



# What Is an American Jew?

Yehuda Kurtzer

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## I. Jewish Identity as Essential/ Ontological

### 1. Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 44a

אֲמַר רַבִּי אֲבָא בַר זְבִדָּא: אִם  
עַל פִּי שְׁחָטָא – יִשְׂרָאֵל הוּא. אֲמַר רַבִּי אֲבָא: הֵינּוּ  
דְּאִמְרֵי אִינְשֵׁי "אֲסָא דְקָאִי בִּינֵי חִילְפֵי אֲסָא שְׁמִיָּה,  
וְאֲסָא קָרוּ לֶיהּ". וְגַם עֲבָרוּ אֶת בְּרִיתִי אֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתִי

Israel has sinned. R. Abba b. Zabda said: Even though [the people] have sinned, they are still [called] Israel. R. Abba said: Thus people say, A myrtle, though it stands among reeds, is still a myrtle, and it is so called.

### 2. Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew* (University of California Press, 1994), p. 240-241

There are significant differences between Jewishness and the modern sociopolitical senses of race. The primary dissimilarities involve the fact that people can convert to Judaism, which would seem to suggest that it is merely a confession, and that there are no "racial" characteristics that mark Jews off from other human groups...More revealingly, however, the convert's name is changed to "ben Avraham" or "bas Avraham," son or daughter of Abraham. The convert is adopted into the family and assigned a new "genealogical" identity, but also, since Abraham is the first convert in Jewish tradition, converts are his descendants in that sense as well. There is thus a sense in which the convert becomes the ideal type of the Jew.

On the other hand, Jews do not sense of themselves that their association is confessional, that it is based on common religion, for many people whom both religious and secular Jews call Jewish neither believe nor practice the religion at all. This kind of "racialism" is built into the formal cultural system itself. While you can convert *in* to Judaism, you cannot convert *out*, and anyone born of Jewish parents is Jewish, even if she doesn't know it. Jewishness is thus certainly not contiguous with modern notions of race, which have been, furthermore discredited empirically. Nor are Jews marked off biologically, as people are marked for sex; nor finally, can Jews be reliably identified by a set of practices, as for example gay people can. On the other hand, Jewishness is not an affective association of individuals either. Jews in general feel not that Jewishness is something they have freely chosen but rather that it is an essence- an essence often nearly empty of any content other than itself – which has been ascribed – sometimes even imposed – on them by birth.

### 3. Lenny Bruce, "Jewish and Goyish"

Now I neologize Jewish and goyish.

Dig: I'm Jewish. Count Basie's Jewish. Ray Charles is Jewish. Eddie Cantor's goyish.

B'nai Brith is goyish; Hadassah, Jewish. Marine corps—heavy goyim, dangerous.

Kool-Aid is goyish. All Drake's cakes are goyish. Pumpernickel is Jewish, and, as you know, white bread is very goyish. Instant potatoes—goyish. Black cherry soda's very Jewish. Macaroons are very Jewish—very Jewish cake. Fruit salad is Jewish. Lime jello is goyish. Lime soda is very goyish.

Trailer parks are so goyish that Jews won't go near them. Jack Paar Show is very goyish.

Underwear is definitely goyish. Balls are goyish. Titties are Jewish. Mouths are Jewish.

All Italians are Jewish. Greeks are goyish—bad sauce.

Eugene O'Neill—Jewish; Dylan Thomas, Jewish. Steve is goyish, though. It's the hair. He combs his hair in the boys' room with that soap all the time.

Louis. That's my name in Jewish. Louis Schneider.

"Why haven't ya got Louis Schneider up on the marquee?"

"Well, 'cause it's not show business. It doesn't fit."

"No, no, I don't wanna hear that. You Jewish?"

"Yeah."

"You ashamed of it?"

"Yeah."

"Why you ashamed you're Jewish?"

"I'm not anymore! But it used to be a problem. Until Playboy magazine came out."

## II. Identity in Crisis: Three Critiques

### 4. Herodotus, *Histories* 2. 35—36

Translation by Aubrey de Sélincourt, available online at [livius.org](http://livius.org).

About Egypt I shall have a great deal to relate because of the number of remarkable things which the country contains, and because of the fact that more monuments which beggar description are to be found there than anywhere else in the world. That is reason enough for my dwelling on it at greater length. Not only is the Egyptian climate peculiar to their country, and the Nile different in its behavior from other rivers elsewhere, but the Egyptians themselves in their manners and customs seem to have reversed the ordinary practices of mankind. For instance, women attend market and are employed in trade, while men stay at home and do the weaving. In weaving the normal way is to work the threads of the weft upwards, but the Egyptians work them downwards. Men in Egypt carry loads on their heads, women on their shoulders; women pass water standing up, men sitting down. To ease themselves they go indoors, but eat outside in the streets, on the theory that what is unseemly but necessary should be done in private, and what is not unseemly should be done openly.

No woman holds priestly office, either in the service of goddess or god; only men are priests in both cases. Sons are under no compulsion to support their parents if they do not wish to do so, but daughters must, whether they wish it or not. Elsewhere priests grow their hair long; in Egypt they shave their heads. In other nations the relatives of the deceased in time of mourning cut their hair, but the Egyptians, who shave at all other times, mark a death by letting the hair grow both on head and chin. They live with their animals - unlike the rest of the world, who live apart from them. Other men live on wheat and barley, but any Egyptian who does so is blamed for it, their bread being made from spelt, or *Zea* as some call it.

Dough they knead with their feet, but clay with their hands - and even handle dung. They practice circumcision, while men of other nations (except those who have learnt from Egypt) leave their private parts as nature made them. Men in Egypt have two garments each, women only one. The ordinary practice at sea is to make sheets fast to ring-bolts fitted outboard; the Egyptians fit them inboard. In writing or calculating, instead of going, like the Greeks, from left to right, the Egyptians go from right to left - and obstinately maintain that theirs is the dexterous method, ours being left-handed and awkward. They have two sorts of writing, the sacred and the common.

5. E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion* (Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 13

I emphasize this predicament because it has some importance for an understanding of theories of primitive religion. One may, indeed, find some word or phrase in one's own language by which to translate a native concept. We may translate some word of theirs by 'god' or 'spirit' or 'soul' or 'ghost', but then we have to ask not only what the word we so translate means to the natives but also what the word by which it is translated means to the translator and his readers. We have to determine a double meaning; and at best there can be no more than a partial overlap of meaning between the two words.

The semantic difficulties are always considerable and can only be partially overcome. The problem they present may be viewed also in reverse, in the attempt by missionaries to translate the Bible into native tongues. It was bad enough when Greek metaphysical concepts had to be expressed in Latin, and, as we know, misunderstandings arose from this transportation of concepts from the one language into the other. Then the Bible was translated into various other European languages, English, French, German, Italian, &c., and I have found it an illuminating experiment to take some portion of it, shall we say a Psalm, and see how these different languages have stamped it with their particular characters. Those who know Hebrew or some other Semitic language can complete the game by then translating these versions back into its idiom and seeing what they look like then.

How much more desperate is the case of primitive languages! I have read somewhere of the predicament of missionaries to the Eskimoes in trying to render into their tongue the word 'lamb', as in the sentence 'Feed my lambs'. You can, of course, render it by reference to some animal with which the Eskimoes are acquainted, by saying, for instance, 'Feed my seals', but clearly if you do so you replace the representation of what a lamb was for a Hebrew shepherd by that of what a seal may be to an Eskimo. How is one to convey the meaning of the statement that the horses of the Egyptians 'are flesh and not spirit' to a people which has never seen a horse or anything like one, and may also have no concept corresponding to the Hebrew conception of

spirit? These are trite examples. May I give two more complicated ones? How do you translate into Hottentot 'Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels and have not charity . . .'? In the first place, you have to determine what the passage meant to St. Paul's hearers; and, apart from 'the tongues of men and of angels', what exegetical learning has gone to the elucidation of *eros*, *agape*, and *caritas*! Then you have to find equivalents in Hottentot, and, since there are none, you do the best you can. Or how do you render into an Amerindian language 'In the beginning was the word'? Even in its English form the meaning can only be set forth by a theological disquisition. Missionaries have battled hard and with great sincerity to overcome these difficulties, but in my experience much of what they teach natives is quite unintelligible to those among whom they labour, and many of them would, I think, recognize this. The solution often adopted is to transform the minds of native children into European minds, but then this is only in appearance a solution. I must, having I hope brought this missionary problem to your attention, now leave it, for these lectures are not on missiology, a fascinating field of research, unhappily as yet little tilled.

## 6. Leviticus Rabbah 32:5

רב הונא אמר בשם בר קפרא בשביל ד' דברים נגאלו ישראל ממצרים שלא שנו את שמם ואת לשונם ולא אמרו לשון הרע ולא נמצא ביניהן אחד מהן פרוץ בערוה לא שנו את שמן

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

## 7. Neil Gillman, *Sacred Fragments: Recovering Theology for the Modern Jew* (The Jewish Publication Society, 1990) p. xvii

Kaplan used to teach that there are three possible ways of identifying with a religious community: by behaving, by believing, or by belonging. Kaplan himself insisted that the primary form of Jewish identification is belonging—that intuitive sense of kinship that binds a Jew to every other Jew in history and in the contemporary world. Whatever Jews believe, and however they behave as Jews, serves to shape and concretize that underlying sense of being bound to a people with a shared history and destiny.

### **III. Diaspora Jewish Identity: Two Stories**

#### **8. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1993) p. xxv**

American identity is too varied to be a unitary and homogenous thing; indeed the battle within it is between advocates of a unitary identity and those who see the whole as a complex but not reductively unified one. This opposition implies two different perspectives, two historiographies, one linear and subsuming, the other contrapuntal and often nomadic.

#### **9. Leo Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (The University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 7**

There is a Jewish problem which is humanly soluble, the problem of the Western Jewish individual who or whose parents severed his connection with the Jewish community in the expectation that he would thus become a normal member of a purely liberal or of a universal human society, and who is naturally perplexed when he finds no such society. The solution to his problem is return to the Jewish community, the community established by the Jewish faith and the Jewish way of life – *teshubah* (ordinarily rendered by “repentance”) in the most comprehensive sense.

#### **10. Naomi Seidman, “Fag-Hags and Bu-Jews,” in *Insider/Outsider: American Jews and Multiculturalism*. Ed. David Biale, Michael Galchinsky, and Susannah Heschel (University of California Press, 1998), pp. 260–261**

To compound the Jewish/multicultural problem, what prevented the widespread Jewish adoption of Jewish ethnic particularism was, in a way, Jewishness itself, in the form of the tradition of universalism that came closest to articulating modern Jewish hopes and pride. Rodger Kamenetz, in trying to account for the prevalence of American Jews in Western Buddhist circles, has suggested a similar etiology for Jewish rejection of Jewish practice. Kamenetz addresses the tendency of secular Jews to be more open to other religions than their own, acknowledging that “the Hasidim represented everything [Allen] Ginsberg’s family had run screaming from for two generations.” But Kamenetz’s most powerful insight is his recognition that the rejection of one kind of Jewish tradition is also, from another perspective, another kind of Jewish tradition: “I began to suspect that Jewish identity, as it has evolved in the West today, could be a real barrier to encountering the depths of Judaism. In other words, being Jewish could keep you from being a Jew.” Kamenetz’s analysis is directed to secular Jewish interest in non-Jewish religious traditions, but the same could be said for the rejection of the politics of Jewish particularism by a certain portion of this group. In the absence of a particularist Jewish political affiliation that could also satisfy the progressive universalist agenda with which Jewish politics has been historically linked, adopting the particularist position of another group paradoxically becomes a distinctively Jewish act.

## 11. Avot d'Rabbi Natan 16

ואל תתמה על רבי צדוק, שהרי ר' עקיבא גדול ממנו.  
כשהלך לרומי אוכילו קורצא אצל שלטון אחד, ושיגר לו שתי נשים יפות. רחצום וסכום  
וקשטום ככלות חתנים, והיו מתנפלות עליו כל הלילה. זאת אומרת חזור אצלי, וזאת אומרת  
חזור אצלי.

והיה יושב ביניהם ומרקק, ולא פנה אליהן.  
הלכו להן והקבילו פני השלטון, ואמרו לו: שווה לנו המות משתתננו לאיש הזה.  
שלח וקרא לו, אמר לו: מפני מה לא עשית עם הנשים הללו כדרך שבני אדם עושים לנשים?  
לא יפות המה, לא בנות אדם כמותך הן, מי שברא אותך לא ברא אותם?  
אמר לו: מה אעשה, ריחן בא עלי מבשר נבלות וטרפות ושרצים.

And don't marvel at Rabbi Zadok, for Rabbi Akiva was greater than him! When he went to Rome, he was slandered before a certain *hegemon* who procured him two comely women. He bathed them, anointed them, and adorned them like brides. And they fell all over him all night – one saying, “come to me,” and the other saying, “come to me” – and he was sitting between them, and spitting, and would not turn to them. At dawn they went and beseeched the *hegemon* and said to him, “Death is preferable than you giving us to this man.” He sent and called for him; he said to him, “And why did you not conduct yourself with these women the way men conduct themselves with women? Are they not comely? Are they not humans like you – did not the one who created you create them?” He said to him, “And what shall I do? Their smell came over as the scent of corpses and carrion and vermin.”

## 12. Torat Kohanim (Midrash on Leviticus) 9:12

“You shall be holy to Me, for I the Lord am holy, and I have set you apart from other peoples to be Mine.” (Leviticus 20:26)

Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah said: From where do we know that a person should not say, ‘I have no desire to wear clothes made of wool and linen, I have no desire to eat the meat of pigs, I have no desire to commit adultery.’ Rather, a person should say, ‘I desire [these things]; but what can I do? My father in heaven forbids it.’ “I have set you apart from other peoples to be Mine”: From here we learn that anyone who separates themselves from sin accepts upon himself the kingdom of heaven.



#### IV. Towards a New American Jewish Identity

##### 13. Mishnah Avodah Zarah 3:4

שאל פרוקלוס בן פלוספוס את רבן גמליאל בעכו שהיה רוחץ במרחץ של אפרודיטי  
אמר לו כתוב בתורתכם ולא ידבק בידך מאומה מן החרם מפני מה אתה רוחץ  
במרחץ של אפרודיטי

אמר לו אין משיבין במרחץ וכשיצא אמר לו אני לא באתי בגבולה היא באתה בגבולי  
אין אומרים נעשה מרחץ לאפרודיטי נוי אלא אומרים נעשה אפרודיטי נוי למרחץ  
דבר אחר אם נותנין לך ממון הרבה אי אתה נכנס לע"ז שלך ערום ובעל קרי ומשתיין  
בפניה וזו עומדת על פי הביב וכל העם משתיינין לפניה לא נאמר אלא אלהיהם את  
שנוהג בו משום אלוה אסור ואת שאינו נוהג בו משום אלוה מותר

Proclus, son of a philosopher, asked Rabban Gamaliel in Acco when the latter was bathing in the bathhouse of Aphrodite. He said to him, "It is written in your Torah, 'Let nothing that has been proscribed stick to your hand' (Deuteronomy 13:18); why are you bathing in the bathhouse of Aphrodite?"

He replied to him, "We do not answer [questions relating to Torah] in a bathhouse." When he came out, he said to him, "I did not come into her domain, she has come into mine. People do not say, 'the bath was made as an adornment for Aphrodite'; rather they say, 'Aphrodite was made as an adornment for the bath.' Another reason is, even if you were given a large sum of money, you would not enter the presence of your idol while you were nude or had experienced seminal emission, nor would you urinate before it. But this [statue of Aphrodite] stands by a sewer and all people urinate before it. [In the Torah] it is only stated, "their gods" (Deuteronomy 12:3) — what is treated as a god is prohibited, what is not treated as a deity is permitted.

##### 14. Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, Letter to Jewish Community of Teaneck, New Jersey (1982)

The Jewish community in the U.S.A. is as old as the U.S.A. itself. We know the problems it faced, and the actual discriminations it suffered, until it has won its place in this country. Yet, even in this day and age prejudice and anti-Semitism exist, not only latently, but also overtly. Under these circumstances we must not relax our alertness to any sign of erosion of our hard-won positions.

One of these positions is the annual lighting of a Chanukah Menorah in public places. As mentioned in my previous letter, such Chanukah Menorahs have been kindled in the Nation's capital (in Lafayette Park, facing the White House), in Manhattan, Albany, Philadelphia, Chicago, and in many other cities of the Union. There has been no opposition

to their being placed on public property from non-Jewish quarters. Regrettably, there have been some Jews who did raise objections in several places out of fear that kindling a Menorah on public property, would call attention to the fact that there are Jews living in that city; Jews who would apparently be willing to forgo the claim that the public place belongs also to them, as part of the public.

I also pointed out that in Washington, D.C. the President personally participated in the ceremony, that in New York City the Attorney General of the State of New York personally participated in the ceremony, and elsewhere public officials and dignitaries were on hand at this public event. There is no need for any stronger evidence that the Chanukah Menorah-with its universal message, which is especially akin to the spirit of liberty and independence of this nation - has won a place not only in Jewish life, but also in the life of the American people.

In light of the above, when a Jewish community in the U.S.A. publicly raises objections to placing a Chanukah Menorah in a public place – on whatever grounds, and however well-intentioned – it is thereby jeopardizing the Jewish position in general. It is also undermining its own position in the long run, as mentioned above. With all due respect to the claim that hitherto this policy has resulted in a "steady reduction of all Christological elements in public life," I doubt whether these have been eliminated completely. But granted, for the sake of argument, that this is the case, it would be most exceptional and unnatural in American life, since by and large the American people is Christian.

Someday, someone will raise the question, "Why should Teaneck be different from any other American town, and be hindered by Jews-a minority-from expressing itself in terms of religious symbols?" The answer that Jews, on their part, likewise refrained from placing a Chanukah Menorah in a public place-will hardly satisfy the majority of the Teaneck population.

Now, to come to the essential point: Why is it so important for Jews to have a Chanukah Menorah displayed publicly? The answer is that experience has shown that the Chanukah Menorah displayed publicly during the eight days of Chanukah, has been an inspiration to 99any, many Jews and evoked in them a spirit of identity with their Jewish people and the Jewish way of life. To many others, it has brought a sense of pride in their Yiddishkeit and the realization that there is no reason really in this free country to hide one's Jewishness, as if it were contrary or inimical to American life and culture. On the contrary, it is fully in keeping with the American national slogan "e pluribus unum" and the fact that American culture has been enriched by the thriving ethnic cultures which contributed very much, each in its own way, to American life both materially and spiritually.

Certainly, Jews are not in the proselytizing business. The Chanukah Menorah is not intended to, and can in no way, bring us converts to Judaism. But it can, and does, bring many Jews back to their Jewish roots. I personally know of scores of such Jewish returnees, and I have good reason to believe that in recent years, hundreds, even thousands, of Jews experience a kindling of their inner Jewish spark by the public kindling of the Chanukah Menorah in their particular city and in the Nation's capital, etc., as publicized by the media.

In summary, Jews, either individually or communally, should not create the impression that they are ashamed to show their Jewish-ness, or that they wish to gain their

neighbors' respect by covering up their Jewishness. Nor will this attitude insure their rights to which they are entitled, including the privilege of publicly lighting a Chanukah Menorah, a practice which has been sanctioned by precedent and custom, as to become a tradition.

I also must point out that I do not think that a Jewish community can disregard its responsibility to other Jewish communities in regard to an issue of this kind, which cannot remain localized, and must have its impact on other Jewish communities and community relations.

**15. Franz Rosenzweig, "Towards a Renaissance of Jewish Learning" (1937), collected in Rosenzweig, *On Jewish Learning* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1955), p. 64**

**Translation by Nahum Norbert Glatzer**

...It could hardly be asserted that the great urgency of the present moment is to organize the science of Judaism or to prompt both Jews and non-Jews to the endless writings of books on Jewish subjects. Books are not now the prime need of the day. But what we need more than ever, or at least as much as ever, are human beings – Jewish human beings, to use a catchword that should be cleansed of the partisan associations still clinging to it...

What, then, holds or has held us together since the dawn of emancipation? In what does the community of our contemporary life show itself, that community which alone can lead from the past to a living future? The answer is frightening. Since the beginning of emancipation only one thing has unified the Germany Jews in a so-called "Jewish life": emancipation itself, the Jewish struggle for equal rights....

Zionism, diagnostician of genius but most mediocre healer, has recognized the disease but prescribed the wrong treatment. What is recognized was the absence of a specific contemporary Jewish life having some common characteristics other than just the common possession of a dead scholarship called "The Science of Judaism" (which nobody is familiar with) and the common "defense against anti-Semitism." What Zionism also recognized – and here is proved itself to be a real pathologist, not merely a diagnostician – is this: that the only healthy, the only whole thing about the Jewish person – is the Jewish person himself.

Expressly or unconsciously, Zionism has always emphasized that it is the integrity of the Jewish individual which has in reality held us together since the beginning, and offered the only solid ground upon which the several vessels of Jewish life could develop – land, state, and law in the old days; later, divine commandment, worship and home. But as soon as the great question is posed as to what should be done now, and how new vessels of Jewish communal life are to be plated in this devastated but indestructible soil in place of the shrunken ones, so that, grafting themselves on to these new vessels, individuals can again feel the sap of the old,

eternally inexhaustible stream course through their arteries – as soon as this question is asked, Zionism fails us.

Those who want to work for the movement, for today, without shifting the main burden to an uncertain tomorrow, must take the Jewish individual seriously, here and now, as he is in his wholeness....

Readiness is the one thing we can offer to the Jewish individual within us, the individual we aim at. Only the first gentle push of the will – and “will” is almost too strong a word – that first quite gentle push we give ourselves when in the confusion of the world we once quietly say, “we Jews,” and by that expression commit ourselves for the first time to the eternal pledge that, according to an old saying, makes every Jew responsible for every other Jew. Nothing more is assumed than the simple resolve to say once. “Nothing Jewish is alien to me” – and this is in itself hardly a resolve, scarcely anything more than a small impulse to look around oneself and into oneself. What each will then see no one can venture to predict.

I will dare to predict only this much: that each will see the whole. For just as it is impossible to attain to the whole without modestly beginning with that which is nearest, so it is impossible for a person not to attain to the whole, the whole that is destined for him, if he has really found the strength to make that first simple and most modest beginning. It is necessary for him to free himself from those stupid claims that would impose Juda-“ism” on him as a canon of definite, circumscribed “Jewish duties” (vulgar orthodoxy) or “Jewish tasks” (vulgar Zionism) or – God forbid – “Jewish ideas” (vulgar liberalism.) If he has prepared himself quite simply to have everything that happens to him, inwardly and outwardly, happen to him in a *Jewish* way – his vocation, his nationality, his marriage, and even, if that has to be, his Juda-“ism” – then he may be certain that with the simple assumption of that infinite “pledge” he will become in reality “wholly Jewish.”

And there is indeed no other way to become completely Jewish: the Jewish human being arises in no other way. All recipes, whether Zionist, orthodox, or liberal, produce caricatures of men, that become more ridiculous the more closely the recipes are followed...There is one recipe alone that can make a person Jewish and hence – because he is a Jew and destined to a Jewish life – a full human being: that recipe is to have no recipe, as I have just tried to show in, I feel, rather inadequate words. Our fathers had a beautiful word for it that says everything: confidence.

Confidence is the word for a state of readiness that does not ask for recipes, and does not mouth perpetually, “What shall I do then,” and “How can I do that?” confidence is not afraid of the day after tomorrow. It lives in the present, it crosses recklessly the threshold leading from today into tomorrow...