

## ***Judaism as Civilizations***

**4:45pm, June 29<sup>th</sup>, 2008**

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### Between Religious Extremism and Secularism: The State of Global Jewish Identity

World Jewry has seen the growth of two distinct movements. On the one hand, Jewry has witnessed the continued growth of a strong secular ethos that has people opting out of religious life. Conversely, it is also experiencing a more particularistic trend expressed by groups privileging a strong sense of belonging and commitment. These two growing extremes have pulled apart any semblance of a shared national identity or a vital center that for years held together the Jewish people. What do these two trends mean for the makeup of world Jewry, the relationship between the Diaspora and Israel, and the notion of Jewish peoplehood? If not peoplehood then what is or might be the new middle or hybrid between these two worldviews? Specifically, what kinds of institutions, initiatives, and organizations will yield a sense of belonging and commitment while being full partners in a multicultural and multiethnic world?

Panelists: Avrum Burg, Judith Liwerant, Shmuel Trigano  
Respondent and Moderator: Deborah Lipstadt

## **Jewish Civilization Today: A world of Identities.**

Judit Bokser Liwerant

Approaching Jewish identity(ies) today and the external and inner challenges they face calls us to acknowledge that Judaism and Jewish life have never being homogeneous. Inner differentiations, divergences and discrepancies in meanings and symbols of identification; permanent and vital dialogues and debates; theoretical and ideological struggles took place inside the changing perimeters of the Jewish world.

However, historical or traditional Judaism –certainly the present is also history- always kept frontiers and markers that brought together the triade underscored by Jewish thought. The shared foundations of all formulations included a solid connection to God and *Torah* of Israel, the belief in the existence of a Jewish People, and a reference to the Land of Israel *vis-à-vis* which any other place of residence was viewed as ‘exile’(Ben Rafael, “Contemporary Threats to Klal Yisrael” 2007)

Modernity broke this connection; disentangled their essential nexus and the post-traditional outlooks regard these ‘deep structures’ of Jewish identity as questions that not only could but should be given new answers. These would ultimately construct the space of Modern Jewish cultures, identities, religious streams, and ideologies. The three elements were opened to queries and quandaries regarding the role and place of religion amidst secularization processes; the frontiers and criteria and ways of belonging to the Jewish people, and therefore its frontiers; and the place of the Land. The religious/spiritual/national dimensions of the latter; the complexity of its symbolic and material changing nature of its centrality would lye in the center of the Zionist building of hegemony *vis-à-vis* other modern national movements. Its *aggiornamento*, renaissance and renewal goals were intertwined with the concept of Return- not only into history, but also to the Land.

Thus, the singularity of the nature of the foundational *Brith*, both theological and sociological, religious and national, ethnic and cultural, and its expression in a secular world would be revisited. The questions this triade aroused –both each one and their relations-, and the contesting answers that have been formulated, diversified the contents,

referents and markers of Jewish ways of being. Thus, a world of Jewish identities has been built that dynamically inhabit a space of identity in which diversity took progressive shape, although supported on shared basic elements that allows us up to the present to refer to them as Jewish identities.

Eliezer Ben Rafael further builds on Wittgenstein's concept of "family resemblance" to underscore the shared nature, in spite of their differences underlying that "even if they do not furnish similar answers to the basic questions of identity, they must at least address the same questions". Thus, following Appadurai's concept of flows or streams, the main flows of Jewish identity may be distinguished according to the different answers to the different aspects of the identity structure which they most evince.

In the same vein, Sergio DellaPergola emphasized the different identification patterns that develop and prevail in the Jewish world more as a matter of intensity and composition than as the product of an intrinsically different typology. Identities are built around contents and identification referents, implying both an individual sense of belonging and collective-relational behaviors. The diverse settings where Jews dwell, however, plus the different ways identity consciousness interacts with the process of individualization and collective belonging have deepened even more the inner differentiation of the variety of flows that define the wide Jewish ethno-religious-national framework. Convergences and divergences as well as overlapping modes characterize the broadest civilizational framework of Jewish life.

Thus, the different normative-traditional flows, religious streams and orthodoxies, as well as flows defined by ethno-community parameters, coexist with distinct cultural and/or spiritual options in which either there is an absence of identity consciousness or new ways of awareness have developed. In its diverse individual inner and non communal orientation, the latter has taken a relevant place, especially, in the younger generations. This ample range of identities reflect the current changes which transformed individual perceptions of the meaning of Jewish collective association: integral existential framework coexist with relevant and meaningful reference group; individual and inner open options, in many senses still undefined stand side by side with identity as an empty statistical category.

Today's radical Modernity amidst globalization processes has certainly deepened the questioning of prevailing shared values and has paradoxically deconstructed certainties and reconstructed belonging. The legitimacy gained by heterogeneity, diversity, and other expressions of identity building validate a myriad of approaches as expressions of new ways of being. Individualization processes as well as old and new collective identities have gained new meaning and force. Contents, symbols and markers have pluralized, not necessarily achieving mutual recognition. Jewish collective identities are built and rebuilt in different institutional arenas –whether these are territorial, communal or religious, national or cultural– and in different political-ecological settings –local, regional, national– within the framework of a global world in which they interact, intersect and overlap, and their components become re-linked. (Eisenstadt, “The Constitution of Collective Identity. Some Comparative and Analytical Indications” 1995). The differential impact of the manifold scenarios also explains the increasing diversity and complexity with which identities are built; also the increased distance that separates the extreme options.

Facing this textured, multidimensional and multifaceted world means understanding that the normative core on which consensus and family resemblance has been constructed seems to narrow and therefore poses the question of the nature(s), scope, and frontiers of the collective. Identity family similitude is not exclusively a natural given; elective dimensions reshape primordial definitions. Thus, also the rules that guide and orient family's resemblance are to be built.

Thus, we must approach Jewish identity not exclusively or mainly in terms of inner plural denomination or multiple agencies but in terms of multiple Jewish social constructions and structures that may enrich or weaken Jewish life. Institutional building therefore also matters as realm for identities. Diversity has to be approached in terms of the required communal, organizational and institutional changes that may provide new options appropriate to changing conditions. Institutions can shape and provide norms of neighborliness even to families that need to remember/redefine resemblances; they allow to adjudicate conflicts in particular contexts and situations. As paradoxical as it may sound, continuity demands “creative ruptures” borrowing Roskies expression, both intellectual and structural.

Thus, I suggest approaching our subject through the conceptual lenses of Multiple Identities, meaning by that the need to understand the continuous process of construction, fragmentation and diversification of identities which lead to new dimensions that not necessarily imply erosion and decline. In this line of thought, not only continuity but also diversity and pluralism become cultural and normative requirements to define Jewish collective identity today.

As stated, a pluralistic conception leads to the need to build mechanisms that regulate differences and conflict and make it possible to deal with dissent.

Amidst an inner differentiated culture, we may probably need to parallel approaches to multicultural environments and develop neighborly relations understood on the basis of what Margaret Levi calls “contingent consent, that is, a consent less situational than that implied when actors are treated as economist rational maximizers pursuing instrumental self-interests but less uniform, fixed and definite than when actors belong to single cultures characterized by unselfish shared norms” Thus, as Ira Katzenelson (*Liberalism’s Crooked Circle* 1996) has suggested, we should invest more creativity aimed at developing institutional rules, sites and arrangements to induce contingent consent and provide locations for the unfolding and play of a conflictual but peaceful common life of identity and difference.

In as much as the future depends on proper present diagnoses and actions; on imagination nourished by knowledge and understanding; adequate policies as well as a serious public discussion are indispensable. Individual actors as well as institutional agencies are called to think and act with an historical responsibility that leads to discover that not only the past is history but also the present and certainly the future, and that there is an essential and meaningful connection between present action (or inaction) and future conditions.

We need today to affirm the importance of a Jewish public thought based on inner and external dialogues, comprised by leadership and constituencies; affiliated and non affiliated- to strengthen the bases of a pluralistic coexistence as a way of being faithful to its past and to its potentialities. It implies differentiated inclusive policies based on agreed thresholds instead of exclusions which find their source in unilateral decisions.

## *2.Context and challenges*

The undisputable historical complexity of Jewish life becomes unprecedented today due to external as well as inner transformation and their close interrelation. Globalization processes pose to individual as well as to collective identities radical challenges. Precisely the historical global people that has dwelled in diverse social contexts defined today by cultural diversity, pluralism, and contesting identity referents faces new realities in its voluntary communal settings and in its sovereign existence.

Cultures and civilizations are realm not only to articulate social coexistence but also domains where encounters, differentiation and confrontation take place inside and outside borders that are increasingly porous. Frontiers are not only lines to be crossed as transgression; they separate and at the same time connect identities –and legacies- with specific geo-political and geo-cultural areas that become inter-connected in multiple and contradictory ways. Isaiah Berlin's understanding of cultures as never unitary, never indivisible, never organic, always assemblages of distinctive ideas, elements, patterns and behaviors seem to acquire even further implications today.

Globalization processes are not uniform since they take place in differentiated manner in time and place and they bear a multi-faceted nature, because they bring together economic, socio-political, cultural and religious aspects, as well as the interdependences and influences between these realms They can be simultaneously reflexive and unintentional; and of international, as well as regional, national or local in scope. It involves the de-territorialization of economic, social, cultural and political arrangements, which means that they depend neither on distance nor on borders, and nor do they have the same influence on the final shaping of institutions and social relations (Giddens). Consequently, social interaction may be organized and structured having the world global dimension as the horizon. The location of countries and borders between States becomes more diffuse, porous and permeable and global connections, which extend throughout the world, are intensified by virtue of the fact that they can travel instantaneously from one place to another.

Thus, globalization has given rise today to identities such as new global ones developed in virtual spaces and conceded renewed importance to identities organized around primordial pivots -religious and ethnic- in the shaping of social, political and cultural spaces. Old and new identities inhabit the public sphere oscillating in a tense fluctuation between the moment of the unique and the universal; the moment of the common and the particular (Bokser Liwerant, “Globalization and Collective Identities, 2002)

The uncertainty arising from the speed and intensity of global flows; the transformations the State is undergoing, in particular, the loss of state monopoly in various spheres, especially as regards its influence on the building of national shared images are part of transitional times that impact both in their common features and singularities the world and the Jewish world. The presence and strength of transnational, supranational or global actors and institutions –as well as old and new diasporas- radically transform the State, its powers, functions, spaces and territories in which it concentrates its activity. However, it seems clear at this stage that, far from what some hurried estimates maintained (Ohmae; Fukuyama), States not only do not disappear but continue to be actors that have a decisive influence in many fields at national and international level. They are even considered among the most active and committed forces of globalization. Nonetheless, their sovereign status weakens in various fields; it loses effectiveness in regulating and applying sanctions to International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGO) and its relations with communities and identities that go beyond national borders are reconsidered, reconnecting the links between the local, the national and the global.

Globalization also restates some of the cultural grounds of sovereignty. Global spaces give a new density to the close and specific, the characteristic and particular, and encourage the building of collective identities on institutional bases, spaces and frameworks that are radically different from those known by social theory.

Both trends coexist and overlap in the Jewish world.

For a global and transnational people as the Jewish people, these changes, in their own specificity, pose challenges and open new opportunities. Both the transcendence and transformation of borders and boundaries as well as the temporal span have elicited new

approaches to contemporary dynamics of social life (and of past historical precedents or analogues) in code of transnationalism. Specifically, looking at bordered and bounded social and communal units as transnationally constituted spaces that interact with one another, has contributed to the legitimacy of the Jewish experience. Transnationalism today refers to the new conditions derived from the changes associated to the fact that time and space cease to have the same influence on the way in which social relations, identities and institutions are structured

Inside the Jewish world, it has meant the exploration of new ways of interaction between Israel and the Diaspora, understanding both the common and its singularity. While diasporization has become a growingly visible trend, following Sheffer and Safran one of the main characteristics of Diasporas as social formation is the triadic relationship between globally dispersed yet collectively self-identified ethnic groups; the territorial States and contexts where such groups reside; and the homeland States and contexts their forebears came from. However Homeland(s), in our case –and its interaction with exile both in its sociological and theological meaning- must be analyzed in the light of its changing referents. Contemporary Jewish history lies behind the unique dialectic between Home of origin and the spiritual and ideological elected home. Therefore a dual tendency of redefining and strengthening the interaction between Diaspora and the State both expresses identity changes and shapes them.

On the one hand -with differences in national and regional settings- the abandonment of historical criteria of belonging coexist with revitalization of Jewish life. Disaffiliation; declining rates of ethno-religious homogamy, specifically, Jewish in-group marriages; declining rates of predominantly Jewish social networks and declining percentages of Jews among the total population in their countries, cities, and neighborhoods (DellaPergola, 2007). On the other hand, a sustained effort –and reality- to promote, what the organized Jewish community calls ‘continuity’ and ‘renaissance’. Jewish education; Jewish studies courses and programs on college and university campuses continue to grow; as does the publication of Jewish books by both Jewish and non-Jewish authors and by both Jewish and general publishers (Sarna, “North American Jews in the New Millenium”2007)

Insert in these differing and even contradictory trends, there are growing levels of Jewish ritual observance. In this sense, identities today are also associated with the transformations in the religious world, in the diverse changing expressions of secularization processes as well as in the general religious revival, in a shared context of an overarching search for meaning. It expresses both in the emergence of religious experiences which offer individual certainties as well as community protection and belonging, not disconnected from a sense of discipline and sanction. It is significant that in the midst of secularization trends, religion - with its wide range of rationalistic and mystic options - has assumed a growing public role and visibility, which may be characterized as a de-privatization of religion (Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*.1994). In addition, it has to be underscored that religious traditions have gained a new public relevance, as a result of their claim to a new sort of interaction between the private and public morality and not a marginal level of disenchantment with the prevailing political structures.

But contrary to these ideal pulsions, a process is spreading of diffuse individuation, self realization, concern with self and hedonism, transformation of particularistic into more universalistic ideas, and shunning away from what is being perceived as an old and obsolete world of rigid concepts and institutions. Secularization and “neutralization” of society are perceived as a definite step forward in the long evolution toward a better and more emancipated humankind, and progressively getting free of the past contents inherent in religious ideas and behaviors.

As Jews witness these two contradictory trends operating simultaneously — assimilation and revitalization— the question is certainly well posed when phrased in terms of which one will turn out to be the dominant trend, and which will be looked back upon as an epiphenomenon?(Sarna)

### *3. Contexts and Challenges II*

With exceptions, historically the more globally oriented, open, multinational and multicultural environments allowed Jewish and other minorities broader intellectual and

socioeconomic options, while the more locally oriented and narrowly particularistic contexts often had deleterious consequences. A background of stable diversity allowed more congenial space to Jewish communities than monocultural ambiances. Within the limits of the changing historical parameters, inclusion and continuity haven't been mutually exclusive.

When turning to an overview of the present environment of Jewish society and life, developing new contexts emerge out of different and not entirely coherent dimensions relating to topics as diverse as economics, politics, religion, law, culture, and technology.

Thus, developments of different sorts both have opened new opportunities and also questioned the feasibility of a plural interaction because of the weakening of the margins of tolerance and diversity under alleged claims of multicultural goals. Geo-cultural and geo-political changes lie behind these trends.

Today, significant political and military events have marked new directions to the regional and international order. Examples include Iran's efforts to become a nuclear power and to establish a corridor to the Mediterranean; the critical developments in Iraq and its still uncertain outcomes; the continuing tensions on Israel's northern front and the still undigested conclusion drawing following the second Israeli-Lebanese war; the unsolved Palestinian issue, in the light of the emerging intra-Palestinian civil struggle and its regional repercussions. Altogether, these developments enhance a sense that the diversified Western world, the Mediterranean and the Middle East are again and deeply into an era of transition, of changing geopolitical conditions that call for a reevaluation of the actuality and relevance of existing political orders and institutional arrangements as well as their value-assumptions and socio-cultural grounds.

To the extent that the West has been subject to a radical critique -in terms of the nature of its project and achievements, which are allegedly surpassed – these developments have far reaching consequences. Moreover, important facets of the current epochal change and its evolving public discussions entail the practical and theoretical questioning of the main project(s) that gave birth to Western modernity and its subsequent transformations up to current times. However, today not only are its temporal limits and geo-cultural roots questioned. Also rejected are its core assumptions and substantive contents. Paradoxically, their questioning –and some of its defenses- have

tended to stress the West as a unified and homogeneous reality, subsuming the deep historical differences among Western countries and between them and other regions of the world. Differences involve cultural textures and traditions as well as patterns of socio-economic development and political organization. While similar general trends of structural differentiation developed in most of world societies, their cultural legacies, ideological patterns and institutional orders gave rise to multiple and diverse modernizing paths; cultural traditions, ideological mappings and organizational patterns evolved into diverse and *Multiple Modernities* (Eisenstadt, 2000).

In its preface to *Daedalus* dedicated to the subject of Multiple Modernities, its editor affirmed that the term is not one in common usage and he wondered if it will ever achieve the renown or instant recognition that other more “hyperbolic phrases” like “the End of History” or “the Clash of Civilizations” have acquired (Graubard, 2000). Interesting enough, both the overall questioning of the West as well as its equally undifferentiated defense share a language of homogeneity and uniformity. The gravity of current events and potential developments require greater conceptual sophistication.

Some of the critiques formulated in terms of multiculturalism are interwoven with an anti-Israeli, anti-Zionist and anti-Semitic component which claims our analytical attention in order to apprehend the inherent scope and risks. Several causes lead to multidimensional and complex manifestations of these adversary attitudes. Among these, the alignment of Israel with the United States; the conflicts of Israel in the Middle East; the variable support by the Jewish people vis-à-vis the Arab world and Islam; the historically new situation of a Jewish State with the conflictive requirements of statescraft and its concomitant departure from a historical Jewish powerlessness that some see as essentially ethical. The permanence of sustained prejudices provide further complexity. Thus, manifestations of antisemitism today “are a dynamic, non linear and, at times, paradoxical product of the interaction between and fusion of both invariant and radically changing variables”. Conceptualized as a new anti-Jewishness, it certainly overlaps with classical antisemitism, but it is distinguishable in its “discrimination against, denial of, or assault upon, national particularity and peoplehood anywhere, whenever the national particularity and peoplehood happens to be Jewish” (Cotler, 2005). It covers a wide range

of expressions that run from the recurrent extreme of condemning Israel in the international arena to the singling out of Israel and the Jewish people for de-legitimation. Certainly, modernity cannot be understood unless its grounding in profound conceptual changes is recognized. Its cultural program which entailed “promissory notes” came to constitute previously unknown affiliations, identities and, ultimately, institutional realities (Eisenstadt, 2000; Wittrock, 2000). Conceived and interpreted, above all, as “culturally constituted and institutionally entrenched”, modernity fostered new revolutionary principles that oriented the construction of public spaces, where dialogue and debates had to take place as expression of increasing participatory involvement and citizenship building. Public sphere and civil society became constitutive pillars of the new forms of collective life. In fact, its legacy can be seen as a world of values and institutions that generated the capacity of social criticism and democratic integration at the same time (Seligman, *The Idea of Civil Society* 1992, Alexander, *The Civic Sphere* 2006).

Societies and cultures – the Islamic world included – developed modern dynamics through a contesting dialogue with the West, questioning its fundamentals and unfulfilled promises, as well as its achievements: among others, as stated, human agency, freedom, autonomy, reflexivity, tolerance, pluralism, civil society, democracy.

Transition Times, therefore, include among its central problematic the need to overcome the assault on Enlightenment’s legacy while facing the claims of culture (Bokser and DellaPergola, “ Times of Transition”, 2007). The challenge to avoid the rejection of differences and simultaneously create the bases, spaces and mechanisms of coexistence within a common public sphere.

Cross cultural alliances defy “hyperbolic phrases”. Cultures have to be seen in its inner richness, in their cross-border interactions. Also in their boundary-shifting in contradictory but wide margins of globalization processes.

But this proposition still has to be framed in the light of possible regional differences, and of the inherent relations of dominance and dependency.

#### 4. *Snapshots of identity. Being Jewish in Latin America*

Globalization processes throw light to a Jewish world that stresses a pattern towards uniformity and still maintains diverse configurations.

Latin America Jews have shown in their own singularity their encounter and dis-encounter with Modernity. Becoming distinctively modern developed hand in hand with unequal patterns of underdevelopment, political instability, strong nationalism against European superpowers and the US. Rulers of the area adopted the ideas for completing modernization and policies emanating from the Western model through a complex dynamics in between building Multiple Modernities pattern and a Mausoleum of Modernities (Whithead).

Latin American Jewish realities point to historical convergences and divergences between identities amidst a singular common trait: a close past interaction between ethno-cultural identity and the national dimension in the mold of Diasporic Jewish nationalism under progressive Zionist hegemony. Jewish identities and narratives, in plural, developed through a contesting dialogue with a strong secular motive. Identities were closely built around communal life *vis-à-vis* the national arena and the dynamics and problems of the Jewish world.

The permanent struggle between world visions, convictions, strategies and instrumental needs fostered the Zionist idea and the State of Israel to become central axes around which identity was built and communal life structured and developed.

The links between an ideological, political and public center and the Jewish community, conceived as Diaspora, carried profound ambiguities around the conception of what the relationship meant. It relied on the wider idea of a national project for renewal of Jewish life and therefore gave birth to recurrent ambivalences and tensions. While an overall disenchantment with the diasporic condition was among the main causes for the emergence of Zionism in Europe, in the new community Zionism committed itself both ideologically and institutionally to the fostering of a new Jewish life. As any ideology in the process of being absorbed by other cultural and symbolic frames of reference, Zionism acquired novel sociological meanings without necessarily redefining or rephrasing its contents. Its organizational functionality was also altered and, beyond its recognized goals, it fulfilled diverse new needs. On both levels, the ideological and the

organizational, it worked toward the enhancement of a one-center-model while, simultaneously, tacitly affirming the diasporic existence.

The place and role of the national center evolved through different stages, expressing both the changing pattern of communal and national conditions as well as the ideological, normative and practical transformations that took place in the center.

Contextual conditions are changing and inner features are acquiring a shared texture with other segments of the Jewish world.

Today, ethnicity and ethno-national patterns of identification that acted as main axes of community organization, have diversified inside the changing parameters of a wide yet also more tied “space of identity”.

Dual trends that characterizes Jewish world find their singular ways of expression.

Democratization processes, though limited, have opened new spaces to diversity and collective identities. In Argentine, pluralist identity politics accepted the notion of a monolithic ethnic collectivity together with full assimilation to the nation. While transnational connections of Jews to Israel and the Jewish world continue to be acceptable, the new discourse fit well to the oxymoron logic of ‘assimilated ethnicity’ (Anagnostou, “Model Americans, Quintaessential Greeks: Ethnic Success and Assimilation in Diaspora” 2003). Jews are concerned with democratic political culture and with becoming full citizens in order to participate in the public sphere, while maintaining their ethnic difference. This implies no global belief in the desirability of individual assimilation, but concern about sharing civic commonality (Sosnowski, “Fronteras en las letras judías-latinoamericanas”, 2000).

Democratization has involved a shift from an overwhelming focus on persisting differences of an allegedly center-linked diaspora to a broader focus that encompasses emerging civic commonalities and transnational links as well. Normatively, it has produced a shift from the automatic valorization of cultural and ethnic differences to a renewed concern with civic integration into the civil society and the public sphere (Senkman, 2007)

While in Argentina Jewish interaction with non-governmental organizations and diverse sectors of society has defined a new agenda in which citizenship-building converge with the struggle for democratization and the defense of human rights, in the

Mexican case the interest points to the increasing individual and collective willingness to overcome dominant perceptions of the community as isolated and uncommitted to the national causes (Moiguer and Karol; *Tribuna Israelita*, 1996 and 2006).

In both social settings, while the trend toward interaction is gaining momentum, potential challenges arise from the fact that civil society has given birth not only to autonomous self-organizing sectors, but also reinforced dependent anomic groups susceptible to clientelistic cooptation. The latter is still a terrain of highly unpredicted collective action .

The multifaceted interplay between globalization and multiculturalism allows the public manifestation of particularism and, simultaneously, it widens the exposure to new forms of identification that seriously compete with the Jewish national identity referent. The pluralizing of referents does not operate in a linear or substitutive form; it rather presents an intricate pattern which points to new conceptions and practices. Globalization processes provide dense cultural resources and networks to particular identities. Indeed, we may affirm that the region is confronting a singular convergence of transitions to democracy and transnationalism that confer legitimacy to the links with external centers, be it the State of Israel or other centers, such as North American Jewry. The latter, as seen, has gained relevance among the Jewish communities extending its political concern to the region as well as its economic and philanthropic help.

From the other side, in Argentine, the recent elections to the communal organization of the AMIA have shown the Haredi sectors “conquering the community” - the expression the Zionists made their own strategy as a way of building their hegemony. Was it an alliance based on circumstantial interest that brought different Jewish religious streams together, or did the religious common denominator play a determinant role? The question claims a reference to the public claim of religion vis-à-vis the lack of credibility of the traditional partisan structures.

Historically, religion played a minor role in what were basically secular communities. This trend was reinforced by the scarcity of religious functionaries, dating back to the earliest days of Latin American Jewry. Thus one may affirm that important changes have taken place that point both to identity formation processes and to patterns of organized community life. They may also be seen as part of the general public relevance religion has gained as a result of its claims to a new interaction between private and public

morality. ( Bokser Liwerant, **Latin American Jewish Identities: Past and Present Challenges. The Mexican Case in a Comparative Perspective, 2007**) In the 1960s the Conservative movement began its spread to South America. It provided the first model of a religious institution not brought over from Europe but ‘imported’ from the United States. As the Conservative movement adjusted to local conditions, the synagogue began to play a more prominent role both in community life and in society in general. The Conservative movement mobilized thousands of otherwise non-affiliated Jews, bringing them to active participation in Jewish institutions and religious life.<sup>1</sup>

In recent years, in tandem with changing trends in world Jewish life, orthodox groups have formed new religious congregations. Today, the spread of the Chabad movement and the establishment of Chabad centers, both in the large, well-established communities as well as in the smaller ones, are striking. More than seventy rabbis are currently working in close to fifty institutions.

While in Mexico the presence of Chabad is marginal at best, there are more than fifty synagogues, study houses, *kollelim* and *yeshivot*, more than thirty of which were established in the last twenty five years. Fourteen of the twenty four existing *kollelim* belong to the Syrian *Halabi* community. There is a very important trend towards religious observance and ‘haredization’. In the last six years the ‘very observant’ grew from 4.3% to 7% while the observant grew from 6.7% to 17%, a growth of almost 300%. Traditionalists, who are still the majority of the Mexican Jewish population, dropped from 76.8% to 62%. These trends, when specifically analyzed among the population below 40 years of age, the figures for very observant grow from 7 to 12%; observant from 17 to 20% and traditionalist fall from 62% to 59% (CCIM; 2006). The extreme religious factions and the strategies of self-segregation are still marginal to the whole of Jewish life on the continent; however, their growing presence point to general processes and tendencies that are developing and shaping the space of identities.

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<sup>1</sup> One proof of the deep the lack of religious leadership to which Elazar refers and the importance of such leadership to religious development is found in the success of Rabbi Marshall Meyer. Rabbi Meyer took upon himself the task of preparing a new rabbinical leadership, establishing the Seminario Rabínico Lationamericano in Argentina. Today its graduates serve throughout Latin America and beyond. Their presence in communities in the United States is not only due to the lack of opportunities in local communities, but also reflects the new phenomenon of regional migration.

The interplay between the historical ethnic components of identity and the new religious flows show a differential behavior throughout the region. Thus, South American communities paradigmatically epitomize how Chabad grew out of the socio-economic and cultural changing conditions. Religious developments responded both to the need for reconstitution of the social fabric and to the aforementioned cultural and spiritual transformation. Religion identification displays as an anchor for belonging and social order and as a moral code expressing the quest for unresolved expectations by the prevailing patterns of organized communal life. New terrains of intimate and private spheres, as expressed in code of spirituality, are interacting with the public dimension.

In Mexico, in spite the fact communal loyalties and the prevailing structural density and norms are still powerful in shaping identity, the search for new bridges between individual intimate realms and communal terrains are showing a growing relevance.

There are still other new cultural referents that act as foci of identity, among which the *Shoah* has become increasingly relevant. As an axis of identification points to a global trend in the Jewish, and non-Jewish world, which may be read in terms of a new dynamics connected to a reevaluation of the Diaspora as a fundamental value and element in the formation of Jewish history and memory. *Vis-à-vis* the Israeli centered identification pattern, one may wonder if current narratives in which the present is subdued by the moment of destruction express an ‘unexplainable uneasiness’ with State power while being more consonant with patterns of postmodern times (Bokser Liwerant, 2006; 2007)

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Latin America has been able to contribute one of the most powerful models of Jewish corporate experience: the ethno-cultural, secularized, cohesive Jewish Kehillah. Clarity of defining boundaries, richness of institutions, unmistakable Jewish contents – even through a significant acceptance of the social norms of the surrounding society and its priorities. These were common patterns, within the internal distinction between more and less integrated societies concerning the general role of ethnicity and social stratification among the majority.

We observe a newly expanding claim of religious experience, but an experience that is connected in relevant and practical ways with and within the known universe of Jewish community institutions and patterns transnationally connected.

The emerging pattern could be described as disappointment and diffidence facing the secular and political alternatives within the Jewish realm, but also questioning the basic paradigm of peaceful integration into the local national-civic mainstream, of being equal while at the same time preserving a significant amount of Jewish community autonomy (Mexico).

Are we facing the growing role and visibility of the Jewish religion as a manifestation of despair? Or religion as creative experience? Is such revival of religion directed from the local community, or is it better characterized as joining the local community with a transnational community of believers under one superior authority usually located in the U.S. or in Israel? (Lubawitcher Rebbe, Ovadia Yosef)

The analyzed changes have a determinant impact on the centrality of Israel. They can be reformulated both in terms of the changing meanings of its centrality as well as an expression of decentralization and the pluralizing of centers. Certainly, Israel's actual place is not necessarily mediated by the classical Zionist paradigm(s) while, it must be stressed, there is a search for new types of interactions that have totally overcome the mediation that organized Zionism used to offer through institutions and individual leaders.

On a different level, Israel's changing role and meaning may also be seen in the importance attributed to it by different age groups. Thus, while among members of the Mexican Jewish community above 70 years, 97% declared that Israel is of utmost importance, among the age group between 18 and 29 years old the proportion feeling this way declines to 77%. These figures are still much higher compared to other communities in the region, such as Argentina, where this percentage stands at 57% (Jmelniczky and Erdei, 2005).

For Latin American Jews, besides its condition of sovereign and creative cultural center, Israel also has appeared historically as a vital space for those who are in need. Necessity and ideology interact now as they have done since the origins of the State. Migration waves and their chosen destination point to this dynamics. For Argentine Jews

Israel became a central spot; however today, when asked about country of preference in case of emigration, while 27% declared Spain, only 24% opted for Israel, followed by 14% that pointed to the U.S.. The emigration trend among Mexican Jews in terms of preferences shows a reduction of Israel's importance, even though 84% have visited it least once (CCIM, 2006).

Among Jews in Caracas in 1998-99 – thus before the significant change of political regime of the last years – asked about their moves facing a crisis, 14% stated they would go to Israel, the same percent would prefer the U.S., 9% would chose another country, and yet 63% would remain in Venezuela (DellaPergola, 2003). Overall, 29% felt very close to Israel, 53% close, 11% indifferent, and 5% distant or very distant. These data do not necessarily help to predict what actually happened under the stringency of the more recent political mutations.

Amidst the context of restructuring the normative, cultural, and organizational axes of Jewish life, the redefinition of a Jewish ecology reflects the changing bonds between individual and community and the complex oscillation between social integration and the search for a meaningful Jewish life. As we analyzed, structures, interactions and frontiers define collective identities whose referents derive from a wide social and cultural spectrum that provides new domains and dynamics where they are built, internalized, created and transformed.

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We may adventure to say that Jewish identity(ies) have to face an unprecedented tension between its Jewish dimension based on memory (growing place of the past) but displayed in a virtual place and time –Jews as a global people, dispersed- and its concrete non Jewish dimension, located in different particular societies –might them be multicultural ones- and without a past.

5.

Globalization allows us a scenario of a world Jewish network-society articulated between diverse focal places of Jewish life. A Jewish world might coalesce in global and integral

terms based on networks and relationships, links and interactions that include voluntary and compulsory frameworks, primordial and elective foci of identities, associative and institutionalized structures. A world in which plural identities would claim differentiated approaches to individuals and institutional orders as agents of changes.

Such a Jewish world would claim policies that have to be differential based on the understanding of inner diversity. Policies should be developed and refined regarding inclusion measures for entering Jewish peoplehood, while greater attention should be given to defining whether there exists a threshold for exiting Jewish peoplehood, and what it is.

Paralleling this effort to improving, clarifying, explaining the rules of belonging, there is the need to build preventive bridges based on semi neutral spaces or better contingent consensus. Efforts should be developed – and they are eminently feasible based on current research – about locating the shared values around which a plurality of Jewish constituencies may find consensus – even constituencies separated by deep intellectual and ideological cleavages. This effort is particularly important and urgent concerning the new generations of Jews who often hold more shared values with the non-Jewish environment. One crucial element in this respect seems to be the feeling of pride about one's own Jewish identity, and the availability to share roles of responsibility within the organized Jewish community.

Recognizable mechanisms should be established to enhance public conversation on Jewish and general issues. Further initiatives should be devoted to the early location and training of community leaders and specialized professionals. Specialized avenues of recruitment and dialogue should be developed vis-à-vis specialized sectors within the Jewish collective who fulfill roles of special public influence, such as academics, entrepreneurs, philanthropists, rabbis, and other leaders. The dialogue between these various specialized sectors should hopefully gradually lead to a broader and more representative conduction of Jewish affairs based on greater knowledge and empathy. These considerations apply regarding the future of Jewish organized interaction at the local level as well as at the international level – such as membership in goal-oriented global task forces.

It stands to reason that no full consensus can be reached among a sophisticated, multicultural Jewish collective deeply inserted in politically and culturally diverse societies. Particularly difficult to reconcile are the varying degrees and shades of Jewish ritual observance, and the different commitments to political scenarios that will involve the future territorial boundaries and ideological choices of the Israeli state – facing which many outside Israel itself will feel authorized and motivated to express high profile propensities.

However, cleavages can be reduced or even made appear as seamless when working together to stress the commonalities of a shared culture, including tools like a better spread of the Hebrew language –identity through linguistic symbolic and communicational encounters; voluntarism to the benefit of the community and society (the relevance of *Tikun Olam* (Mirsky, 2008); changing and renewed meanings of observance; visits to Israel and to other Jewish communities worldwide, and developing interactions that may provide a concrete substantiation to the more virtual feeling of belonging with the Jewish people.

Ultimately a “vital center” for multiple encounters represents the convergence of a fluid realm of identities through associative and institutional arrangements and mechanisms to build changing consensus.