sample so as to approximate the demographic characteristics of the NJPS. Eligible households contained at least one Jewish adult, as previously reported in responses to questions on religious identity posed in an annual screening questionnaire that collected information on a variety of basic socio-demographic variables from each panel member. NJPS determined that approximately 80 percent of adults who are Jewish also said that their *religion* is Jewish (Kosmin et al. 1991, pp. 5–6). Jews who did not identify as Jewish for purposes of religion (so-called

secular or ethnic Jews) reported lower levels of Jewish involvement (e.g., observance, affiliation, in-marriage). Hence, a survey such as this one, based upon a sample who claim to be Jewish by religion, underrepresents the Jewishly less involved. As a consequence, our survey slightly overestimates the overall population's levels of Jewish identification, making it appear that American Jews are more ritually observant, organizationally affiliated, socially cohesive, and emotionally engaged in being Jewish than they are in reality.

OUR FINDINGS

The single most important finding of our study is decidedly double-edged. On the one hand, the American Jews we interviewed overwhelmingly follow the pattern explained fifteen years ago by Bellah and his co-authors in *Habits of the Heart.* The "first language" that our subjects speak is by and large one of profound individualism. Their language is universalist, liberal, and personalist. Community—though a buzzword in our interviews, a felt need, even a real hunger for some—is a "second language," subordinate to the first. Our subjects, like Americans more generally today, do not speak it as often or as well.

Indeed, to a surprising degree, we found that that first language remains predominant among moderately affiliated American Jews even after the second language has found expression and enactment. Community and commitment, in fact, are repeatedly redefined and apprehended by our subjects in terms acceptable to sovereign and ever-questing selves. Only in those terms is commitment possible and community permitted to obligate the self. The more committed and active among our sample told us repeatedly that they decide week by week, year by year, which rituals they will observe and how they will observe them. They also repeatedly reconsider which organizations and charities they will join or support, and to what degree; which beliefs they will hold, which loyalties they will acknowledge. The self is and must remain autonomous and sovereign.

The decline of communal obligations, the rise of sovereign individuals, is of course the modern story par excellence, one that has been told and retold by countless scholars of religion in the modern world. Individuals newly liberated from inherited identities and obligations seize hold with a vengeance of the autonomy afforded them, and are driven as a result to reject or recast traditional beliefs and behaviors. Religious life, if it survives at all in a "disenchanted world," transpires "in pianissimo," as Max Weber put it: in personal relations selected by each person. The "sacred canopy" (Peter Berger's famous term) no longer overarches existence, and so the demand to choose and re-choose identity (which Berger called the "heretical imperative") is inescapable (Berger 1969, 1980). Nowhere have these processes been more evident than among Jews. Their move "out of the

ghetto" and into major achievement in many areas of modern life has often been chronicled. The continuing effects of this transformation in America have also been the subjects of much scholarly attention, including our own.

Yet here the postmodern story weighs in: the labor of fashioning a Jewish self remains deeply significant to moderately affiliated American Jews. We can state with confidence that the quest for Jewish meaning is extremely important to our subjects, just as the search for meaning is important to contemporary Americans more generally (Bellah et al. 1996; Wuthnow 1994; Roof and McKinney 1987). Middle-range American Jews seek an abiding significance in their lives that goes beyond the activities of daily life and the limits of their own mortality. They readily discussed their highly personal searches for transcendent meaning, and confessed (to a degree that surprised us) to belief in God. Our subjects reported a strong desire to find a sense of direction and ultimate purpose, and the wish to find it largely or entirely in the framework of Jewish practices and beliefs. The fact that decisions concerning Judaism are inextricably wrapped up in the search for personal meaning to life is perhaps the reason that our subjects most often expressed their Judaism in the private sphere, where transcendent purpose is most readily discovered and located by contemporary Americans of whatever tradition. Judaism "happens" at home, with family or good friends. It transpires in the place within the self given over to reflection, longing, faith, and doubt.

This development marks in several crucial respects a veering away from the modern story: the "grand narratives" of emancipation and enlightenment in which the rejection of religion has figured prominently. Far from leaving faith behind in favor of secular national or communal loyalties, as many of their parents and grandparents did, the Jews we interviewed are dissatisfied with secular affiliations and are in search of personal spiritual meaning. Where previous generations abandoned ritual practice almost entirely, believing it outdated or superstitious, Jews today are returning to ritual observance and making it a major locus of personal meaning. Avowed discontent with the disruptive and alienating aspects of modern life has led many of them to seek out religious communities that hold the promise of personal meaning as well as of enriched and enduring family relations. Finally, where the parents and grandparents of those we interviewed had in many cases lost faith in God and lost interest in all but the ethical and historical aspects of the Jewish tradition, moderately affiliated Jews today are not abandoning tradition but refashioning it. They have no wish to sacrifice the particularity of ethnic and religious loyalty in the name of America or of humanity.

Quite the opposite: the Jews who speak in the pages that follow take the existence of "multiple life-worlds" and "local narratives" for granted, and value them as precious goods. They aim to make Jewish narratives part of

their own personal stories, by picking and choosing among new and inherited practices and texts so as to find the combination they as individuals can authentically affirm. This attempted synthesis of disparate commitments, including the commitment to an unending journey, does not leave moderately affiliated Jews untroubled. Almost all our subjects, including the most Jewishly active among them, knowingly and unknowingly betrayed enduring ambivalence toward the organizations, institutions, commitments, and norms which constitute Jewish life: families of origin, synagogues, federations, God. Ambivalence continues to be felt and expressed, even after the decision has been made to be a serious Jewish self; freedom to choose is retained even after the recognition that one has been "chosen" and is obligated. This is, perhaps, inevitable given the close association between Jewish identity and the family ties that are the source of intense and conflicting emotion. But the combination of modern and postmodern patterns at work inside these selves also plays its part. Our aim in chapter 2 is to set out these complexities of self-conception, drawing as always upon other research into these matters, including our own. The kinds of selves Jews are and want to be go a long way toward explaining the eclectic, idiosyncratic, and nearly always ambivalent patterns of behavior and belief that we will examine in succeeding chapters of the book.

Our focus in chapter 3 is the family: the single most important source of Jewish identity, and the site at which it is most frequently enacted and contested. Childhood relations with grandparents were consistently recalled by our subjects as key positive influences upon their later adult decisions on behalf of more active Jewishness. Reaction to parents, as we would expect, was far more equivocal. We heard stories about parental pressures toward observance which our subjects resented and resisted. We heard too—and perhaps more often—of childhood homes that were indifferent to Jewish observance, a heritage likewise rejected (with full appreciation of the irony involved) but this time in *favor* of the tradition. Spouses, the individuals who exercise the most immediate influence on what adult Jews will decide to do or believe, likewise have a complex impact: at times supportive of Jewish activity and involvement, at other times antagonistic, and in still other cases—remarkably so, perhaps—indifferent.

Family has this impact, in large measure, because it is the stimulus to and location of ritual observance, our subject in chapter 4. Ritual practice is without doubt the most important way in which moderately affiliated Jews express their Jewish commitments, the means through which "the Jew within" steps outside the self, in the company of family, into times and spaces hallowed by centuries of tradition. Our subjects spoke warmly and with great enthusiasm about their holiday observance, describing at length the choices they have made from among the repertoire available to them thanks to the Jewish calendar. The reason given for those choices was

almost always the satisfaction provided by enhanced connection to family. Again and again, as the holidays approach, moderately affiliated Jews—whatever their denomination or past practice—are impelled to reflect on whether and how Jewish sacred time should affect them. Year by year, in the framework of the holidays, they discover, adapt, and construct Jewish meaning, inserting it into the course of everyday life.

Holidays thus serve as a major marker of Jewish ethnic and religious difference, our subject in chapter 5. In part, the observance of ritual occasions, distinctive to Jews, has the effect of marking and heightening ethnic difference. When Jews take off from work on the High Holidays, eat matzo rather than bread during Passover, or avoid the celebration of Christmas, they are departing from the American majority in ways that are noticed by children, co-workers, spouses, and themselves. No less importantly, however, their observance may testify to the *erosion* of ethnic attachment. The Passover seder, as sociologists Marshall Sklare and Joseph Greenblum pointed out several decades ago, may be such a popular observance precisely because it takes place in private space and leisure time (at home in the evening), is child-centered, carries a universalist theme (liberation), and occurs only once a year. It and other holidays might well be witnessing to the triumph of "symbolic ethnicity," partaking more of nostalgia than commitment.

Our concern was to find out what moderately affiliated Jews make of their own Jewish distinctiveness: how they calculate the balance of their obligation to Jews as opposed to Gentile Americans (or humanity as a whole); whether and how much they worry about antisemitism; the ways in which "vertical" connection to the Jews of past generations translates into "horizontal" connection with other Jews in the present. We were surprised by the degree of "tribalism" exhibited by our subjects: the oft-expressed conviction that they were Jews, period, because one or both of their parents had been Jews, regardless of what they believed or observed, and regardless of whether they ever had appeared or would appear on the membership list of any Jewish organization. Their children would be Jewish in turn, for the same reasons of blood, and their children after them. Yet these same Jews took pains at other moments to play down particularist loyalties, insisting that Jews are no more obligated to other Jews than to the human family as a whole. They showed signs of far less ethnic commitment than was common a decade or two ago.

This pattern is new; all three of the major pillars on which Jewish identity in the United States has rested in recent decades—as we shall see in chapter 6—have been considerably undermined. The Jews we studied betrayed little interest in or knowledge of the organized Jewish community. They drew universalist lessons from the Holocaust far more than they related to it as a Jewish tragedy with consequences for the survival of the Jewish people; they exhibited far less attachment to the state of Israel than

was the case only a few years ago. The implications of these developments for the future of Jewish ethnic distinctiveness in America seem to us to be profound.

American Jews' relation to God and synagogue, our subject in chapter 7, also has serious implications. The Jews we interviewed overwhelmingly believe in God, far more so than we would have expected or that survey data about American Jews led us to believe. They are also surprisingly content with, and even fondly attached to, their synagogues. But they rarely make any straightforward connection between the two. God for them is a Being or Force who/which they encounter as individual human beings rather than as Jews. They overwhelmingly do not believe in special divine commandments to the Jews, or special divine providence watching over Jews. When they come to synagogue, it is to enjoy the pleasures of Jewish community and of attachment to Jewish tradition. God is rarely sought or found there, and is certainly not brought near by the words of the prayer book, which—to our subjects at least—rarely carry personal significance. We were repeatedly struck by the salience of faith to our respondents—and by their unease with it. They revealed a significant degree of both devotion and disquiet, sometimes in the very same sentence. This pattern of alienation and belonging is not easily unraveled, and—we expect—will not soon be reversed.

In the conclusion to the study we shall review the patterns of American Jewish selfhood and attachment that we have examined, and compare them with trends discerned by other researchers in America generally. Belief in God, for example, plays far less of a role among Jews in motivating involvement than it does among American Catholics and Protestants; home observance and attachment to primordial community, by contrast, are both far more important.

We will then take up the question of what brought the Jews we encountered to make the sort of commitments which now characterize them, and will consider the likely consequences of these commitments both for American Jewish selves and for the community as a whole.

Our findings, in sum, are complex—in part because the present moment is one of striking personal and communal transition, but principally because the many voices of our subjects, heard clearly and at length in the pages which follow, are rich with diversity, thoughtfulness, and ambivalence. Marshall Sklare and Joseph Greenblum, introducing their landmark study of American Jews a generation ago, warned that the temptation to bias is strong among scholars in the field. "Frequently the Jewish social scientist is in conflict: he prides himself on accepting his group identity but he wishes to separate himself from a community which does not seem to honor his values." For example, we confess at the outset that the atti-

tudes and behaviors we encountered in the course of our research occasioned no little perplexity on our part, and much unease. The sovereign Jewish self, in its search for personal fulfillment, may turn out to be the stimulus for personal growth and fulfillment in a Jewish context and may even prove the stimulus to Jewish communal renewal and creativity as yet unimagined in America. Or—more likely, in our view—it will contribute to the dissolution of communal institutions and intergenerational commitment, thereby weakening the very sources of its own Jewish fulfillment and making them far less available to succeeding generations. Our understanding of this issue draws upon both our personal Jewish commitments and the analytical tools we bring to bear. We have tried to lend a sympathetic but not uncritical ear to moderately affiliated American Jews as they told us what matters most to them about Judaism, and why.

"The most important thing a Jew should do as a Jew," we were told by one person who could have been speaking for nearly all those we interviewed, "is to pursue a Jewish journey . . . not to ignore Judaism or to give up on it . . . to be open to it." That has been our task as well, as we set out to study this generation's journey. We have sought to go inside, to listen carefully, and to reckon with the contradictions we encountered as well as with our subjects' attempts to live with or get around these contradictions —part of their search, and ours, for Jewish meanings in America.

2

THE SOVEREIGN SELF

> I remember at my bat mitzvah having a thought, a prayer, and saying: Let me never leave this. I also remember being surprised, because that was a time when I couldn't imagine Judaism *not* being important to me—it was almost like knowing what was coming. I remember thinking it and being surprised I was thinking it.
>
> —Molly

Molly is a physician in her forties who lives in suburban Boston: thoughtful, soft-spoken, and extremely articulate—reason enough to take careful note of what she has to say about the formative experiences which led to her current commitments as a Jew. We begin with her, however, for another reason as well: because the key words in this passage from our conversation, "I remember," are repeated no less than three times—reflecting their importance to our interview sample as a whole. It would not be too much to say that *what* Molly and the other Jews we interviewed remember of their Jewish journeys, and—more importantly—*how* they remember it, provide the clues to a new sort of Jewish self emerging in the United States in recent decades. Our purpose in this chapter is to provide a sketch of that Jewish self and to begin to ponder the implications of its emergence.

The first thing that Molly remembers is a key moment in her development as a person and a Jew, her bat mitzvah, which is still vivid in her mind despite the passage of three decades. Similar events or experiences from childhood or adolescence figured prominently in almost every interview