Chapter 6

Jewish Membership as an Optimal Distinction:

Does Aliyah Make a Difference in Identity and Practice?

Abstract

Minority religious groups come in different forms and relate to each other in a variety of ways (White & Langer, 1999). Those who identify with Judaism can sometimes be seen as nominal, secular, or non-practicing Jews. Based on Brewer's (1991; 1999; Brewer & Gardner, 1996) theory of optimal distinctiveness and McGuire's (2008) idea of lived religion, this paper considers the *Jewish* identity marker as a means of optimal distinctiveness and an expression of an exclusive secondary identity, which is considered part of a larger salient self. Research was conducted through interviews with Canadians who grew up in Canada and Canadians who have made a permanent move to Israel (*aliyah)* in order to explore shifts in identity descriptions and practices. The results of this study revealed a decrease in overall practice and an increase in awareness for Israeli participants. Furthermore, Israeli participants were less likely to report Jewish as an identity marker.

Keywords: identity, religion, Israel, Jewish, belonging, membership, optimal distinction

Introduction

Jewish identity can be considered different from other types of religious identity because aside from religious practice, it can be demonstrated in a variety of ways (Friedman, Friedlander, & Blustein, 2005). At times, it seems to transcend mainstream religious projections and become a cultural, ethnic, or even national identity. The problem with attempting to categorize a certain 'type' of Jewish identity – or rather, categorizing people who describe themselves as Jewish – is that it can be comprised of any combination of these identity categories. For the purpose of this discussion, the terms *secular* or *nominal* Jew will be used to refer to members who only see themselves as such in name or through passive based participations. This is because as people practice in different ways, so too do they affiliate in just as many unique patterns. When it comes to Judaism, especially within diaspora communities, the idea of in-group/out-group status is an important one to consider. While Judaism inside Israel can be seen as a majority religion or culture, outside of Israel there will always be competition with a greater majority population concerning the salience of this Jewish identity and its expression. This will not necessarily be indicative of majority or minority status.

Secular Jewish communities in Canada, it can be assumed, may consist of members who live in a social in-group (Canada as a whole), but also in a cultural out-group (Jewish). Those who identify with Judaism but do not practice are seemingly indistinguishable from others in the general community, as they do not spend their daily lives following the diet, dress, or other religious guidelines specific to rabbinic Judaism. It is reasonable to predict that within a daily-lived sense, rabbinic prescriptions do not guide the decisions of individuals who identify as Jewish in any other way as a religious sense. More specifically, Jewish identity salience does not allow for a prediction of active participation. Whichever aspect of a Jewish identity is most appealing to a given member can provide legitimacy to this identity salience. As a result, it may be easy to feel that there is no actual in-group/out-group situation. Rather, for members of the social in-group, there is a unique cultural, or shared, traditional background that gives these Jews the ability to remain part of the dominant culture while also keeping their own history. A key notion that ties these ideas together is perception. How individuals perceive themselves as Jewish within their current surroundings and context should, to some extent, allow them to transcend their perceived status as members of a minority group – as determined by its number of members – and still find themselves belonging to a larger social whole, in which certain identity markers are more salient than others.

Cultural and religious concerns aside, Judaism has another feature: Israel. The focus of this paper is not how people decide to identify politically with Israel. However, Israel cannot be separated from a discussion of Jewish identity; not only is it a lingering idea in the minds of the Jews themselves (including those who do not self-identify as Jews in a religious

sense), but it is also associated as something Jewish among non-Jews. Israel can be a topic of much debate, but for anyone growing up in any sort of Jewish context, there will most certainly be discussion about, and possibly even a visit to, this perceived homeland. The question is sometimes raised as to whether it would be beneficial to identity for someone from a diaspora community to move to Israel. By this logic, if Israel is so central to Jews and Judaism in all cases, should someone who identifies as Jewish in any capacity in the diaspora not then be driven to leave this minority, or out-group, situation to seek an all-encompassing Jewish existence in Israel?

What is to be said for Jews who do not feel they are in the minority? What of nominal Jews, who live their daily lives as fully integrated Canadians, for example, and do not follow the diet, dress, or other Jewish religious requirements? Considering that (a) Jews are generally a minority in the Diaspora, (b) Israel exists as a Jewish majority, and (c) Jews in the Diaspora and Israel do not necessarily follow religious laws, it may be reasonable to ask why a Jewish identity is held amongst nominal Jews in the Diaspora and how a Jewish identity may be affected for Jews who move to Israel. These questions can be looked at together to bring to light one of many possible reasons for continued Jewish membership: optimal distinctiveness.

Optimal Distinctiveness: Jewish Distinction

Following the line of thinking brought forth by social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), Brewer (1991; 1999; Brewer & Gardner, 1996) has discussed the theory of optimal distinctiveness. The theory proposes that people must feel they are included in a group to the extent that they feel they belong, while also being able to exhibit some form of individuality. In this study, the phenomenon of interest is whether the *Jewish* identity among nominal Jews acts as an optimal distinction within a larger national setting.

In a country like Canada, where Jews are certainly a minority, non-practicing Jews who are asked about their identity as Canadians could be expected to refer to their Jewishness as a shared heritage and traditional piece of their identity that allows them to be optimally distinct, while at the same time considering themselves part of the Canadian majority. That being said, for nominal Canadian Jews who move to Israel, would Jewish be as strong an identity marker, or would they need to seek out a new way of being distinct in their newfound majority? Looking at this idea through the lens of optimal distinctiveness, those who see Jewish as an identity marker may come to see this as what makes them optimally distinct. Therefore, they may see themselves as being distinct through Judaism but still accepted as full members of Canadian mainstream society, as opposed to being perceived as part of an out-group by the larger Canadian majority.

Defining who is Jewish for this study

Defining who is Jewish is not a simple task. For the purposes of this study, anyone who answers *yes* to the question of whether he or she considers him- or herself to be Jewish will be considered an acceptable participant. There are many *halakhic* ways in which one can be considered Jewish, but it may be undesirable for a survey/interview study to use these criteria. It should be noted that those who make aliyah, a permanent move to Israel, will have been declared Jewish by the State of Israel. According to Nefesh B'Nefesh (2012), The Ministry of the Interior, Misrad Hapanim, needs to see a *proof of Judaism*, which includes*:* (a) an original letter from your congregational Rabbi in your country of origin, on congregational letterhead, stating you were born to a Jewish mother, or (b) original conversion papers, if applicable. Since this is the case, those who have made *aliyah* will be considered Jewish on these grounds, while those who have not will be considered Jewish based on verbal confirmation. The State of Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2012) offers the following definition of Aliyah:

> Aliyah means ascent, rise, advance, or progress – the return of the Jewish people to their homeland. Aliyah has been one of the fundamental principles of the Zionist Movement since late 19th century, with a peak of nearly 1 million immigrants in the 1990's.

Sample

In order to assess any measurable shift in practice, belief, and identity, two groups were interviewed. The first group, the main target group, was comprised of Canadians who previously made *aliyah* and who currently live in Israel. The second group, the control group, consisted of Jews who grew up in Canada and who not only felt they were members of the Canadian Jewish community, but could also comment on living in it. In order to find the Canadian sample, the study was made available to members of the Jewish community and respondents were invited via email to inquire about participation and if they fit the description of the required sample. The Israeli sample was also found through a network of existing contacts and subsequently sent to acquaintances and other Canadians who had made *aliyah*.

As discussed above, to be considered Jewish for the purposes of this study, participants only needed to describe themselves as members. This was slightly different for those participants who had previously made *aliyah*. *Aliyah* participants for this study had to have previously moved to Israel as well as obtained Israeli citizenship. As such, the determination of whether participants were Jewish was not made solely by the definitions within this study; it was also approved by the State of Israel, as the *aliyah* process involves a more rigorous check of Jewish heritage than a verbal declaration. This is not expected to have an impact on the results, but it should be noted that the same strict rules were not applied to the second, Canadian based group. Participants in both the Canadian group and the *aliyah*

group were from all parts of Canada, just as members of the Israeli group were from all parts of Israel, with the majority from Jerusalem or Tel Aviv.

With regard to demographics, this was a preliminary look at the issue, so only 30 participants were interviewed: 15 from the Canadian category, and 15 from the Aliyah category. Participants ranged in age from 22 to 31 years old. Gender distribution (M:F) was 6:9 for the Canadian group and 3:12 for the Israeli group. Length of stay in Israel ranged from just under one year to twelve years. Participants who were married at the time of the study included four Canadians and six Israelis. None of the Canadian participants came from Israeli parents; three of the Israeli participants had one Israeli parent, and one had two Israeli parents. When asked about a Jewish education, 14 Canadians indicated that they had some sort of Jewish education, while only 11 Israelis indicated the same.

Methodology

A questionnaire was created alongside a specially assembled eight-question survey to assess individual experiences, comparability among participants and compatibility with study requirements. These survey methods were implemented based on Brewer's (1991) description of optimal distinctiveness as a function of finding equilibrium between assimilating and remaining distinct. This is explained by Brewer (1991) when she illustrates how a salient identity can be context specific by describing the importance of her identity as a UCLA professor (p. 476).

In a Canadian context, we can predict that participation and practice will remain constant or, at the very least, be more contextually observable when *Jewish* is considered an identity marker that makes one optimally distinct. In an Israeli context, it is expected that fewer participants will indicate practice, as the Jewish identity marker no longer satisfies the need for distinction. In this case, practice will not prove or disprove optimal distinction.

The interviews for this study were returned online, to allow participants a chance to reflect on their answers. The Israeli group was asked to discuss both their lives at the time of the study and their lives in Canada, which involves retrospective memory. Generally, identical interviews were given to both groups of participants – with the exception of slightly modified language—along with identical surveys. Both surveys and questionnaire were presented in English, as all participants were of Canadian origin and spoke fluent English.

To understand the sample used in this study, it is important to note the extent to which respondents participate in weekly Shabbat. This is considered a simple but accurate way to inquire about levels of practice. Shabbat participation was indicated for participants who described it as more than a meal. This is because, for the purposes of this paper, keeping the *halakhic* laws of Shabbat is an indication of religious participation. Two of the Canadian participants (13%) reported that they kept Shabbat; nine of the Israeli participants (60%)

said that they kept Shabbat in Canada, while only five (33%) continued to keep Shabbat in Israel.

Geographic Locations / Majorities and Minorities

The first question of the interview section was inspired by Day's (2009) discussion of belief as a means of assessing religious questions. As such, the first interview question was, "What do you believe in?" Following a candid look at belief, it is important to establish a thoughtful reflection on participants' geographic surroundings in order to have them consider the rest of the responses with respect to the place they are currently living. Israeli participants were asked to indicate why they had chosen to move to Israel. Expanding on their choice of living in Israel, participants were then asked to reflect on the city they were currently living in, in order to get them to consider their identity with respect to their surroundings. Canadian participants were asked this same question for comparison.

Once the idea of where the participants were currently living was in the front of their minds, the survey went more in-depth and asked if they consider themselves to be part of the majority in Canada. The word *majority* was not defined for either the Canadian or Israeli participants, so as not to influence the way in which they answered. It would be important to assess the degree to which optimal distinctiveness may be at work by looking at which group they consider to be the majority and whether or not they, as Jews, are a part of it. As previously discussed, the idea of optimal distinctiveness (Brewer, 1991) will be important to discuss how and why people connect with a religion in a nominal or secular way.

Canadian participants were asked whether they consider themselves part of a majority in Canada as a means of assessing the extent to which they feel their place is in Canadian society. Israeli participants were asked the same question. Although responding to this question was a matter of retrospective memory for the Israeli participants, the reflection was still important for purposes of comparison. For further comparison, Israeli participants were asked if they feel like part of the majority now that they are *living in Israel. This question allowed a look at any differences felt after reflection on their feelings when they were in a Canadian setting.*

Religious Practice and Passive Participation

The interview included four questions about participants' shifts in practice. The first question concerned participation in, and observance of, religious holidays; the second concerned cultural items in the home; the third asked whether the participants felt they participated *more* or *less*; and the fourth, a more global question, asked whether participants felt *more* or *less* Jewish. The questions about participation that were administered to the Canadian sample did not use words like before and now; instead, those participants were asked to reflect on how living as a Jewish child in Canada compared to their current situation. This allowed for an examination of whether shifts in practice and observance were typical of

simply growing up and moving on one's own, or if a move to Israel had a more observable effect.

The participants were then asked to reflect further on any cultural items they may have in their homes. For the Canadian participants, this was intended to assess how much of their Jewish identity was expressed through personal items, while at the same time making a comparison with items Israeli participants have in their homes. This speaks to optimal distinction in the event that Canadians have more items, as it would be predicted that there should be a decrease in items for Israeli participants. Finally, for this section, Canadian participants were asked if they participated more, less, or the same as they did when they were younger, as well as if they felt more or less Jewish.

Jewish Identity

The next group of questions concerned Jewish identity. Participants were asked at what point in their daily lives they feel that being Jewish is part of their identity. The answers to these questions are important to any discussion of social identity or optimal distinctiveness, as the contextual revelation of *Jewishness* could point to how this identity is manifested. Canadians first responded to the question of when they feel the most Jewish, followed by the same Israeli reflection. Israeli participants also used retrospective memory to compare feeling Jewish between the two countries. Finally, in order to have a simple picture of how participants' Jewish identity may or may not fit into a personal description, they were asked to complete the following sentence: "On any given day I would describe myself as . . ."

Scale Comparison

After completing the interview section, participants were asked to complete a survey for the sake of consistent comparability, as standard scores were used. A survey was created for the purposes of assessing feelings of identity with a dominant culture or religion. The eight-question survey was scored on a five-point Likert scale and consisted of the following questions:

1) *Do you consider yourself a member of the dominant culture of the neighbourhood in which you live?*
2) *Do you consider yourself a member of the dominant culture of the city in which you live?*
3) *Do you consider yourself a member of the dominant culture of the country in which you live?*
4) *Do you consider yourself a member of a dominant culture from a city or country other than the one in which you live?*
5) *Is your religion the dominant religion of the neighbourhood in which you live?*
6) *Is your religion the dominant religion of the city in which you live?*
7) *Is your religion the dominant religion of the country in which you live?*

8) *Do you consider yourself a member of a religion from a city or country other than the one in which you live?*

Results

Results are reported in the order in which they were received and offer numerical indications and examples of responses. Duplicate answers are only reported once. A variety of responses were given for the first question, "What do you believe in?" However, it should be noted that there was a much higher variation among the answers from the Israeli group.

- **Canadian Participants** (*n = 15): Judaism; Higher being; Ability to write your own destiny; Life; Love; Family; Culture; Respect; Living life with purpose.*
- **Israeli Participants** (*n = 15): God; Jewish history; Judaism; Love; Family; Happiness; Passion; Torah; Hard work.*

Geographic Locations / Majorities and Minorities

Reflections from Israeli participants on why they moved to Israel resulted in a variety of responses. As some were similar in nature, non-repetitive and notable responses are listed below. These reflect any and all opinions gathered and no atypical responses were excluded:

- *I moved to Israel because I was tired of living in Vancouver. I wanted change, and after being in Israel a few times it was the only place my head was in and couldn't imagine being anywhere else.*
- *I'm a Zionist, and I felt as though to truly express it, I had to live in Israel.*
- *I moved to Israel after high school having never been here previously. I decided to make Aliyah three years after being here as a tourist. I did not make Aliyah because of Zionistic or religious beliefs whatsoever. I live the same life I would anywhere else in the world; only in Israel.*
- *Deep connection to the state and the land, Jewish kinship, fun place to live when you're young, being part of the majority. Jewish self-determination.*
- *I moved to Israel because as a person of Jewish culture and tradition I wanted to give back to the Jewish state of Israel. I also studied Middle East studies and peace and conflict and therefore have an interest to work and live in the Middle East, and specifically Israel.*

More specific reflections from participants on their current city:

- *Tel Aviv because the other cities are too small and it's where everything is happening.*
- *I live in Jerusalem because I go to Hebrew University but also because there is more of a religious community in Jerusalem.*

- *Tel Aviv is the epicenter of youth, culture, creativity and secularism.*
- *Tel Aviv, the only 'real' city in Israel. Places of entertainment are open all the time. Vibrant, creative, culture. I find Jerusalem to be too religious, extreme and somewhat segregated by neighborhood. Haifa and Be'er Sheva are too small.*
- *Jerusalem – simply put, because it is the holiest place on earth and the center of the universe.*
- *Jerusalem – for work purposes.*

Examples of Canadian participants' city reflection responses:

- *I live in Vancouver for the lifestyle, for my family and because this is where I have found work in my chosen field.*
- *Toronto. Job market, Jewish community . . .*
- *I live in Toronto because of the large Jewish community, great business opportunities for my career, I have family here, and it is a vibrant city that is great for Jewish young professionals.*
- *(Various city responses) . . . because my family lives here.*
- *(Various city responses) . . . work.*

As the responses to the question about Shabbat practice illustrate, the majority of respondents were not actively observant. With this in mind, the next step is to see to what extent participants feel they are or are not a part of a greater Canadian majority. Therefore, the following question is of great importance, as it relates to how participants feel that they fit into their general surroundings. Canadian participants' responses to whether they feel like a majority consisted of the following remarks:

- *Yes in my political beliefs, no in my religious beliefs.*
- *Yes. I consider myself part of a Caucasian majority. I do not consider myself part of a Jewish majority.*
- *Yes. I was born here, speak English (and French) and understand the customs, laws etc.*
- *I do because I am a Caucasian woman, not an immigrant, and 3rd generation Canadian.*
- *Yes, probably based on race and common Judeo-Christian values.*
- *Yes because I am white and English.*
- *Yes because I am Caucasian, no because I am Jewish.*
- *Yes. I consider myself part of the majority because I am Canadian.*
- *Yes, as a 2nd generation Canadian I feel I have a connection to both my "community" and also the wider Canadian culture.*
- *Not really. It's predominantly Asian in Vancouver.*
- *No, Jews are not considered the majority.*
- *No, because as a Zionist Jew our Canadian society is hostile to our belief.*

- *No, I am Jewish which is a minority, and my parents are immigrants so I have never really felt Canadian.*

Israeli responses:

- *No. Being Jewish means you're part of a national, ethnic, and religious minority in Canada. You could call me an invisible minority. However, I was part of a linguistic majority.*
- *No. There are 25,000 Jews out of 2 million people living in the city I am from in Canada.*
- *No, I do not consider myself part of the majority of Canada since I affiliate first as Jewish Israeli and second as Canadian. Since there are a minority of Jewish people living in Canada, I am a minority.*
- *No. I come from a middle class upbringing in the suburbs. I don't even know my way around down town Toronto – definitely not a majority.*
- *Up until the end of high school I did. I grew up in a tight knit Jewish community and went to Jewish school. After high school . . . realized that I wasn't part of a community that was a majority, it was actually a minority.*
- *Superficially, yes. On a more personal level, no.*
- *In terms of shared values or multiculturalism and racial sensitivity, comfort and familiarity with dominant pop culture, yes. In terms of strong religious affiliation, political outlook and overall worldview I was very much in the minority.*
- *I never considered it . . . I had a Jewish identity that definitely made me feel special.*
- *I do consider myself part of the majority in Canada. I am Caucasian, 4th generation Canadian from a secular non-Jewish family.*
- *Yes. White, upper-middle class. I don't know about majority in terms of numbers but I don't feel marginalized or like a visible or oppressed minority.*

When asked if they currently felt part of the majority, Israeli participants provided the following responses:

- *Based on the fact that my mother is Jewish/Ashkenazi then I am part of the majority in Israel.*
- *Yes. I am Jewish and Jews are the majority in Israel.*
- *In most of Israel and especially Tel Aviv, yes. In heavily religious, sephardi or Arab surroundings, no. . . . Throw me in Meah Shearim or [among] Moroccan-Israeli Jews and I'm definitely the minority.*
- *In a lot of ways, yes. I know that statistically, religious Jews are not the majority in Israel, but in the circles that I operate in, I am.*
- *No, I don't speak the language very well, I am not Haredi (I live in Jerusalem and many people are religious), I wasn't in the army and I look different.*

- *No. I am aware I'm not fully Israeli but I feel as if I fit in better.*
- *Yes, I consider myself part of the Israeli majority of middle class, traditional Jewish Israelis.*
- *Yes and No. I am a majority in the sense that I am Jewish. I am an immigrant in Jerusalem, where there are lots of immigrants. However, as a secular Jew in Jerusalem I do not feel as though I am part of the majority and when I was observant I also didn't feel as though I was part of the majority . . . although I still maintain it is easier to be Jewish here than it is in Canada.*

Religious Practice and Passive Participation

Tables 1 and 2 indicate examples of response comparisons from Canadian and Israeli participants regarding Jewish holiday participation. Holidays mentioned by Canadian participants and their numbers in brackets included: Childhood participation: Rosh Hashana (11), Yom Kippur (12), Passover (11), Chanukah (7), Shabbat (4), Sukkot (2), Purim (3), All holidays (4). Current participation: No Change (8), More Shabbat (1), All holidays (2), Less Synagogue (4).

Table 1. Jewish Holidays Observed by Canadian Participants

Childhood Participation	Current Participation
Passover, Yom Kippur, Shabbat (dinners only).	Go to synagogue less.
Passover, High holidays	Shabbat and all Holidays
Shabbat, Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur	Rarely do Shabbat due to work, family dinner in place of it.
Passover, High holidays	All holidays
High holidays	No change
High holidays, Purim, Hanukah	I observe more holidays now
High holidays, Hanukah, Passover	Still attend synagogue for major holidays but often forget to light the candles since we are not all together in the same house

Note: Examples of response comparisons.

Table 2. Jewish Holiday Participation Among Israeli Participants Before They Moved to Israel (Canada) and after (Israel)

Canadian Participation	Israeli Participation
Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur, Pesach	No family in Israel so less observant and no synagogue
High Holidays	Public holidays lead to heightened awareness
Chanukah, Pesach, occasional Shabbat	All holidays
All holidays	I am no longer religious
Holidays but more conservative	I have become less observant of the high holidays
High holidays and Chanukah	I observe all of the holidays…the country is off work
All holidays	All holidays and memorial days

Note: Examples of response comparisons; Interpreted specific holiday mentions from Israeli participants and their numbers in brackets included: Canadian participation: Rosh Hashana (6), Yom Kippur (6), Passover (5), Chanukah (5), Shabbat (3), Sukkot (2), Purim (2), All holidays (5), None (1). Israeli participation: No Change (1), More observant (3), All holidays (1), Less Synagogue (3), National holidays (5), No longer religious (1), Shabbat (1), Less observant (1).

Concerning cultural items in their current home, Canadian responses included traditional items such as: mezuzah, tefillin, chanukiah, Shabbat/havdalah set, kippas, Jewish books, and seder plate. Nearly all responses included mezuzah or menorah/chanukiah. Some participants indicated that they were not using the items or that they wished to use them in the future when they started a family. Israeli participants' responses concerning cultural items generally indicated that they had less in their current homes than they did in Canada, with a small minority of responses saying they had the same or more.

In response to the question about whether they participate *more* or *less* than they did when they were younger, Canadian participants responded: more (4), less (7), same (4). This was echoed in the Israeli sample's responses to how they were currently participating relative to their participation in Canada: more (4), less (7), same (4). The question concerning feeling more or less Jewish was asked in the same way, and the results were as follows: more (7), same (8). Most of the comments accompanying this answer stressed a difference in practice or meaning, as well as a connection with Israel, allowing for a stronger Jewish existence. However, some participants stressed that this does not necessarily mean religious/non-religious shifts.

Within the context of moving from Canada to Israel, the Israeli participants were asked the same question. The Israeli answers were quite different and more complicated. The simple break down was: more (3), less (3), same (7), with two that did not quite fit the

category. One response remarked that the question was too ridiculous to answer and another said they were more Jewish in that they observed the holidays, but less in that they no longer go to synagogue. Comments included the fact that living in Israel makes it easier to be Jewish and that many holidays include no work – so there is a generally heightened awareness, but that does not necessarily mean observance.

Jewish Identity

The following are participants' responses to the question about when they felt the most Jewish:

Canadian responses:

- *When I am not in Israel*
- *When I am hanging out with Jewish friends…also when I am working [in the film industry], which has a fair amount of Jewish roots*
- *When I am with Jewish friends, when I am in Israel*
- *Around Jewish friends*
- *All the time*
- *During Shabbat*
- *In Israel*
- *In the presence of other Jews*
- *When surrounded by non-Jews*
- *When I am not around Jews or when I am around my family*
- *During the high holidays*
- *With family*

Israelis, when in Israel, responded:

- *When I celebrate holidays*
- *Shabbat*
- *When I'm abroad*
- *In Israel, not so much so I'd say when there are holidays and the whole country revolves around the holiday*
- *In the Old City of Jerusalem*
- *When I am the only Jewish person in a group of non-Jews*
- *Each and every moment*
- *Always*
- *In Israel I feel most Jewish with the greatest degree of pride. When I'm in Canada I will feel more Jewish relative to the wider population.*

Israelis, when in Canada (retrospective memory), responded:

- *When I felt like I was the only one my age . . .*
- *Shabbat*
- *During the holidays*
- *When I am with people who grew up with no faith and religion or when I'm with my parents*
- *At my old synagogue*
- *When with Jewish friends*
- *At synagogue*
- *Pro-Israel rallies; Zionist settings*
- *When confronted with anti-Semitism*
- *On weekend retreats with religious youth group*

Examples of answers from the Canadian group concerning self-description included:

- *Jewish*
- *Canadian Jew*
- *Bubbly*
- *Jewish-South African-Canadian*
- *Canadian, Haligonian, Torontonian, Jewish*
- *A Jewish woman from and living in Canada (particularly in that order)*
- *Member of the Jewish community*
- *Peppy*
- *A Jewish woman*
- *A Jew*
- *Crazy and out-spoken*

Only three responses out of fifteen did not include Jewish.

Examples of Israeli responses concerning self-description included:

- *Jewish*
- *Traditional Jew*
- *Balanced and grounded*
- *Israeli*
- *A busy and happy working wife and mommy*
- *Anglo immigrant*
- *Happy*
- *Jew 2. Canadian*

- *Jewish, Israeli, Canadian, English speaker, athlete, fun, etc.*
- *Man*
- *Amazing*
- *Curious*
- *Zionist, Modern-Orthodox*

Only six out of fifteen responses included Jewish as a descriptor. Israeli responses had a much wider variety of describing words, and Jewish was not present in the majority of responses.

Scale Comparison

Table 3 reflects the results for both groups:

Table 3. Agreement and Disagreement with Scale Assessing Feelings of Dominant Culture/ Religious Membership (Neutral Removed)

Geographic Area	Canada (SA/A)	Canada (SD/D)	Israel (SA/A)	Israel (SD/D)
Culture – Neighborhood	53%	33%	73%	13%
Culture – City	27%	47%	60%	20%
Culture – National	27%	40%	80%	13%
Culture – Other	67%	13%	57%	43%
Religion – Neighborhood	33%	47%	100% (14:1)	
Religion – City	6%	80%	100% (11:4)	
Religion – National	0%	87%	93% (12:2)	
Religion – Other	67%	13%	6%	73%

Note: SA: strongly agree; A: agree; SD: strongly disagree; D: disagree. Ratio data is given where 90-100% of responses are SA/A.

Although this study used a small sample, the results strongly support a trend towards discovering one of the many modes of the sustainability of a secular Jewish identity. Looking at the answers above, these examples show the contextual differences where Jewish identity salience can be considered an optimal distinction. There is a visible trend towards a lessening of Jewish practice among secular or nominal Jews in an Israeli or *Jewish majority* context as opposed to the Canadian context, which shows little change.

The central goal of this preliminary interview was to see if a move to Israel had an effect on Jewish identity and practice. As such, the interview and survey data shows that there are observable shifts, and reasons for such shifts, that are described by many of the participants. The three major findings of this paper are (a) a case for optimal distinction as a means for

Jewish identity, (b) an observable decrease in active participation among nominal or secular Jews, and (c) an increase in Jewish awareness as a result of living in a country where Jewish holidays are more prominent.

Discussion

Optimal Distinction Revisited

Brewer's (1991; 1999) model of optimal distinctiveness states:

> . . . this theory holds that group identification is the product of opposing needs for inclusion (assimilation) and differentiation from others. As opposing motives, the two needs hold each other in check. When a person feels isolated or detached from any large social collective, the drive for inclusion is aroused; on the other hand, immersion in an excessively large or undefined social collective activates the search for differentiation and distinctiveness (Brewer, 1991, p. 434).

Looking at this idea in the context of Canadian Jewish identity, one way to interpret it could be as follows: living in Canada would cause someone identifying with Judaism to strive for inclusion – in this case, inclusion as a Canadian.

Because *Canadian* is a rather all-encompassing term for a nation of immigrants and a cultural mosaic tiled by nearly every ethnic and cultural group in the world, one needs to satisfy a desire for differentiation. In this case, Jewish can be that differentiation. This is evident from the way in which identity has been reported by both Canadian and Israeli participants. The identifier 'Jewish' in a majority context, in this case, Israel, becomes much less of a defining characteristic, as the shift in surroundings causes 'Jewish' to be seen as the mainstream culture that one now must differentiate oneself from. Evidence for this is supported by the much wider range of answers given by Israeli participants and the high number of 'Jewish' responses given by Canadian participants.

If what is being observed will present itself on a larger scale, this could be the assimilation and inclusion (Brewer, 1996) dynamic working together and shifting before our eyes as minority turns to majority. The equilibrium described by Brewer (1991) can be seen in Canadians, as they both assimilate as Canadians and differentiate as Jews. The shift can be seen in Israelis moving from Canada, as they struggle with terms to describe themselves now that 'Jewish' no longer satisfies the need for differentiation.

Participation Decrease

Discussions of increase or decrease in religious populations (Connor, 2008; Robinowitz, et al., 1995), especially among immigrant religious populations, generally tend to focus on moving from a majority situation to a minority situation. Connor (2008) discusses that, for

immigrants, turning to a religious community has social benefits and offers a safe haven from discrimination. This makes sense for those who move from a majority to a minority, but what is to be said for Jews who have grown up in the Diaspora and know nothing else but life in Canada? In their minds, they are not necessarily living as immigrants, but as Canadians who have certain shared cultural heritage with other Canadians who also happen to be Jewish. A shared cultural heritage can be accompanied by a desire to interact more closely with members of this group. However, if it is considered as an optimal distinction and not as a separate group, it can help explain why there is a decrease in participation among Canadians who make *aliyah*.

In their discussion of Jewish community size, Rabinowitz et al. (1995) remark that the size of the community is important and can impact how the community behaves (p. 417). Their discussion leads to one alternative explanation that could coincide with optimal distinctiveness: Fischer's (1984) subculture theory. The authors discuss Fischer's statement that "involvement in community affairs is influenced by the salience of a community to individuals and by the number of decision-making positions available in the community" (p. 417). The authors hypothesize that "1) Participation in Jewish community institutions will be negatively correlated with increased size of Jewish community, and 2) informal participation (i.e., primary group involvement) will be positively correlated with increased community size . . . " (Rabinowitz et al., 1995, p. 419). Of these two hypotheses, it is possible to see how the indicated ideas fit those of optimal distinctiveness. We see that formal participation can be expected to decrease, and informal participation to increase when the population becomes large. This was reflected in participants' showing both a decrease in synagogue attendance and an increase in holiday awareness.

Further Research

Following the conclusion of this study, many questions and scenarios still need to be explored. For one, a larger sample would be beneficial to examine any trends on a larger scale. This larger sample could also be followed longitudinally, as opposed to relying on retrospective reflection, perhaps providing more detailed results. Another important factor to control for would be a more orthodox and stable religious group, both inside and outside Israel, to allow for a third comparison. Finally, for the purposes of this study, those who have made *aliyah* as well as those who are from Canada were selected at random from known circles and from all cities. Results could be strengthened by choosing one city from both ends for comparison – for example, Jews from Vancouver versus Israelis from Vancouver living only in Tel Aviv.