

Identity and Jewish Identities

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For Hershale Grin, Z”L

- 1) The construction of identities is the cultural mechanism through which human finitude is expressed (i.e., our consciousness/feeling of separation from the rest of the universe, the fragility and fugacity of life, and the certainty of death). It differentiates individuals and groups and rebinds them to the social universe and nature.

Comment: Identity is one of the paths culture provides us with for facing our finitude. In addition to using hallucinogens or alcohol (which at times drastically limit self-awareness), a number of spiritual approaches try to reach ecstasy or to void the ego by suspending one’s state of reflective consciousness.

- 2) Social identity is constructed around an identification with beliefs, symbols, and practices that delimit, or create boundaries, constraining the individual or group tendency to blend with others. Identities allow the construction of ‘memories’ and narratives of selves and groups.
- 3) A social identity presumes: (a) one or several criteria that define the rules for ‘joining the club’; (b) a set of social practices and symbolic systems that explain/confirm the individual’s or group’s singularity; and (c) a formal authority (as, for example, a judge or rabbi) or an informal one (a consensus that affirms the individual or group image/definition, either by that individual or group itself or by someone else or some other group).

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- 4) Identities may be: (a) self-defined, that is, freely chosen; (b) ascribed, by facts of birth, biography, and social context (e.g., nationality, family name, stigma); or (c) a mixture of both.

Identities form the basis of an individual's and a social group's classificatory systems, within which each presents a version of him or herself and of the other. In other words, the definition of an identity always depends upon who the observer is and who is being observed.

- 5) Identities are always contingent, that is, the product of historical, social, and psychological circumstances. As sociologists like to point out, they are social constructions. However, for the individuals who live these identities, they are not random but rather the very meaning of life, the thing that tells each of us what our 'natural' place in the world is.

Individual identities are defined by a variety of affiliations (sense of belonging/identifications)—biological, social, or mythical, for example. Individual identities are always multiple (e.g., familial, geographical, political, religious). However, such concepts as hybrid, mutant, multiple, fluid identities do not preclude analysis of the mechanisms that ensure the institutional stability of collective identities. Stability should be looked for in the existence of institutions specialized in establishing boundaries and group rules.

- 6) Both individual and collective identities depend on shared values. Individual identity does not exist outside of a shared cultural framework. In traditional societies, the space for individual identity was heavily bound and limited by collective identity and by mechanisms of imposition that operated through the social control of religious/political authority. In modern times, the relation has been inverted, demanding that each individual view his or her identity as a willful act, that is, an autonomous moral choice, experienced as a personal choice.

- 7) In modern liberal societies, there is still a feeling of ‘us’, of community, but each member of the group has the right to define what he or she understands by ‘us’. The meaning of identity is to be constructed individually. Every time authority is delegated to a symbolic power (for example, to a pastor or rabbi), this is an act of individual will that can be suspended at any moment.
- 8) One or several identities can be experienced as sacred (from a religion to a soccer team)—that is, as a transcendental force that lends meaning to life.
- 9) Although the sociological and psychological mechanisms for constructing identities are universal and determinable, the social sciences have not arrived at equally solid explanations for why certain identities, especially religious and ethnic, display an endurance down through time and an ability to survive the most diverse historical transformations. In other words, while all identities may use similar formal mechanisms of reproduction, their contents have specific impacts.
- 10) Respect for everyone’s right to choose, construct, and live his or her identity is the basis of a democratic, humanistic society. The greatest danger to human freedom in modern times comes from those who try to impose decisions upon others concerning their individual and collective identities. The paradox—and the limit—of democratic values is that they must permit the free exercise of all identity, save those identities that aim at suppressing other people’s freedom of choice.

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- 11) Down through modern times, Judaism—like all religions—has constructed its identity upon a series of beliefs and myths, and upon practices and rituals grounded in a separation between pure and impure, between profane and sacred,

and between Jews as the chosen people (in any religion, those who believe in it are the chosen—“there is no salvation save in the Church”) and other people.

12) Found in the Bible, this set of practices was radicalized by the rabbis in order to create the conditions necessary for surviving the diaspora. The absence of a shared geographic space that would naturally separate Jews from non-Jews prompted the extension of the purity/impurity laws to almost all acts, ritualizing all daily practices and thus hampering the natural mixing that life in the diaspora would promote.

13) Rabbinical Judaism was constructed as an identity system that defined: (a) entry rules (conversion or consanguinity—originally patrilineal and later matrilineal); (b) a set of practices and beliefs (laws on purity/impurity, rituals, and endogamy; narratives on the meaning of history, messianic hope, systems for the intergenerational transmission of knowledge, the expectation that another world exists and that rebirth will occur in the end times); and (c) an authority system centered on rabbinical authority (at moments of major decision-making, this authority is always exercised collectively and through delegation of power from the community, since in Judaism the rabbi enjoys no special theological status nor does the rabbinate have a hierarchical structure).

14) Modern times shattered the foundations of rabbinical Judaism. Most Jews embraced the values of modernity. Equality before the law and the opportunity to take part in all areas of social life opened up new possibilities. For the Jews—a group that had been oppressed for centuries—modernity represented a unique chance to enjoy recognition, dignity, and social mobility.

15) Modern Judaism separated (a) Jews and Judaism; (b) Jews from Judaism; and (c) Judaism from an ultimate source of authority. It separated Jews and Judaism because, while traditionally each Jew had sought to embrace a shared image of Judaism, in modern society each individual produces his or her own version of what Judaism means. It separated the Jews from Judaism because in modern life

Judaism occupies only part of each Jew's existential space, for each feels he or she belongs to other collectivities (for instance, a professional circle, country of residence, social class, humanity). Lastly, it deprived Judaism of an ultimate source of collective authority by transferring to individual consciousness the definition of Judaism, thereby pluralizing Judaism.

16) During the transition into modernity, a series of efforts were made to integrate Judaism and modernity into a coherent whole. These secularizing versions of Judaism were expressed not only in religion (liberal and conservative Judaism) but also in political ideologies (Bundism—that is, Yiddish socialism—and Zionism). In all cases, the goal was to integrate Judaism with the values of modernity by reinterpreting, moderating, or eliminating practices centered on the pure/impure, Jew/non-Jew code.

17) Starting in the eighteenth century, the new religious and secular versions of Judaism sought to emphasize the continuities between Jewish tradition and the values of modernity as a way of facilitating the social integration of Jews and their acceptance by non-Jews. In so doing, the particularistic dimensions of Jewish identity were minimized or negated. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century Judaism presumed modernity to be a set of coherent, universal values and failed to recognize the diversity of identities and particularist loyalties of life in modern times. Defending an inclusive view of humanity, the universalist discourse is in fact particularist, for it offers one possible view among many other possible views of what constitute universal values. In practice, modern man displays multiple identifications and loyalties—familial, local, national, religious, political, professional—that cannot be reduced to a single coherent whole and that at times fall into contradiction with each other. In short, all individual identity has its schizophrenic dimensions. If in modernity Jews have especially suffered from the schizophrenic nature of all identity, this is because they have been accused of displaying multiple loyalties and particularisms that are normally accepted in the majority of the population.

18) From its origins down to our present times, Judaism has built itself around the experience of a small tribe/group/people/religion set within hostile surroundings, dominated by great empires, or living as a minority in a context of diaspora. From the Egyptian exodus to the judges and the prophets, from the destruction of the Temple to the holocaust, the memory of Judaism—in mythical or historical accounts or in individual psychic experience—is one of resilience and endurance in the face of adversity. (In fact, the motive for the ‘happiest’ of religious festivals, Purim—the Jewish Carnival—is Queen Esther’s act of saving the Jews from genocide!!)

The long debate over what defines the modern Jew—is it anti-Semitism, that is, an outside element, or some inner content?—is a false debate. In the construction of the Jewish culture—and this holds true for any people—persecution is never a purely ‘external’ dimension, an imposition from the outside in relation to which Jews passively take a stance, either accepting or fleeing from Judaism. The persecuted one is never merely a passive victim. Out of persecution, the Jews constructed a culture and the practical knowledge of how to survive. They built group solidarity (explicit or not), institutions, and narratives within which the persecution experience was re-elaborated and transformed into ways of acting and thinking. It includes unconscious psychic components, where insecurity coexists alongside the ability to resist, and self-destructive trauma coexists alongside creative wisdom, components always present in a more or less diluted way among those whose biography (usually through the family) led them to receive this cultural heritage.

Comment: The fact that someone has received this heritage does not automatically make him or her Jewish; this requires a personal decision.

19) For the majority of modern Jews, Jewish identity displays the following features: (a) it is a **part-time** identity—in other words, on a conscious level, Jewish identity only appears circumstantially; (b) it is **modular**, that is, Jewish tradition becomes like a game of Lego’s, where everyone gets to rebuild his or her own personalized model; (c) it is **mutant**, keeping in step with society’s

ongoing transformations; and (d) it depends upon the **life cycle**, that is, on intergenerational relations and passages in our personal lives.

20) With few exceptions—like conversions—the origin of Jewish identity is ascribed, that is, it is a product of the destiny of being born into a family with a Jewish father and/or mother. For the modern man or woman, what Judaism and being Jewish means is a personal question, one that cannot be transferred to an external authority. The discussion about what constitutes the essence of Judaism belongs to the culture wars inside Judaism, which depend upon historical context and on the capacity for political action displayed by the different groups confronting each other.

21) Comment: As to those people with a Jewish family background who do not define themselves as Jewish, they do not have a Jewish identity. One could argue that an outside eye—usually an anti-Semitic one—might define them as Jews. But in this case, Judaism is not an identity but a **stigma**, for it does not express these individuals' free choice. If, for instance, someone with Jewish parents opted to become a Christian and even so was killed in the Holocaust, this doesn't mean he or she died as a Jew. He or she died as a Christian, murdered by the bloody insanity of an ideology that did not admit people could choose their own identity.

22) Although from the perspective of sociology or modern ethics, defining what it means to be a Jew or what Judaism means is an individual question, the collective dimensions of Jewish identity (e.g., entry rules and rites of passage or membership) are a political issue, that is, they belong to the public space and collective construction. Defining who is a Jew has different consequences in the diaspora and within the State of Israel. The diaspora has room for an infinite variety of Jewish communities, each with its own criteria and in implicit or explicit dialog with the others. Within the State of Israel, the definition of who is Jewish has another kind of consequence: it determines whether a person will have the right to Israeli citizenship. (At present, two definitions of 'Jewish'

coexist in Israel, one handed down by the Supreme Court, which established that anyone whose grandfather or grandmother was Jewish has the right to access to Israeli citizenship through the “law of return”, and one defined by the Orthodox rabbinate, to whom the State entrusted the internal adjudication of nationality and which upholds an orthodox, rigid definition.)

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