Beyond the doors of the synagogue : self-perceptions of Jewish identity in a modern Canadian society

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Citation

Millman, N. J. (2015, May 26). *Beyond the doors of the synagogue : self-perceptions of Jewish identity in a modern Canadian society*. Retrieved from https://hdl.handle.net/1887/33066

Version:	Corrected Publisher's Version
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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

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Title: Beyond the doors of the synagogue : self-perceptions of Jewish identity in a modern Canadian society
Issue Date: 2015-05-26

Chapter 1

Self-Expressions of Jewish Connectedness

Abstract

What does it mean to consider oneself Jewish? This article looks at the different ways in which Jewish membership can be described as a self-representation and how outsiders may label the way this is manifested. While Judaism can be represented as a religion of ritual and laws for daily life, adherence to both is not necessarily important to Jewish identity. A goal of this paper is to reveal different modes of belonging, as interpreted through outward categorization of candid statements of what it means to be Jewish. As part of a larger study looking at behaviors of Jews living in a Diaspora community, participants responded to the prompt, "In one sentence, please describe what it means to be Jewish." The researcher assessed the responses for consideration of Jewish membership and trends towards culture, community and tradition over active religious participation. One hundred and seventy-two responses were collected from a sample of self-identifying Jews living in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia, Canada. Following this, eight independent coders categorized the responses into groups expressing different modes of connection. Religion was identified by the respondents as one of several categories of what it means to be Jewish; however, this grouping was not as popular as culture, tradition, or identity. This study considers the extent to which these statements fall under a number of participant chosen categories. The results show that culture is the dominant category for responses, followed by tradition, identity and religion.

Keywords: identity, religion, tradition, culture, Jewish, belonging, membership

Introduction

In Canada today, the means by which a person practices or does not practice religion is largely a matter of personal choice. Attending church is not a legal obligation; driving, as opposed to walking, to synagogue will not result in a fine. However, many people choose to follow these rules as religious obligations. What is interesting about religion in a country that does not have mandated religious rules and obligations is the citizens' ability to choose when, if, and how much to believe and participate. This differs from countries with a state religion – for example, one following Islamic law, such as Saudi Arabia (Brand, 1986). These countries do not have the same separation of religious ideals from everyday life (Lapidus, 1996), and religion is part of law. As a consequence of this separation in Canada, followers of a given religion can pick and choose pieces of religious practice that suit their daily lives.

This idea is largely true for followers of the Jewish faith who can come to look at Jewish membership in any way that fits their daily routines (Rouss, 1999). When considering Judaism, there are different ways to look at being a member of this religion; some may not involve any ritual or belief aspects at all. One straightforward way to consider oneself Jewish is in a literal sense: being a member of a religious faith with a set of rituals and laws governing diet, dress, moral conduct, and belief. However, aside from manifesting itself as a religious faith, Judaism can be seen separately as a culture with foods, languages, and customs relating to a general Jewish idea, but not necessarily a religious one. These traditions and cultural practices may vary depending upon the specific sort of Jewish ancestry from which they stem. Those who come from a Sephardic background, an Ashkenazi background, or those living in Israel may find that there are different ways to express Jewish culture. Due to the preference of some members for culture over the rules of religious faith, there are those who will describe themselves as secular-Jewish or culturally Jewish. This idea can also be thought of as associational Judaism (Brodbar-Nemzer, 1984; Levine, 1986; Sklare & Greenblum, 1967), referring to the Jewish commitment exhibited by some Jews while remaining unaffiliated.

Though personal connection and a general trend towards a cultural label can be seen when it comes to those considering themselves as secular Jewish, it should be noted that Jewish members who affiliate in this way are more likely to have more Jewish friends than non-Jewish. For example, a study conducted by the B'nai B'rith Youth Organization (2011) showed that only four percent of respondents indicated that none of their six closest friends were Jewish. To complicate things further, Jews can also be thought of as a race, an ethnicity (Webber, 1997), and a nation with different members viewing their belonging in different ways. The question then becomes not only who is Jewish, but also how they are Jewish.

Defining Jewish and Religious

It is generally difficult to agree upon what makes someone Jewish. In order to answer this question, it must be considered that different parts of one's identity will be more salient than

others in a given situation (Brewer, 1991). What makes this problem exceptional for those who identify with Judaism is that there are a plethora of ways that one can consider oneself Jewish. One of these ways stems from the biblical literature and halakha. In the Torah itself, there are no specific passages discussing what makes a person Jewish or what his or her lineage should be; but in rabbinic Judaism, it is accepted that a person who has a Jewish mother is considered Jewish.

Some people do not follow the strict halakhic rules (DellaPergola, 2005), and connect in more culturally driven ways that are more personal in nature. Since Judaism, the religion, comes with a rich heritage of food, music, and rituals, among other traditions, how can these ideas be discussed with regard to those individuals who participate on this purely cultural level? More and more American Jews are identifying themselves as secular and participating in this way (Cohen & Blitzer, 2008). Data from the Pew Forum Religious Landscape Survey (Cohen & Blitzer, 2008) indicates that while some Jews are religious, there is also a non-religious Jewish means of connection. Because the present article is concerned with cultural Judaism, which may have *religion* sifted out and placed in a minority setting, the findings from the Pew survey are extremely important.

Subsequently, what can be said for those who do not follow Halakha, do not follow a religious pattern of behavior, and still consider themselves Jewish? Should a person who is born to a Jewish mother but does not participate be considered more Jewish than someone who is not Jewish by birth, but follows each ritual and law to the letter? If there are two hereditarily Jewish people – one following halakha and one not – is one considered more Jewish than the other? This brings the issue back to our starting point: The question of who is Jewish, it would seem, depends on who is being asked.

Whether or not someone is religious, which is difficult to define, is a completely separate issue from whether or not someone considers him- or herself to be a member of a religion. Just as the words *religion* and *religious* are difficult to define, it is hard to say which definition should be used to tell people whether they are more or less religious than they feel. The fundamental problem is that there *can be* a definition of what a religious person should do. However, the degree to which this definition designates someone as religious remains unclear. Most institutionalized religions have a set of codes or written laws that outline how members of the religion should live their lives. For Jewish people, it is the Torah – and, to be more inclusive, the Torah, Mishna, and Gemara. These books include not only biblical stories, but also the rabbinical commentary that explains, interprets and applies the narrative. With this literature at one's disposal, it seems evident that abiding by the laws would make a person religious. The issue with using this definition in today's context is that, as discussed above, there is more than one way to identify with a religion, and if that way is broader and more spiritual than ritualistic and specific, who is to say how someone should feel? If it is a matter of participation, then what sort of participation should be counted?

Judaism as Culture

As a result of Judaism being present in Canada, the United States, and most of the European continent (Webber, 1997), there is no doubt that a variety of cultural aspects will be associated with members of this faith. In a North American setting, there are the people mentioned in a study interpreted by Cohen and Blitzer (2008) who do not even essentially believe in the faith, but participate solely as passive members. Webber (1997) comments on Judaism in a European setting, saying:

> The idea that Jews are a single people possessing a single, or at least united history assuredly has great power at the level of theology or political ideology; but, in practice, the overwhelming majority of European Jews today also function as citizens of the respective countries in which they live . . . they are only *partially* Jewish in the sense that their cultural identities as French-men, Italians, and so on operate alongside, if not in competition with, their identities as Jews (p. 259).

Judaism, when spoken about on a cultural level, will be considered as including the non-ritual facets of Jewish participation and community life (as opposed to a religiously active level, which would include keeping dietary laws and attending synagogue). Can this distinction be made? If a person does not follow active ritual aspects of Judaism and only considers him- or herself as a secular member, then, yes, a distinction can be made. This is not to say that culture does not stem from religion and religious practices to some extent; however, it is at this point that it could become a matter of perception. A distinction between culture specific participation and active religious participation is important, as it will help differentiate engaging in Jewish customs and traditions from active religious practice.

Why Ask This Question?

As previously discussed, Judaism has the feature of being seen as a religion and separately as a culture in itself. Cohen and Blitzer (2008) remark on American Jews, saying that:

> In many ways, they are indeed religious. When they marry, especially when they marry each other, large majorities of Jews join congregations, provide religious schooling for their children, attend religiously based family life cycle ceremonies, observe ritual practices, and participate in holiday celebrations in home and synagogue. As such, they demonstrate a widespread engagement in Jewish religious life . . . . (p. 1).

The researchers also discuss that "Jews claim relatively low rates of religious service attendance. They strongly favor a high wall separating church and state, and they favor public policy positions generally associated with more secularized Americans and opposed by most visible religious leaders and institutions" (Cohen and Blitzer, 2008, p. 1).

The ways in which people consider themselves members – or, more specifically, what membership means – will be essential to continuing the discussion about the diverse ways in which people can feel a part of this group and, therefore, how more culturally based communities can maintain a Jewish identity. By asking what it means to be a member, it will also be possible to catalogue the different modes of membership described by members. Too often being a member of a religion is classified by what a person does or does not do that reflects the specific rituals of that faith. While religion can be all-encompassing with respect to providing laws and customs for diet, dress, and moral conduct, it should be noted that some people do not follow these prescribed ideals but still consider themselves members of a religious group.

As part of a larger project concerning the identity of passively participating Jewish men and women, a preliminary question needs to be asked in order to assess how much variation there may be and how people do or do not consider themselves to be Jewish from both an inside and outside perspective. The question is: what are the ways in which members consider themselves Jewish, and is there a connection to belonging or Jewish identity that is purely cultural, separate from belief?

Sample

The sample for this preliminary study included a very specific demographic in order to meet the criteria for discussing the feelings of a minority religious group in a cultural setting. The original sample was comprised of Jewish respondents (37.9% male; 62.1% female) from the Lower Mainland area of British Columbia, Canada ($n = 203$). Cities included Vancouver, North Vancouver, West Vancouver, Richmond, Delta, Surrey, New Westminster, and Burnaby. In order to be eligible, participants had to either currently live in the Lower Mainland or have spent more than half their life in the area if they were away for work or school.

The minimum age requirement for participation was 18 years old. Respondents' ages varied from an 18-25 category ($n = 101$, 49.8%) to a 66 and over category ($n = 12$, 5.9%); the second largest category was 45-66 year olds ($n = 24$, 11.8%). A final requirement was that respondents answered yes to a question asking if they considered themselves to be Jewish. Participants were recruited online or in public settings, which did not include current religious worship to lessen possible priming effects. An identical version of the questionnaire was given out in person as well as online. The results discussed in this article will be those of the final open-ended response ($n = 172$) of a larger study.

Methodology

Participants were asked to respond to the statement, "In one sentence, describe what it means to be Jewish." There were no additional rules or guidelines. Cacioppo, von Hippel, and Ernst (1997) describe that a thought listing can be quite accurate and will allow a look at thoughts as they appear in participants' stream of consciousness. While the statement used in the present

study was not as freeform as the thought listings used in previous studies, the general idea of explaining in one written sentence with no further instructions was used.

The question was included as part of a larger study with 203 participants. A total of 172 participants of the 203 responded to this final question section. A response was one that was not left blank and answered with relevance to the question. Only 31 responses were either left blank or crossed out. Ten coders were originally asked to categorize the responses; two of them had to be excluded, as they did not correctly follow the instructions, and their submissions were not compatible with this study (example of an excluded category name: "this is not an answer"). When two answers were selected for one response (for example, *religion/culture*) and it could not be clarified, the first of the two answers was favoured as a response. When a category appeared less than twenty times (ten percent of responses) out of 172 in conjunction with another answer, the dominant answer was favoured. If the category seemed to be a duplicate (for example, the category *monotheism* was designated as religion), it was either clarified or assigned to its closest similar category.

Tarico, Van Velzen, and Altmaier (1986) remark that while self-ratings can be useful, the use of categories could call for the use of raters (this study will refer to them as coders). Categories would be indicators of what and how many types of responses there were; therefore, different described modes of Jewish membership could be seen within the responses. The directions given to the coders were to first read the responses and then create as many or as few categories as they felt necessary, and finally, indicate which sentence falls into which category. The reason behind allowing the coders to create their own categories was to reduce the bias towards expected responses or desired categories. This would also allow for a discussion if there were similar categories chosen between coders.

The coders themselves were from varied populations, as a perspective different from those who filled out the survey would be important for an unbiased categorization of responses. Of the eight reviewers, one was from Canada, two were from the United States, one was from Aruba, one from England, one from Lithuania, one from South Africa, and one from The Netherlands. The coders' educational backgrounds ranged from high school diplomas to Ph.D. candidates, and their religious backgrounds also varied.

Results

The categories from the eight coders were generally similar, or at least variations of a similar theme. The majority of coders used the following categories: identity, religion, community, culture, and tradition. Other categories that were used included belonging, pressure, and values. As the majority of responses were categorized into the first five categories, those were chosen for further analysis. Only the *religion* category had responses being unanimously agreed upon across all eight coders.

These responses include:

- *Belief in one God, and observance of Jewish customs and tradition in appreciation of the one God.*
- *Understanding, believing, and investing oneself in the ideologies, practices, and beliefs of the Jewish Religion.*
- *Practice the laws of the Torah.*
- *To me, believing in God, observance of ritual holidays, identifying with the Jewish faith.*
- *Serving God above all else.*
- *To be Jewish is to believe in one God and observe the laws inherent in your belief.*
- *To believe in one God.*
- *To believe in one God and follow the Torah.*

The general themes of responses that were deemed religious by all eight coders were *one God* and *Torah*. This was generally expected, as these responses were based in active religious practice. These responses, however, were only eight out of 172, which accounts for only five percent of all responses.

Religiously Designated Responses
As previously discussed, religiously oriented responses were the only responses that showed agreement across all eight coders, with eight out of 172 being unanimously designated *religious*. There were, however, sixty total responses out of 172 where religion was chosen as a category by even one coder. This is 35% of the total responses. Only one religious response showed agreement across seven coders, and eight responses across four to five. A total of seventeen out of the sixty – or 28% of the responses – had a majority consensus as religious responses, which accounts for 10% of the total 172 responses. Examples of those with mixed reviews include:

- *I have faith in Hashem (God) and follow Jewish traditions, particularly with my family (6/8 agreement; other responses: tradition).*
- *Belief in one God, being part of a community (7/8; other responses: culture).*
- *Observing holidays and customs (3/8; other responses: culture, tradition).*
- *To spread the attitude, wealth and tradition of Judaism (4/8; other responses: culture, tradition).*

Identity Designated Responses
Responses that coders felt concerned Judaism as identity and not religion were the most agreed upon of the categories, with nine in agreement across six coders. Examples include:

- *Varies from person to person, for me it's an overall feeling and a way I identify myself (other responses: culture).*
- *It means everything to me as it makes me who I am (other responses: culture).*
- *It makes me very proud to be Jewish (other responses: culture).*

Overall, coders used identity to categorize 109 of the responses, which is 63% of 172 total responses. Sixteen of those responses had a majority consensus, accounting for 9% of 172 responses. Categories of tradition, belonging, culture, and community were also considered along with responses for which one or more reviewers designated identity as a category. The responses with agreement of six coders also lean towards describing Jewish connection as identity without a mention of participation involving active religion or culture specifically.

Culturally Designated Responses

One hundred and fifty-eight responses out of 172 were designated *culture* by the coders; this accounts for 92% of the total responses. Interestingly, no more than five of the eight coders agreed on any of the cultural responses. Examples of culturally designated responses include:

- *Family oriented and fiercely protective of my heritage and history (5/8; other responses: tradition, pressure).*
- *Lox, bagel, cream cheese, sufganiot, Jewish summer camp (5/8; other responses: tradition, religion, pressure).*
- *Remembering our past and protecting our future (4/8; other responses: community, pressure, tradition).*

One interesting point is that some coders designated responses that mentioned community as cultural, while others considered community in itself to be a separate category. For example, belonging to a community was given a majority response of culture. It can be speculated that for some, community is a part of culture, however, this varied from coder to coder. After collecting responses, when asked, one reviewer remarked, "Belonging to a community is something I see as inherent of Jewish culture". Forty-three responses out of 172 were categorized by the majority of coders as cultural responses; this accounted for 25% of the total responses.

Community Designated Responses

The second most prevalent category was *community*. While high in numbers, there were no responses within this category that received more than three out of eight designations across the coders and therefore had no majority consensus. One hundred and seven total responses were given at least one designation as community by the coders. The other categories that most commonly appeared with community designated responses were tradition, culture, religion, and identity.

Tradition Based Responses

Eighty-three of 172 responses were designated as *tradition* by the coders. Only ten of these responses had a majority consensus, which accounts for 12% of tradition responses, but only 6% of the total 172. Examples include:

- – *Family, tradition, pressure (5/8; other responses: culture).*
- – *Family and tradition (5/8; other responses: culture).*
- – *To continue on the traditions of generations of my family (5/8; other responses: culture).*

Tradition shared most of its responses with culture, and those responses that included holidays and food were the most divided between the two. The word family was commonly associated with a tradition designation.

Of the 172 total responses, sixty (34.8%) were designated as religious by at least one of the eight coders. Of those, only eight responses were designated as religious by all of the coders. This leaves 87% of religiously designated responses up for debate. For some coders, the responses were as religious as reading the Torah, and for others they were as non-religious as enjoying a bagel. Most religious responses overlapped with *tradition* and *culture*. It is interesting that only sixty responses were designated as religious, because the nature of the question was to describe what it means to be Jewish.

Discussion and Conclusion

The central goal of this paper was to capture participants' candid responses about how they feel they are Jewish and what it means to be Jewish, while also examining how their responses could be classified by coders with different backgrounds. Discussions of how people can consider themselves Jewish point to different ways that Judaism manifests itself from person to person and perhaps at varying lengths from the institutionalized traditions themselves.

The results of this study show that while many responses can be considered religious – even by one coder – it is hardly a majority of the total responses. It would seem that for participants, being Jewish is a much more robust and complicated feeling than ritual and belief based participation. One hundred and twelve responses out of 172 were not categorized as religious by eight independent coders, a striking indication that a majority of responses from participants who consider themselves Jewish are not seen as primarily belief based. More specifically, under the umbrella of Judaism for participants, a belief category of membership does not make up their initial assessment of what it means to be Jewish. Perhaps this speaks to the work of Day (2009), who looked at the extent of belief among Christians in the UK. Categories of culture, community, and tradition were somewhat interchangeable among reviewers, although they remained essentially constant from person to person. It became clear that there is a definite cultural dimension to Judaism that can be considered by both insiders

and outsiders to be considered separate from the religious aspect of Jewish membership. These cultural responses speak to this difference. The fact that they make up sixty-six percent of the total responses shows their importance and the importance of considering Judaism from these different angles.

To look at Judaism as a culture or tradition as well as a religion is an important way to discuss communities – particularly more secular or cultural Diaspora communities – with regard to what makes Judaism sustainable in today's world. Many respondents indicated that Judaism was more a cultural way of life than a religion, and the coders showed agreement, as their categorizations echoed this sentiment. Candid feelings and expressions of how Judaism is important to more secular members to provide a window into a sometimes forgotten demographic when discussing religious practice or religious motivation. A conclusion that can be made as a result of a preliminary look at this population is that there is indeed a variety of ways in which people can consider themselves Jewish and a variety of ways that they can place the importance of Judaism within their daily lives.

Satlow (2006) makes the point that "a community's 'Judaism' is not made by a collection of texts or norms but by historically and socially situated human beings who engage, filter, and activate their traditions according to their local understandings" (p. 10). It is important that each of these opinions and histories be taken into consideration for the future of this dynamic faith, so that all who associate themselves as members will be counted, and their individual feelings towards membership will be appreciated.

Considering identity as its own category separate from culture or religion was an important outcome of this preliminary look at a modern Jewish community. Understanding these different modes of participation will be integral to the ongoing conversation about religion and Judaism in modern society – certainly with respect to keeping the community sustainable and the members affiliated in the future.

Further Research

This was a preliminary study that asked a simple question to assess Jewish membership and identity. It did not provide an in-depth analysis for the reasons why this separation of belonging and believing exists, nor was it concerned with other external variables. As part of a larger project, further research is currently being conducted looking at different modes of participation, as well as different feelings associated with membership. For example, self-esteem resulting from group membership is a variable that should be tested. This speaks to discussions concerning social identity theory (Abrams & Hogg, 1990; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) – for example, the idea that "social identities do not exist in isolation, and religious identification might interact with other identities in unique ways to influence psychosocial functioning" (Ysseldyk, Matheson, & Anisman, 2010, p. 65). As such, self-esteem assessments of members

connecting to belief first, as opposed to those connecting to culture or identity first, would speak to participation and feelings towards membership.

Further assessment of active versus passive participation is needed in order to understand the scope of the phenomenon. In the future, a larger response pool from different cities and areas would be interesting to evaluate. Furthermore, it would be interesting to look at responses from coders where categories are given, as opposed to where coders are allowed to create the categories themselves. As Amyot and Sigelman (1996) point out ". . . strength of Jewish identification varies as a function of religiosity and contact with other Jews" (p. 184). Looking at this question in different cities may be an important tool to assess identity with respect to the size and availability of a Jewish population. Further studies in progress also ask questions concerning feelings of belonging to a dominant culture in one's city and country.