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Jewish Social Studies, Volume 23, Number 1, Fall 2017, pp. 134-167 (Article)

Published by Indiana University Press



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Traditional Judaism: The Conceptualization of Jewishness in the Lives of American Jewish Post-Boomers

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ABSTRACT

Post-boomer American Jews pose many challenges to established frameworks for understanding the organization of the American Jewish community. In an analysis of 58 in-depth interviews with post-boomer American Jews, we found a preference for people who described themselves as not religious, and we found a near-total absence of the language of ethnicity. Instead, interviewees volunteered tradition as a replacement for both and as part of a rationale for the elements of Jewish life that compelled them to participate. Rejecting the voluntarism of much baby-boomer religion and the established frameworks of religion and ethnicity, post-boomers' characterizations of their own Judaisms point to the ways in which the social science of American Jews needs to develop a finer, more diverse set of tools for understanding American Jews and the Judaisms they practice.

Key words: social science, identity, religious nones, religion, secularism, tradition

According to the Pew Research Center's 2013 report entitled *A Portrait of Jewish Americans* (hereafter referred to as the Pew report), American post-boomers are more likely than their

Ari Y. Kelman, Tobin Belzer, Ilana Horwitz, Ziva Hassenfeld, and Matt Williams, "Traditional Judaism: The Conceptualization of Jewishness in the Lives of American Jewish Post-Boomers," *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society* n.s. 23, no. 1 (Fall 2017): 134–167. Copyright © 2017 The Trustees of Indiana University. doi: 10.2979/jewisocistud.23.1.05

predecessors to report having “no religion,” even as they are as likely as their elders to report having a sense of pride in being Jewish.¹ The discrepancy between an expressed sense of Jewish pride and a concomitant disavowal of religion as a determining factor in their Jewishness suggests that religion no longer plays the definitive role it once did in describing the youngest mature generation of American Jews. So how do American Jewish post-boomers describe the Jewishness in which they take pride? How do they conceptualize the Jewish religion that they reject, and how do they explain the elements of Jewish life they retain?

This inquiry seeks to understand how post-boomer American Jews understand and articulate the dimensions of Jewishness that continue to bind them to it. In this way, it departs from much social-scientific literature about American Jews that seeks to parse the dimensions of Jewish identity as formulated by individuals and represented through interviews or survey responses. Instead of focusing on the contours of post-boomer Jewish identities, this study seeks to understand how American Jewish post-boomers formulate Jewishness and, specifically, how they conceptualize the elements they both reject and retain. Therefore, this study does not linger on questions of identity as such and whether those we spoke with in this study refer to themselves as religious Jews or secular Jews or Jews of no religion. Rather, as the title suggests, we focused on how they understand, apprehend, and represent Jewishness in their lives.

By attending to the descriptions of Jewishness, we hope to move past inquiries into the qualities of individual identity and toward a deeper understanding of the ways in which American Jewish post-boomers formulate Jewishness itself. This seems a necessary intervention because the discourse on Jewish identity stretching back to the 1950s has long taken Jewishness for granted, as if all those who claimed a Jewish identity shared a common understanding of what Jewishness is or was, what it meant, and why it maintained a claim on hearts, minds, bodies, and souls. This project seeks to understand how American post-boomers who identify as Jewish understand what Jewishness is, and, as important, what it is not.

By focusing on the ways in which people apprehend Jewishness, we uncovered a discourse that runs parallel to dominant sociological frameworks that define Jewishness as either a religion or an ethnicity or as some combination of the two. Based on 58 long-form interviews with post-boomer American Jews, we found an alternative understanding of American Jewishness. Our interviewees revealed a strong affinity for elements of Jewishness that they described as traditional even

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as they rejected those they described as religious and ignored those described as ethnic. They did not experience tradition as either voluntary or binding, and they instead endowed it with a sense of commitment that resonated more deeply than either the external authority of what they understood religion to be or the exclusivist communal pull of ethnicity. These testimonies of post-boomer American Jews suggest that the authority of tradition eclipses that of religion or ethnicity and, in the process, makes possible new engagements with the Jewish past and future in the present.²

Methods

We did not begin with an interest in tradition as such. We started with a desire to gain better resolution with respect to the ways in which American Jewish post-boomers formulated Jewishness. To that end, we studied other interview protocols and decided to take an approach that would provide the broadest possible latitude for our interviewees to talk about themselves. Drawing on the work of Dan McAdams, we created an interview protocol that invited them to share their life stories and reflect on “how Jewishness plays a part.”³ If they told us their life stories without mentioning Jewishness, as some did, we offered some prompts to invite them to explicitly reflect on the place of Jewishness in their life stories. With this methodological choice, we departed quite intentionally from the standard scripts of Jewish social-scientific inquiry. We avoided questions that asked directly about denominational affiliation, ritual observance in their families, or whether they attended Jewish summer camp, because we wanted to give our interviewees the greatest possible authorial power over the definitions and examples of Jewishness and Judaism. We hoped that they would tell us about these experiences if they found them interesting or important, and in general, these kinds of experiences did appear in the narratives of our interviewees. Under these conditions, we were able to allow our respondents to formulate and describe their own understandings of and relationships to Jewishness and to do so on their own terms.

Because our method gave significant authority over the language and direction of the interview to the interviewee, the interviewees’ selection of terminology gains even greater significance. The terms they used to conceptualize Jewishness were their terms, offered voluntarily, which makes the emergence of certain terms and the omission of others a strong indicator of patterns in the conceptualization

of Jewishness, as understood by our interviewees. As important as the terms that they volunteered were those that they either rejected or simply ignored. Thus, an analysis of the interviews with particular attention to chosen and ignored language reveals a portrait of American Jewish post-boomers' conceptualizations of Jewishness on their own terms.

Between December 2013 and April 2014 we conducted 58 interviews with North American Jews ages 23–43, living mostly in major urban centers, where the majority of American Jews reside. The average age was approximately 30, and we interviewed 34 women, 23 men, and one person who does not ascribe to a single gender. Eight of our participants described themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and/or queer; the remainder did not describe their sexuality, but many alluded to relationships with people of the opposite gender. In terms of more established categories of Jewish demographics, our sample, though not statistically representative, nevertheless aligned with those revealed in the Pew report. Nearly one-half had traveled to Israel, and just over one-quarter had studied in Jewish day schools, whereas approximately 40 percent studied in synagogue-based supplemental schools. Around 20 percent had one non-Jewish parent.⁴

We reached out to potential interviewees through a purposive sampling methodology, through which we asked people in our social networks—both Jews and non-Jews—to recommend Jewish friends and acquaintances who they thought would be interested in speaking with us. We incentivized participation by offering the possibility of winning an iPad. We attempted, wherever possible, to begin two degrees of separation from our research team, with the friends of our acquaintances, so as to mitigate the bias that our immediate social circles might bear. Interviews averaged about 60 minutes in duration.

We specifically sought post-boomer Jews because of the prevalence of nonreligion among younger people. Though the number of Jews without religion has held fairly constant since at least 1990, the number of younger Jews who claim to have no religion has grown. The Pew report on American Jews found 32 percent of millennial Jews (born after 1980) and 26 percent of generation X Jews (born after 1965) identified as “Jews not by religion.”⁵ In 2013, Jews ages 18–49 accounted for 48 percent of the American Jewish population and constituted 61 percent of Jews not by religion.⁶ Steven Cohen and Jack Wertheimer, in their reassessment of the Pew study, also framed their concerns in generational terms: “If we take non-Orthodox Jews as a whole, there has been a striking decline in Jewish activity or commitment among those under the age of fifty.”⁷ This is connected to broader trends in

American religion. The 2015 Pew Center report, *America's Changing Religious Landscape*, found that rates of religiously unaffiliated individuals are growing in every major geographic region in the country. Also, though many American religious groups are aging, those identifying as unaffiliated are actually growing younger over time: "as a rising cohort of highly unaffiliated millennials reaches adulthood, the median age of unaffiliated adults has dropped to 36, down from 38 in 2007 and far lower than the general (adult) population's median age of 46."⁸ Barry Kosmin and Ariela Keysar saw a similar correspondence between age and the prevalence of having no religion, finding that 72 percent of Americans with no religion were under age 49.⁹

We also sought to understand post-boomer Jews in order to extend the understanding of American Jews beyond that of the baby-boom generation, whose experiences were well documented in the 1990 and 2000 National Jewish Population Surveys (and their subsequent analyses), in the work of Bethamie Horowitz, and in Steven Cohen and Arnold Eisen's *The Jew Within*.¹⁰ Because generational boundaries are not easy to draw sharply, we deployed four basic parameters for further focusing the selection of our participants. Subjects had to (1) identify as Jewish, (2) have spent a significant portion of their childhood in North America, (3) not be full-time university students at the time of the study, and (4) not have children of their own. The first two criteria focused our sample on American Jews, and the second two allowed us to examine the population most likely to identify as not religious. We excluded college students because of their liminal status both institutionally and professionally, and we excluded those with children because of the strong correlation between the birth of one's own children and engagement with formal religious and communal organizations.¹¹

Conceptualizing American Jews

The vast majority of social-scientific literature on American Jews has emphasized the religious and ethnic dimensions of Jewishness. Sometimes these are treated separately, and sometimes they provide the terms for a hybrid construct. For decades, both religion and ethnicity have provided relatively stable formulations of American Jewish behavior, belonging, and belief, as well as their absences. They have long functioned as useful and reliable ways of describing patterns of Jewish life, but their utility in describing Jewishness as it is lived may be more limited than expected. The

post-boomers in our sample regularly described themselves and their commitments in terms that did not align with conceptions of either religion or ethnicity. With respect to religion, many referred to themselves as not religious, which has a different and perhaps more expansive valence than the strict, survey-driven formulation *no religion*. Similarly, their almost total avoidance of the term *ethnicity* suggested that it had even less significance in their conceptualization of Jewishness, insofar as they did not offer it as a meaningful or useful term to describe their Jewishness. The relative absence of *religion* and *ethnicity* as terms that held a positive valence for the vast majority of our interviewees suggests the existence of other registers for the articulation of Jewishness for post-boomer Americans. A brief investigation into the discourses of religion and ethnicity will reveal the limitations of these terms and destabilize them just enough to allow for alternative formulations of Jewishness to emerge and, we hope, to expand the usable vocabulary for the study of Jewishness.

Religion

Jews have never sat entirely comfortably within the framework of religion. Leora Batnitzky's history of modern Jewish thought traces the development of the idea that Judaism should be considered, first and foremost, a religion.¹² This approach is predicated on the notion that Jews were not always thought of as practitioners of something that might be called a religion. For Batnitzky, "the modern concept of religion ... is not a neutral or timeless category, but instead a modern, European creation, and a Protestant one at that."¹³ Tying religion to modernity, Batnitzky traces the ways in which the formulation of Judaism as a religion emerged from particular social and historical conditions, mediated and embellished through the efforts of certain thinkers who sought to reconcile the demands of modernity with Jewish life and make it legible to Protestant and Catholic majorities. In contrast, David Biale offers an account of the "countertradition" of Jewish secularism against that of religious Judaism.¹⁴ For Biale, secularism affords an alternative course through modernity (and postmodernity) that claims a stake in historical Jewishness while resisting the hegemony of Judaism as a religion. Read in tandem, Batnitzky's and Biale's books offer insights into parallel constructions of Jewishness that have shaped how Jews have come to understand themselves in the modern world and explain themselves both to themselves and others.¹⁵

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Despite the contemporary and historical difficulties of categorically aligning American Jews and religion, religion remains a resonant and powerful, if not totalizing, category for describing Jewish collective behaviors and attitudes. Both the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) and the 2013 Pew report on American Jews used religion as a key indicator for determining whether a possible interviewee might qualify for inclusion in the study. The screening process for inclusion in the 1990 NJPS asked directly about “religious qualification” and followed up with questions about “1) each individual’s current religion, 2) religion raised, and 3) religion at birth.”¹⁶ Similarly, the 2013 Pew report asked potential participants if they were “Jewish by religion.” An affirmative answer qualified a respondent for inclusion in the “core Jewish population.” A negative answer required affirmative answers to three additional questions in order to qualify for the study, suggesting that in both cases religion served as a primary rationale for deciding who could be included in the study and who could not.¹⁷

This extended to the analysis and organization of findings in both studies as well. The Pew Research Center foregrounded distinctions between “Jews by religion” and “Jews not by religion,” providing no fewer than 25 tables that presented data broken out according to these two populations. Similarly, the 1990 NJPS derived seven different “Jewish identity constructs” to capture the entire spectrum of Jewish identities. All seven constructs included a religious qualifier, and as with the Pew survey, to be counted in the “core Jewish population” one had to claim “no non-Judaic religious loyalty.”¹⁸ This suggests, again, that religious loyalty served as a central concern in determining whether a survey respondent could be counted as a Jew. In both instances, religion played a significant role in the conceptualization, implementation, and organization of the research and thus shaped the portraits of American Jews that emerged.

Despite the persistence of religion as a term that might describe them, on the whole American Jews do not actively or regularly participate in activities or institutions that look terribly religious. Just over one-quarter (26 percent) of American Jews say that religion is very important in their lives, whereas 56 percent of the general public makes that claim.¹⁹ American Jews also attend religious services with far less frequency than do other Americans; only 23 percent of Jews attend religious services once a month or more, whereas 62 percent of Americans in general claim to do so.²⁰ Among Jews who claim to have no religion, these numbers drop even further, with only 4 percent attending worship services at least monthly and only 8 percent

agreeing that religion is very important in their lives.²¹ As incoming college students, Jews were among the least likely to score strongly on measures of both religious commitment and religious engagement, scoring in the single digits, alongside Buddhists, Unitarian Universalists, and those incoming students who have no religious preference.²² Sociologist Nancy Ammerman found that Jews were also outliers in the use of theistic and spiritual discourse, employing such language with about the same frequency as those whom she labeled *nonaffiliates*, a term referring to those who claim to have no religion (30 percent for Jews, 27 percent for nonaffiliates).²³ By comparison, the group with the next lowest usage rates was American Catholics, who were approximately twice as likely (60 percent) to use theistic language.

In line with these trends, the majority of our respondents described themselves as not religious. Twenty-four interviewees explicitly self-identified as not religious, and another 11 explained that they did not see themselves in religious terms, using a variety of phrases like “I’m really not all that in tune with Judaism” (Kevin Kogan).²⁴ None of our interviewees described themselves as having no religion, and only eight of our respondents positively identified themselves as religious. With respect to ethnicity, only two of our respondents volunteered the term *ethnically Jewish* to describe how they understood their Jewishness. When offering affirmative descriptions of themselves and their relationship to Jewishness, the two most popular terms were *culture* and *tradition*. Eighteen of our respondents described their connection to Jewishness as cultural, and 29 described their affinity for Jewishness in terms of tradition. More important, all of our 35 respondents who referred to themselves as not religious used either *culture* or *tradition* or both to describe their relationship to Jewishness.

So what did they think about the religion that they were rejecting? The 24 respondents who described themselves explicitly as not religious typically associated religion with wisdom or expectations that came from a divine source manifested in legal formulations laid out in the Bible or other codifications of Jewish law. They understood religious law to be totalizing and binding for those who believed it, and they shared very low incidences of an affirmative belief in God. Religion, they held, existed “out there,” in the realm of the divine, the faithful, the biblical, the legal, institutional, and prescribed. As such, it was not for them. In general, they held to quite strict notions of religion, and to be religious often meant accepting these notions in their entirety.

Brian offered a typical framework for expressing both his rejection of religion and his embrace of Jewishness. He explained that he had never been a “spiritual person” and then continued,

being Jewish is very important to me and I’m very proud of my heritage and where I’ve come from, but do I go about my day wondering if I’m doing something that biblically would be more or less wrong? Or am I going against traditional Jewish morals according to the Bible? These type of things don’t concern me.

He did not reject Jewishness, but he scoffed at the assumption that he should “concern” himself with the Bible, which had no bearing on his otherwise positive feelings about being Jewish.

Sam offered a similar description of his relationship to religion, in which he conveyed his sense that he had, somehow, been approaching religion incorrectly. Sam, who was involved in Jewish youth groups through high school, explained, “I didn’t really believe in what most people would call God, and I don’t think I was connecting to things the way that it seemed like I should’ve been connecting.” His impression that he had somehow failed at religion led him to conclude that although he still felt an affinity for elements of Jewish life, he should not consider himself religious. As with Brian, this did not diminish his enjoyment of aspects of Jewishness that he associated with religion, even though he had been able to separate them from religion as such. Sam explained,

I still very much enjoy songs and prayers, the experience, and I still connect to the community, and I still feel connected to friends and family, especially [those] who are Jewish. That’s a part that wouldn’t be there without the religious aspect, but to me, it doesn’t feel religious anymore.

He described how he engaged in elements of Jewish life that are associated with religion without threatening his not-religious status by identifying “songs and prayers” with family and community rather than religion.

Caryn, another self-identified not-religious Jew, shared a similar set of associations with the Jewish religion as something riven with judgment. “The older I get, the less I go to [worship] services. It’s really like, it’s a combination of guilt and old-school feeling that the man with the long white beard is going to punish me if I don’t.” This theme resonated throughout her interview, as she repeatedly attributed her disengagement from religion to persistent associations with fear, guilt,

and irrationality. “I think that a lot of the stuff that I do related to religion is guided by what seems like craziness, which is what like so much of it is. It seems like it’s motivated by a desire to ward off the bad things.” By referring to herself on four separate occasions during the interview as not religious, Caryn distanced herself from the superstition and guilt she associated with religion but nevertheless created a way to continue engaging with Jewish life.

Jacoba offered one of the more detailed descriptions of this approach to Judaism, in which she both embraced and rejected the religious framework. She explained,

The religion itself means very little to me. I wouldn’t say that I’m a religious person at all; I would say that I practice certain observances, but the reason I do them is not out of belief in God or belief in halakhah [Jewish law], no.... It’s more out of being part of a community that’s very warm, and being part of a family that has some positive attributes in itself, like having a day to rest and hang out with your family. I think it’s great. And the holidays can be lovely because you spend them with family, so it’s really more about a family community for me, in terms of Judaism now.

Jacoba’s attitude was informed by a series of encounters, starting in middle school, in which the explanations and practices of Judaism failed to speak to her in an adequate way. In her recollection of the most positive of these experiences, she explained how and why religion detracted from the elements of the program she found to be meaningful and even spiritual.

I did this one summer program where I went hiking for a month, and it was ... great. I loved the outdoors; I loved the hiking; I hated praying. We had to pray three times a day; I thought it was awful. It has no meaning; you’re in this beautiful environment; it makes you feel spiritual, and instead of engaging with that, you recite Hebrew words in a book that mean nothing to you. And then, if you actually happened to read the English, you were even more disgusted because it has nothing to do with your life, and you’d read phrases like, “I’m so happy I’m a man,” all these things that you’re like, “This doesn’t speak to my life in any way.” I really enjoyed that in the sense of hiking and engaging with a Jewish community that wasn’t about Judaism, but not in the Jewish sense of it.

In that setting and in subsequent ones, Jacoba found religion to be a hindrance to fully appreciating or participating in Jewish experiences.

A smaller number of our interviewees were not quite as critical as Jacoba and expressed their appreciation for Jewish religious wisdom while still describing themselves as not religious. They often explained that the beauty of Jewish knowledge lay not in its religious particularism but in its universal values. Reflecting on his participation in an extracurricular program of Jewish study while in college, Jeff explained how the program both brought him closer to religion and simultaneously allowed him to move away from it.

In terms of Jewish faith, I always thought it was really stupid until I did the program where I realized . . . I knew the community aspects are important but not the faith aspect. I learned that the faith aspects are important but you don't have to have them if you are getting what you need out of your other actions in life.

Diana, who described herself as “really not a religious person,” explained her approach to Judaism in terms similar to Jeff’s.

Judaism offers a lot of tools for us to discuss important things, and you were born into a family where this is the language that they have and these are the tools that you were born into that you have that we can use to help talk about the universe, ethics, culture, identity, and let's find out what this culture says about those things and how we can look at them, and then you can decide what your place is in that and if you want to continue.

Jeff and Diana both found the wisdom of Judaism accessible and engaging, but in order to fully embrace it they found it necessary to step outside of the specifically religious framework and universalize its meaning and the application of its ethics.

Those in our sample who identified as not religious tended to offer a stricter definition of religions than those who identified as religious or those who did not describe themselves explicitly as either religious or not. The smaller number of our respondents who spoke positively about the religious dimensions of Jewishness described it in both highly personal and highly universal terms. For these eight interviewees, religion could be both a vehicle for personal meaning and a model for a kind of liberal politics. Most important, they described religion as something more flexible than did their not-religious counterparts, saying that participation did not rely on perfect faith, obedience, law, the Bible, or guilt.

Deb did not identify as either religious or not religious, but her description of Judaism captured Jewish practice in very personal terms.

I've always felt Jewish, and always still feel a connection to the community. It gives me an identity. . . . No matter what, no matter where I've moved, no matter where I am, I still feel Jewish, and I still want to have it in my life. I still talk to God and pray, and still feel that there's a plan out there. There is fate and there's a plan. I want to be a good person and I want to be a good member of society, but I still feel Jewish about everything.

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Judaism, for Deb, emerged from her very personal relationship with God and a faith in God having “a plan out there.” She expressed little interest in religious life as practiced through the performance of biblical and rabbinic commandments and instead offered a depiction of Judaism as radically open and accepting, not bound to traditional legal or ritual structures. She continued:

Having a lesbian rabbi is such a freeing thing for me. To me, that is the most beautiful thing because it tells me, you're all accepted. This is about Judaism and it's not about any bullshit. It's just about the Judaism. So to me, that makes me feel so comfortable, but you can be spiritual and you can sing the songs, and you all can speak Hebrew, and you can all be a community, no matter what your sexuality is. No matter if you're married or not married, or if you didn't have kids or you did have kids. So we're all equal in that way and not any less Jewish, if that makes sense.

Deb's version of Judaism is open and welcoming, nonjudgmental and flexible, allowing for the equality of all who participate. In this way, she blends the individualistic and the universal, defining Judaism as both strongly pluralistic and deeply personal.

Jonas and Vicki both offered descriptions of Judaism that followed a pattern similar to Deb's. Vicki, who became a rabbi, described her relationship with religion in terms both deeply personal and pluralistic. She explained her sense of orientation toward Jewish life as an “inner voice” that she recognized at various points in her life.

The inner voice that told me when I was six years old, I want to go to summer camp. The voice that guided me through being an 11-year-old traveling through the airport in Copenhagen alone but like completely in a deep sense of security and directedness. The same voice that told me when I was 17, “You could go to college right away, you could jump on the hamster wheel like everybody else but you don't wanna do that. You actually want to explore the richness and the depth of your soul and you want to go to Israel,” that voice is the voice that I look for to make important decisions in my life.

Later in the interview, when she described her process of deciding which rabbinical seminary to attend, Vicki described meeting one of the deans of the school she eventually attended, who offered a vision of an environment where “people kept kosher and kept Shabbat and were creative and were LGBT-inclusive and friendly and took halakhah seriously, but also took the modern world seriously and had a sense of humor about it, and I liked that.” Her vision of a religious life included both the personal and the pluralistic. It did not at all resemble the distant, judgmental, strange-sounding moralistic descriptions of Judaism offered by interviewees who described themselves as not religious.

Even Jonas, who identified as religious, offered a description of Judaism that was both personally engaging and broadly inclusive. Jonas explained,

I would say religion plays a big part in my life, even if observance doesn't. . . . That stretch where I don't do anything Jewish really because I'm in the city and I miss Saturday morning [worship services] or whatever it is. I do begin to feel a bit discombobulated and I tend to be drawn back to it, even as a 28-year-old.

He explained that without regular engagement with religious practice, he felt like he lacked a “center base” to ground him. It was important for Jonas to describe himself as a religious Jew, though his explanation of the difference between himself and other, cultural Jews reveals just how murky a distinction it really is.

I don't consider myself a cultural Jew. . . . I consider myself a religious, if not always observant, Jew. I consider myself a cultural Jew, too, just not in the sense that it's . . . mostly a cultural Jew means you like lox and schmear on a bagel or whatever. . . . When I think of Jewishness, obviously culture is included. But to think of it primarily as a culture seems to be missing the essence. It would be like the sandwich without the stuff in the middle.

Echoing much sociological literature, Jonas explained that culture cannot exist independently of religion. For him, being religious meant participating willingly in practices that were personally meaningful, not abstract, legalistic, or even divine. Yet he also distinguished between being religious and adhering to the law, suggesting that he held his relationship to Judaism closely, more likely to follow the spirit of the law than its letter.

Regardless of whether our interviewees described themselves as religious or not religious, they all generally rejected the notion of a

meaningful framework emerging from their understandings of faith, law, the Bible, and direct divine intervention. The willingness of our religious interviewees to accept that category derived from their sense that they gained personal meaning from engaging with it, whereas our not-religious respondents could not imagine religion in those terms. Instead, they referred to religion as something abstract, judgmental, and irrational. They shared a common sense that religion had limited authority over their lives, regardless of how personally meaningful they found it. To be not religious was to reject the authority of rabbis and Bible, liturgy, Hebrew, obligatory laws, empty rituals, and unrealistic expectations of prayer and the like. Yet rejecting religion did not require them to abandon Jewish rituals, holidays, or other practices that they called *tradition*.

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Ethnicity

The other dominant framework for categorizing American Jews is that of ethnicity. Uninterested in religion but seeking a term to describe Jewish history, culture, and community, Horace Kallen and his peers at Harvard in the 1910s and 1920s developed the concept of ethnicity to explain patterns of group cohesion among American Jews who were not committed to religion.²⁵ Ethnicity offered a mode of explaining group affinity without resorting to the problematic science of racial categorization or, from Kallen's perspective, the equally problematic thicket of religious superstitions. Ethnicity afforded a malleable mode for the articulation of social difference that lay somewhere between race and culture, both safely secular formulations of collective identity.

The appeal of the concept of ethnicity grew over the course of the century, even as sociologist Will Herberg argued that religion was going to supplant ethnicity as an identifier.²⁶ Organizationally, he was right, as synagogue membership boomed during the 1950s and 1960s, but still, the general irreligiousness of American Jews persisted. Writing at the end of the century, Cohen and Eisen extended the idea of ethnicity to "refer rather broadly to a sense and pattern of Jewish belonging ... [including] all other [nonreligious] communal or collective aspects of being Jewish: all manner of attachment to Jewish family members, neighbors, secular institutions, and the Jewish people worldwide."²⁷ Ethnicity, for them, offered a way to conceptualize Jewish belonging without belief and a means for understanding commitments to Jewish life outside of religion. Embedded in this definition lay a critique of Herbert Gans, who a few decades earlier provided a broadly sweeping deconstruction of ethnicity as it manifests among

white ethnic groups.²⁸ Gans dismissed any such group affinity as “symbolic ethnicity,” which he defined as little more than “a nostalgic allegiance to the culture of the immigrant generation, or that of the old country; a love for and a pride in a tradition that can be felt without having to be incorporated in everyday behavior.”²⁹ To individuals of European descent, the costs for such symbolic allegiances were few, as one could claim a proud Irish, Jewish, or Polish identity without being subject to some of the more virulent strains of prejudice, such as those exerted on African Americans and Latinos.³⁰ Gans’s theory was extended and extrapolated by Mary Waters and Richard Alba, who argued that ethnicity had become largely a matter of choice: an “ethnic option,” available to those who chose to choose, without much social cost or negative repercussions.³¹

But for many scholars of American Jewish life, ethnicity alone could not describe American Jews, because ethnicity seemed too closely tied to religion. Charles Liebman formulates this as the tension between *folk* and *elite* practice, in which the former is the sociological manifestation of the latter.³² Steven Sharot argues that, with respect to Jews, ethnicity and religion cannot be considered independently of one another.³³ Uzi Rebhun concludes that the privatization of religious expression has had effects in the ethnic realm, “resulting in a less intense ethno-religious life and weaker group commitments,” and he also argues that a weakened commitment to communal life does not necessarily indicate a weakened commitment to Jewishness lived and expressed on the personal level.³⁴ Peter Kivisto and Ben Nefzger argue that religious continuity will best sustain ethnic continuity, and sociologist J. Alan Winter argues that the “importance of Jewish identity” declines as one moves away from a religious definition and toward an ethnic one, thus concluding that religion bolsters ethnicity but that the reverse is not necessarily true.³⁵

Despite the prevalence of ethnicity as an explanatory framework for social scientists, it was almost entirely absent from our interviewees’ reflections on Jewishness. Only two referred to themselves as “ethnically Jewish,” and none formulated their notions of Jewishness around ethnicity. Because of our open-ended approach to interviewing, we can take this to mean that the term is neither particularly valuable nor useful to our interviewees. Ethnicity had neither a positive nor a negative valence; it had none at all. Unlike religion, for which our interviewees had fairly complex definitions even in their rejection of it, ethnicity seemed neither appropriate nor resonant, suggesting its limited utility in describing the meaning of Jewishness in their lives.

Shaul Magid might identify this absence as an artifact of postethnic Judaism, or “American post-Judaism.” He explains, “It is my contention that the ethnic anchor of Jewish identity has been irreparably torn in postethnic America.”³⁶ This is not a bad situation for Magid; rather, he understands it as an opportunity for the creation of a new “template with which Jews can navigate the contours of the new territory in which they now live.”³⁷ Magid may identify strains of his vision of Jewishness in the voices of our interviewees, both in their rejection of traditional religious authority and in their avoidance of the language of ethnicity. Though Magid looked toward Jewish Renewal as a model for his vision of American post-Judaism, our interviewees tended to shy away from categorical markers (which might be mistaken for denominational ones) and tended toward a more general embrace of Jewish “culture,” which served as a useful if vague modifier for things that seemed Jewish but did not correspond to a particular belief, practice, or commitment. Culture was atmospheric, impressionistic, and totalizing. Tamar was typical in this respect, saying, “I know that I’m culturally Jewish and I love all these things about Judaism.” Kevin offered a similar account, explaining that he felt “proud that that’s my culture, but truthfully, Judaism does not play a very large role currently in my life.” But even so, only 18 of our interviewees employed the language of culture to describe Jewishness. This tendency might complement Magid’s more theoretical perspective.

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More often, our interviewees used the language of tradition to describe dimensions of Jewishness that they found resonant. Half of our interviewees (n=29) described their affinity for Jewishness in terms of tradition. More important, all of the 35 respondents who referred to themselves as not religious used either tradition or culture to describe their Jewishness. Owing to our interview method, we can conclude that these were their terms, offered voluntarily, which makes the prevalence of tradition as an operative framework for engaging in Jewish life that much more significant, since it suggests a formulation of Jewishness beyond the hegemonic language of religion and ethnicity.

For our interviewees, tradition usually referred to a more specific locus of engagement outside the bounds of religion though often comprising elements that others might identify as religious, like holidays,

rituals, or life-cycle events. Often, their connection to tradition bore overtones of a very significant, if intermittent, connection to other people both contemporary and historical, and it became the medium for a commitment to the past as something consciously malleable. In this vein, tradition often signaled a sense of commitment to others, both specific and general, both past and present. Tradition, for most of those we spoke with, encompassed something akin to commitment without the guilt and theological burdens that they associated with religious observance and formality.

Generally, our respondents mobilized the language of tradition to describe the elements of Jewishness that they cared about and were moved to incorporate into their lives. Michelle explained how she and her fiancée were “figuring out” how to incorporate Jewish ritual in their lives.

[Lighting Shabbat candles] would have meaning for me, I guess, not necessarily because it’s this religious thing. . . . We do want it. We are both into tradition and sentiment and family, and that comes in hand with all this religious stuff. You know what I’m saying? We’ll take it because that’s the tradition, and we care more about it as a tradition, I guess.

Yair offered a similar description of his observance of Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement, which for him included fasting but not attending synagogue. “I don’t fast on Yom Kippur because of religious reasons . . . I view it as a tradition.” With perfect ambiguity, Amanda explained,

My understanding of Judaism is as an intellectual tradition and as a cultural necessity. And I think that following halakhic rules strengthens our commitment to the ethical tradition and the intellectual tradition. So, I am not a God person, but I do believe in the importance of following certain laws. But at the same time, I work on Saturdays now. I actually work seven days a week, so there’s obviously. . . . But I never kept Shabbat, so I don’t feel like I’m slipping.

She enjoys the “intellectual and ethical” traditions but is not a “God person” and appreciates that laws ought to be followed, even though she does not follow them. Representative of our sample, Michelle, Yair, and Amanda each took their traditions quite seriously. For them, tradition offered a way of conceiving of Jewish life that confounded the religious-secular divide while connecting them with their communities, their families, and their versions of history.

These connections were important, and they played a powerful role in the ways that our interviewees formulated tradition and their commitments to it. Over and over again, they demonstrated an understanding of tradition that configured it as a logic of social connection, not as an idiosyncratic choice. Tradition held a claim on them, and it enabled them to sustain connections to others. Specifically, our interviewees tended to formulate their understandings of tradition in two narrative forms: generational connection and getting together. Not exclusive of one another, each provided a framework for locating Jewish practice and its meaning and a logic for elaborating on the notion of tradition as they understood it.

Generational Connection

The generational-connection trope allowed interviewees to connect their actions and beliefs to a past and, sometimes, to an envisioned future. They shared stories like this one, from Idit, who described what the practice of baking hallah (traditional braided bread for the Sabbath eve) meant to her.

About four years ago, I got ahold of [my grandfather's] hallah recipe. So I've been baking from his recipe that they had in the bakery [that he owned], and everyone just dies over the hallah. I realize definitely that the Jewish aspect of my life is just deep into everything that I do. That *it's not the religious aspect, it's the tradition* from thinking about [my grandfather] and all of his brothers baking hallah, going hundreds of years back. Because my grandfather left Russia with his brothers because they were Jewish, and they knew that if they stayed there they would be killed, and they wanted a better life for themselves and their children, and I think about that. I think about... The reason I'm American is because I'm Jewish.³⁸

Referring to her experience as a tradition grounded in her sense of family history enabled Idit to rationalize her connection to her grandfather's hallah recipe, which in turn allowed her to imagine a connection to his family, to migration, and to Jewish history more broadly. The act of making hallah from her grandfather's recipe provided a material connection to her past and her ancestors. It is a powerful expression of connection and a strong rationale for this particular practice that exists outside of either religion or ethnicity. But, by volunteering the rationale of tradition as the impetus for baking hallah, Idit invested it with greater resonance and greater significance than

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the act of baking generally has. This influences the meaning of the act of baking and also helps illustrate the particular authority of tradition.

Sarah, too, emphasized her affinity for tradition over religion in ways that emphasized the power of generational transmission. “Religion is not a way I connect to Judaism, but tradition is. So it’s the sense of pride for me to do things that are part of tradition that has been happening for generations. I feel like they’re part of carrying that on to the next generation.” A bit later in the interview, she elaborated.

I just don’t give any thoughts to things like biblical stories, [or] the [dietary] laws of kashrut. . . . I don’t want to know what [Hebrew prayers] mean. I hate when we translate them into English ’cause I don’t like talking about the “Almighty God” and all of that. But I really like lighting candles. I really like celebrating Jewish holidays. I like those traditions. I like the idea that people all over the world, for thousands of years, have done these traditions, that’s what they mean to me. They don’t mean to me like whatever they’re supposed to mean about God.

Echoing the logic of her peers in her formulation of religion, Sarah enthusiastically embraced the historical and sociological dimension of practices that many associate with religion, recasting them as tradition. Devoid of theological content or biblical reference, Jewish practices became manifestations of a shared history and occasions for the construction of new meanings, a formulation that enabled her to engage and enjoy Jewish life.

Brian shared one of the most illustrative stories of someone whose commitment to tradition rests not on religion but on his connection to the future.

To give you an example, my girlfriend’s not Jewish. The other day for Hanukkah, I decided to light the candles. She asked me, “Why are you lighting the candles?” I said, “Well, it’s Hanukkah.” She’s like, “I know it’s Hanukkah, but you’re not really religious.” I said, “I want to do it for myself. I just want to know that I know the tradition, the ritual. I want to do it for myself just to reinforce it.” I’m not doing it because I want to make sure that God is listening, that He knows that I care. I’m doing it because I want to be able to tell my kids, “This is how you light the candles on Hanukkah.” I guess that’s kind of how I look at it.

Despite the good-natured teasing of his girlfriend, Brian lit Hanukkah candles with all of the religious overtones and content intact, provided

that he made sense of his performance as tradition and did not take the formulaic blessing or its theological content to heart.

Brian's use of *tradition* suggests that it is something other than a convenient language for making choices about when to engage in Jewish life and when not to. Existentially, Brian and Sarah and Idit could have chosen to limit the cognitive dissonance in their own lives and not engage in Jewish life through ritual, praying in a foreign language, or baking hallah. But the conceptualization of their efforts as tradition suggests that the implicit freedom to opt out of Jewishness never presented itself fully. Instead, the use of the language and logic of tradition suggests a sense of a binding connection to other people in their immediate families—past and future—which our interviewees willingly subjected themselves to. Tradition provided a sensible modifier of a kind of transmission and a kind of authority that they imagined as neither hereditary nor especially holy.

Getting Together

The other axis on which our interviewees organized narratives of tradition was that of their contemporary social and familial networks. Tradition provided a rationale or an occasion for organizing a more elaborate social gathering than one otherwise would. It offered a pretext for the event and a scaffold for organizing what might happen there. Scott recalled an experience from college when he was trying to find a Passover seder.

I was away from home and I had to find a Passover seder to attend because I thought, there's something wrong with the feeling of experiencing Passover and not going to a seder. Until this day, I don't believe in any gods but come Passover, I have to be at a seder. . . . Yom Kippur means nothing to me. [N]either does Rosh Hashanah. The thing about Passover is that my whole extended family was always together.

Like most Jews, Scott found particular value in these explicitly Jewish holiday celebrations, but he refused to root it in religion. In accord with almost every large-scale recent study of American Jews, Scott's commitment to Passover and Brian's to Hanukkah are consistent with American Jews' widespread practice of those two holidays. Often, the popularity of Hanukkah and Passover among American Jews follows Scott's logic: it presents an occasion for family to get together and requires neither synagogue attendance nor the oversight of clergy.³⁹ The holidays also enabled Brian and Scott to access the timing and

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structure of these rituals to frame and even justify their Jewish experience in the name of tradition without resorting to the totalizing logic they associated with religion.

For Elizabeth, the ritual of a Friday night dinner proved especially appealing. Friday night marks the onset of the Jewish Sabbath, and Elizabeth approached the ceremonial dinner as an opportunity for socializing and education but not for religion.

For us [her and her husband], a lot of it is educating our friends, both Jewish friends and our non-Jewish friends. We are sort of that couple that always has like people over for like Shabbat dinners and holidays, and like I said, Jewish and non-Jewish. It's not meant to be like an outreach kind of thing or try to make people religious because we're not religious. It's just like a way to sort of make everybody stop for a second and put down their phones and like have a proper dinner and have like proper conversation.

Elizabeth, who described herself as “really, really into tradition and history and learning, but not practicing,” does not observe the Sabbath with regularity or in accord with Jewish law, but she selectively applies its logic to create a technology-free social space for herself and her friends to connect. This space aligns with religion, but Elizabeth understands it as separate from a strictly religious commitment, as a space where she can host friends regardless of their backgrounds.

Molly also distinguished religion from tradition and explicated the ways in which this distinction manifested in her life.

I do not belong to a synagogue, although I have been to services, High Holiday services, almost every year of my adult life. Not every year, but almost every year. And I always take time to reflect and just do something a little bit different during that time. But it's not about the food. I don't eat kosher. I don't observe Shabbat or really, really anything. I only fast if I am feeling like fasting, but it's not even a mandate for me. Probably because it doesn't mean anything to me. It's for me. I could do it, but I don't necessarily need to do or, or want to do it. But I love being with my Jewish friends and family. I have some family who live here. I love getting together with them for holidays, but they're also not very religious. They just get together because holiday is an excuse to get together. So that's actually a great fit, it's perfect. It's why I want to see them anyway.

Like Scott, both Elizabeth and Molly found meaning in Jewish holidays in terms of their social function, not their religious content. The



holidays provide an “excuse to get together” to see friends and family. Yet, the nature of the “excuse” is important because her explanation, which included a detailed elaboration of what she does and does not do, suggests that Molly has thought through her Jewish commitments and that getting together with friends and family around Jewish holidays is, for her, the meaningful practice they enable.

By contrast, Penelope and Sally pointed to their affinity for synagogues as important sites for connecting to Jewishness, though not necessarily with religion. Both women described themselves as not religious, yet both explained that they seek out synagogues and their communities when traveling for work. Penelope enjoys the “cultural traditions” of Jewish life, “but not necessary the organized religion aspects of it.” Still, “when I go to places where I don’t know anyone,” she said, “I still go to the Jewish community. That’s my way of meeting people.” Likewise, Sally, who used to travel for work a great deal, made a habit of going to synagogue on Saturday mornings no matter where she was. This began when she told someone that she was going to Atlanta and they told her that she should see a particularly beautiful temple. “My immediate reaction was like, ‘I go to temple twice a year. Why . . . would I go to temple?’” But she went and enjoyed it and “used it as therapy” when she was on the road.

I did continue to go to synagogue in every city. I found some beautiful temples. I still am close to people I met for one Shabbat in the middle of the country. It really kept me grounded. I was really grateful for it. Just the feeling of prayer, not religious. . . . Not being religious but a celebration with food and with music and in places like Memphis, places you don’t think there are Jews, where you open up and someone wishes you a *shanah tovah* [happy Jewish new year] on Beale Street.

Penelope and Sally approached synagogues as centers for socialization, for grounding, and for finding community while away from home. The traditional elements and established space and time of synagogue practice helped them locate Jewish connections in unfamiliar places.

Discussion: Theorizing Tradition

In vernacular formulations of post-boomer American Jewishness, tradition serves as an alternative to more established frameworks of religion and ethnicity. In their own words, our interview subjects chose to



define themselves against religion and avoided the language of ethnicity. They might be mistaken for religious “nones,” but the notion of a Jewish none is almost an oxymoron, as *none* refers to the absence of a sociologically defined religious tradition, not the absence of faith or practice. By identifying as Jews but describing themselves as not religious, they invert the logic of the religious none, claiming affinity for a religious tradition but eschewing religion. Their claim on tradition and tradition’s claim on them suggest that two possible conclusions could be drawn from our limited sample.

First, the preference for the language of tradition suggests that the sociological distinction between Jews by religion and Jews of no religion emphasized in studies like the 1990 NJPS and the 2013 Pew report creates a sharp distinction between groups that are, in reality, more fluid. The analytic deployment of religion (and even denomination) as the primary marker of Jewish collective identification effectively limits the range of ways in which Jewish life might be conceptualized and described. With respect to our interviewees, emphasizing the distinction between religion and its absence leaves little room for people who might best refer to themselves as not religious but who are not ready to say that they have no religion at all. Similarly, the emphasis on religion makes difficult the possibility of accounting for other ways of formulating meaningful Jewish engagement.

The terms at stake in this discussion are, as Ammerman reminds us in her discussion of religion and spirituality, “moral and political” categories, not “empirical” ones.⁴⁰ That is, their deployment in certain arenas carries a measure of judgment, which means that they can reveal more about how people conceive of the worlds in which they live than they can about either individual people or institutions.⁴¹ The primary place of religion and ethnicity in the study of American Jewry evidences the long-standing concern for locating Jews and Jewish communities within conceptual frameworks legible to the Anglo-American Protestant-influenced majority.⁴² Recent critiques of this approach to the study of both religion and ethnicity have revealed the political and moral genealogies of this concept of religion, suggesting that the binary structure of *religious* and *none* might be useful but it does not do justice to the varieties of ways in which people experience these categories in their own lives or apply them to their own practices.⁴³

This argument against the use of religion as a meaningful way to understand distinctions among American Jews should not be taken as a case for the rise of secularism.⁴⁴ What appealed to so many of our

interviewees was not an explicitly or independently secular realm of Jewish life but a way of making Jewish life enjoyable and meaningful. Casting such occasions as traditional instead of religious allowed our interviewees to activate those associations while disregarding any theological overtones or moral finger-wagging. The utility of tradition and its non-exclusive implications echo even the universalist overtones of religion in the narratives of respondents who expressed a positive feeling toward it. This is not to conclude that tradition is a thin cover for religion; rather, what religious post-boomers and their not-religious counterparts seek in Jewish tradition are driven by similar impulses.

Our interviewees' mobilization of tradition does not fall terribly far from the ways in which many recent scholars of religion have formulated their own theories of tradition. In his critique of Protestant hegemony in the study of religion, anthropologist Talal Asad offers tradition as an alternative formation to the Protestant-dominated notion of religion. "Islam is neither a distinctive social structure nor a heterogeneous collection of beliefs, artifacts, customs, and morals. It is a tradition."⁴⁵ Seeking a more flexible and more accurate term to define Islam, he explains: "A tradition consists essentially of discourses that seek to instruct practitioners regarding the correct form and purpose of a given practice that, precisely because it is established, has a history."⁴⁶ Using similar language, philosopher Martin Reisebrodt defines tradition as "the historical continuity of systems of symbols," a contextually and culturally specific instantiation of the broader category of religion.⁴⁷ Jonathan Z. Smith, perhaps the most influential thinker in the field of religious studies, conceptualizes tradition in a summary of his approach to teaching a survey course entitled *Religion in Western Civilization*. Smith explains that he organized the class "around a single two-part issue: What is a tradition? How are traditions maintained through acts of reinterpretation?"⁴⁸ Not unlike the fictional Tevye of *Fiddler on the Roof*, Reisebrodt's, Smith's, and Asad's understandings of tradition are rooted in its emergence as a historical category that is rather unlike the universal or eternal appeal of a religious system; tradition seems to account for practices and commitments in history, with all its contingencies. If religious beliefs and law suggest eternal and unchanging truths, tradition offers a way of turning those immutable qualities into lived religion.

In spite of theoretical interventions that seek to bridge the gap between the transcendence of religion and the practices that give it shape in the lived world, Eisen theorizes tradition in terms of a

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“dilemma . . . [that] goes right to the heart of contemporary American religiosity.”⁴⁹ For Eisen, tradition offers not a way of historicizing practices (whether or not we might call those practices *religious*) but a weak explanation for the retention of elements of Jewishness. Both its appeal and the “problematic character of its use,” he writes, derive from the fact that it “harks back to roots dearly desired without imposing obligation to any particular behavior or creed. Jews, like other Americans, seem to want connection with their ancestors while reserving the right to depart, however radically, from the paths which the ancestors walked.”⁵⁰ The desire to both connect to a past and depart from it prompted him to conclude grimly that “[w]hether the average Jew will submit to the authority of tradition . . . is a matter of serious doubt.”⁵¹ Whereas Reisebrodt and Smith both recognize the flexible nature of tradition as a feature of religion and its evolution over time, and Asad finds strength in the “discursive tradition” that is Islam, Eisen understands this quality of tradition to be the problem. American Jews of the future, he writes,

will likely not utterly ignore the wishes of the ancestors, as they see them, but neither will they accord those wishes central significance in their lives. More important, armed with the popular notions of tradition such as those proclaimed by *Fiddler on the Roof* . . . they may well regard their stance as the only authentic response to the past.⁵²

Eisen’s reference to *Fiddler on the Roof* imports a thinness to Tevye’s notion of tradition that reflects his generally pessimistic tone about the future of American Jews and the role of tradition in their lives.

Yet this account of the Jews of Eisen’s imagined future reveals the surprising tenacity of tradition that holds a kind of authority, albeit one rather distant from the external and eternal kind that he seems to both imagine and prefer. For post-boomer American Jews who reject religion for reasons that are related to its seemingly authoritarian and arbitrary assignation of rules, tradition offers a way of rationalizing retention based not only on personal preference but also on a sense of deep personal commitment to the tradition and the relationships it enables. Tradition can account for historical instantiations of Jewishness that are independent of both the abstractions of religion and the exclusivity of ethnicity. Eisen represents a strong stream of Jewish thought, but the post-boomers of American Jewry in the twenty-first century formulate their Jewishness in ways that more closely resemble Asad’s notion of Islam. For post-boomers, tradition may offer a way of conceptualizing “the only authentic response to

the past,” but it should not be mistaken for a weak version of a strong central Jewish religious authority. Instead, it should be understood as a mechanism for retaining connections to Jews and Jewishness over time, within which change is a reasonable expectation and adherence is flexible. Still more important, it should be appreciated as a formulation of Jewish commitment in the context of a sizable population of people for whom religion does not really present itself as an appealing option.

For Israeli sociologist Yaakov Yadgar, the question of religion as a useful category of social analysis has been a long-standing preoccupation, though its application to American Jews is limited.⁵³ Frustrated by analyses of Israeli society that reinscribe an opposition between secular (*hiloni*) and religious (*haredi*) Jewish communities, Yadgar offers the term *traditionists* (his preferred translation of the Hebrew *mesorati*) as an alternative, postsecular formulation for Jewish identities among Israeli Jews. Though Yadgar’s formulation of tradition derives from a tension with conceptualizations of Judaism similar to those offered by respondents in our study, its application to the conditions of American Jews is inappropriate for three reasons.

First, for Yadgar, traditionism is a category of identity that exists alongside those who identify as either religious or secular. He explains that traditionists abide, albeit loosely, by “a strict list of religious practices as essential for the reaffirmation of a modern, authentic Jewish identity: *masortim* observe—in a rather strict manner—those practices that they deem essential for their self-identification as Jews.”⁵⁴ Their tradition, though it occupies a space between strict adherence to religious law and secular dismissal of the same, nevertheless adheres closely to a sense that there are core practices that, however flexibly held, nevertheless constitute a traditional identity. Those who participated in our study offered no such normative definition of which traditions could be considered “essential to their self-identification as Jews.” Though they proudly participate in Jewish life and engage in ritual and nonritual practices, they would blanch at the notion that their choices reflect a normative definition of Jewishness or Judaism.

Second, as Yadgar explains, the term is central to self-identification. The subjects of his inquiry call themselves traditional Jews and that monicker leads him to neologize. His attention to this matter has paid off in sociological spades: in 2016, the Pew Research Center’s study of Israeli society offered *mesorati* as a category of religious identity, and 23 percent of Jewish Israeli respondents claimed it as such.⁵⁵ The inclusion of the term in the Pew Research Center’s study represents

a kind of validation of the term as a category of identity. It did not circulate in this way for participants in our research. They did not refer to themselves as traditional and instead applied the term to the practices and elements of Judaism that they positively identified and that, they felt, retained a purchase on them. They were not traditional Jews, but their Judaism was traditional. Although it has become an established identity category for Israeli Jews, it has not done so for the post-boomer American Jews with whom we spoke, even as the notion of tradition itself still resonates.

Third, and perhaps most important, Yadgar explains that the logic of traditionism “focuses on the preservation of a valid, ‘thick’ sense of ethno-national (Jewish) identification.”⁵⁶ This formulation of tradition, though more flexible than exclusivist notions of either religion or secularism, nevertheless stiffens significantly around ethnonational boundaries. Its inclusion in social-scientific studies of Israeli society might soften sociological distinctions between religious and secular Jews and expand the array of possible identities for Israeli Jews to claim as their own, but that very flexibility ossifies distinctions between Jews and others. Our interviewees, many of whom have non-Jewish parents, peers, and partners, offer no such connection between the traditions that they embrace and their sense of a normative, ethnonational identity. Instead, tradition affords a way of opening up the exclusivity of ethnicity and easing the limitations of religious obligation. Rather than reinforcing a boundary, tradition offers a kind of cultural resource that could be shared with everyone in their social circles, Jewish or not. Tradition offers all of the positive valences—occasions for gathering, and structures for socializing that are often associated with religion—without any of its prescriptive obligations or its limitations on who can participate. It is neither as commanding as their notion of religion nor as exclusive as associations with ethnicity. Tradition allows for a kind of nonexclusive, nontheistic Jewishness that retains much of the existing infrastructure and adapts it according to contemporary sociological realities.

Therefore, the language of tradition is more than merely a convenient articulation of a sovereign self whose individual volition constructs personalized versions of Judaism.⁵⁷ Mobilizing the language of tradition that connects people across time implies that tradition exerts a unique kind of authority over the people who claim it. When they used tradition to explain or rationalize their Jewish commitments, they did not do so in a way that suggested the triumph of an empowered, wholly individuated self for whom practice was elective and

meaning entirely personal. Rather, participants in our study spoke of the power of tradition both in social terms and in terms of practices or “excuses” that bound them to the past. Not coincident with either religion or ethnicity, tradition offers an alternative register for engagement in Jewish life that nevertheless retains some measure of deeply compelled engagement and does not lapse into simple religious voluntarism or ethnic choice.”

The gravity of tradition in the accounts of our interviewees also suggests that they departed from Eisen’s description of tradition as a response to the problem of locating “authority in the past when one is aware of the degree to which that past is a product of one’s own construction.”⁵⁸ The concept of tradition, he argues, offers a rhetorical and conceptual way of threading an otherwise religious needle, allowing people to engage selectively in Jewish life “as demanded by one’s ‘lifestyle’ and the commitments of the moment.”⁵⁹ Sociologist Samuel Heilman calls this mode of selective engagement *traditioning*, and Eisen extrapolates, framing it in between “the way of being Jewish as determined by God and by age-old authorities” and that epitomized by more “fragmentary, variable, and individualized” engagements.⁶⁰ For Eisen, tradition is a trade-off, a kind of deal struck between committed “elites of the center” and “popular” approaches of “the vast majority of Jews in late-twentieth-century America.”⁶¹

Our interviewees revealed no such deal and expressed no such tension. They seemed largely uninterested in “elites of the center” and were quite willing to engage with the authority of tradition, even when it did not make immediate sense to them. For the majority, tradition did not become a way of explaining the authority of the past, it became a way of connecting with the past. The inconsistencies that so bothered Eisen, and the artifice he believed central to postmodern mobilizations of tradition, did not seem to plague our interviewees, who were well aware of the contradictions and tensions inherent in almost any commitment—ideological, interpersonal, cultural, or otherwise. Tradition, in their view, offers a way to accept an authority that one already understands has no power to enforce itself. Idit did not believe that anything would happen to her if she failed to bake hallah using her grandfather’s recipe, and Scott felt similarly should he decide not to fast on Yom Kippur. Yet they both invested those practices with a kind of power that drew on tradition but not on the irrational faith that they understood religion to require. Both religion and tradition require commitments to forces that are not enforceable. But the differences between them are crucial. Religion,



post-boomer American Jews believe, requires fidelity to a distant God. Tradition, by contrast, requires the same kind of fidelity to people, past and present.

Conclusion

In this, post-boomer Jews are not that far from Tevye, the fictional protagonist of *Fiddler on the Roof*. He, too, used tradition to explain almost everything in Anatevka. Not just religion. Not just ethnicity. A difference between Tevye's tradition and that of the post-boomers who participated in this study is that, within the framework of the musical, Tevye's tradition could not withstand the arrival of modernity. The people in our study utilized the language of tradition from a self-consciously modern and even postmodern sense of Jewishness as they wished it would be. If modernity threw Tevye's tradition into disarray, it made post-boomers' traditions possible by enabling commitments to Jewishness without appealing to a seemingly illogical, guilt-ridden, theistic, biblical notion of religion.

Our small sample limits our ability to generalize widely from this conclusion. However, our method, which allowed our interview subjects to use language of their choosing to describe their own Jewish commitments, supports our conclusions and suggests that they may have greater resonance within a larger sample. The descriptive language of our interviews emerged organically from the interviewees themselves, and the frequency with which our interviewees volunteered terms like *tradition* and phrases like *not religious* suggest their importance to conceptualizations of Jewishness.

More than 60 years after Will Herberg reorganized postwar ethnicity around religion, American Jewish post-boomers are suggesting that tradition might be emerging as an alternative to religion, at least among the avowedly non-Orthodox. Less exclusive than ethnicity and less restrictive than religion, tradition serves as a powerful modifier of the kind of Jewishness with which post-boomer American Jews can engage. By unmooring their Jewishness from religion and ethnicity, the post-boomers in our study suggest a mode of engagement that captures the power and pull of their Jewishness under the conditions of twenty-first-century sociological and demographic realities. Neither an exclusive commitment to an ethnic group nor adherence to the word of a divine being, tradition suggests a slightly more flexible articulation of commitments to people and practices. Tradition prevails upon its practitioners with seriousness but without guilt or

exclusivity and, as a result, allows for greater flexibility and more positively inflected engagements with Jewishness than other ways of framing Jewishness might allow.

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Notes

- 1 Pew Research Center, *A Portrait of Jewish Americans: Findings from a Pew Research Center Survey of U.S. Jews* (Washington, D.C., 2013). *Post-boomers* is a catch-all demographic term that refers to members of Generation X, Generation Y, and millennials. See Richard Flory and Donald E. Miller, *Finding Faith: The Spiritual Quest of the Post-Boomer Generation* (New Brunswick, N.J., 2008); see also Robert Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings are Shaping the Future of Religion* (Princeton, 2007).
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- 3 Dan P. McAdams, *The Stories We Live By: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self* (New York, 1997); idem, “The Psychology of Life Stories,” *Review of General Psychology* 5, no. 2 (2001): 100; idem, *The Redemptive Self: Stories Americans Live By* (Oxford, 2005).
- 4 The demographics are instructive, but they should not be deterministic. Part of the effort of this article is to provide an account of the various meanings of Jewishness that more structured, survey-bound categories do not. Noting that 20 percent of our interviewees have one non-Jewish parent does not account for the interviewee who told us that his non-Jewish mother was responsible for his Jewish education. Nor does it reveal anything about the interviewee who offered that her mom is “a stereotypical Jewish mother” only to reveal later that she discovered at age 13 that her mother had converted from Catholicism. Nor does it shed any light on the interviewee who has a “name day” because of a tradition of her Italian Catholic mother’s family. If, as this article suggests, the categories of *religion* and *ethnicity* no longer hold descriptive power in the way they once did, perhaps the same is true for other categories that have become part of the standard litany of survey questions about American Jewish life.
- 5 Pew Research Center, *Portrait of Jewish Americans*, 7.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 38.
- 7 Steven M. Cohen and Jack Wertheimer, “The Pew Survey Reanalyzed: More Bad News, but a Glimmer of Hope,” *Mosaic*, Nov. 2, 2014, accessed Nov. 3, 2014, <http://mosaicmagazine.com/essay/2014/11/the-pew-survey-reanalyzed/>.

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- 9 Barry A. Kosmin and Ariela Keysar, *American Nones: The Profile of the No Religion Population* (Hartford, Conn., 2009), 1.
- 10 Bethamie Horowitz, *Connections and Journeys: Assessing Critical Opportunities for Enhancing Jewish Identity* (New York, 2000); idem, "Reframing the Study of Contemporary American Jewish Identity," *Contemporary Jewry* 23, no. 1 (2002): 14–34. See also Steven Cohen and Arnie Eisen, *The Jew Within: Self, Family, and Community in America* (Bloomington, Ind., 2000).
- 11 Ira M. Sheskin and Arnold Dashefsky, *The Jewish Population in the United States, 2013* (Storrs, Conn., 2013), 16, 22; for marriage rates by religion generally, see Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers*, and Steven M. Cohen and Ari Y. Kelman, *Uncoupled: How Our Singles Are Reshaping Jewish Engagement* (New York, 2008).
- 12 Leora Batnitzky, *How Judaism Became a Religion: An Introduction to Modern Jewish Thought* (Princeton, 2013).
- 13 *Ibid.*, 1.
- 14 David Biale, *Not in the Heavens: The Tradition of Jewish Secular Thought* (Princeton, 2010), 13.
- 15 Lila Corwin Berman, *Speaking of Jews: Rabbis, Intellectuals, and the Creation of an American Public Identity* (Berkeley, 2009); Mitchell B. Hart, *Social Science and the Politics of Modern Jewish Identity* (Stanford, 2000).
- 16 Marketing Systems Group, *1990 Survey of American Jews: Methodological Report* (New York, 1991); Barry A. Kosmin et al., *Highlights of the CJF 1990 National Jewish Population Survey* (New York, 1991), 3.
- 17 Pew Research Center, *Portrait of Jewish Americans*, 9.
- 18 Kosmin et al., *Highlights*, 4.
- 19 Pew Research Center, *Portrait of Jewish Americans*, 72.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 76.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 72, 76.
- 22 Alexander W. Astin, Helen S. Astin, and Jennifer A. Lindholm, *Cultivating the Spirit: How College Can Enhance Students' Inner Lives* (San Francisco, 2010), 94.
- 23 Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion in Everyday Life* (Oxford, 2013), 268.
- 24 This and all other names in the article are pseudonyms.
- 25 Daniel Greene, *The Jewish Origins of Cultural Pluralism: The Menorah Association and American Diversity* (Bloomington, Ind., 2011); Horace Kallen, "Democracy versus the Melting Pot," *Nation*, Feb. 25, 1915, pp. 190–94, 217–20. See also Steven M. Cohen, *American Modernity and Jewish Identity* (New York, 1983); Herbert J. Gans, "Symbolic Ethnicity: The Future of Ethnic Groups and Cultures in America," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 2, no. 1 (1979): 1–20; Charles S. Liebman, *The Ambivalent American Jew: Politics, Religion and Family in American Jewish Life*

- (Philadelphia, 1973); idem, *Choosing Survival: Strategies for a Jewish Future* (New York, 1999); Stephen Sharot, "A Critical Commentary of Gans' 'Symbolic Ethnicity and Symbolic Religiosity' and Other Formulations of Ethnicity and Religion Regarding American Jews," *Contemporary Jewry* 18, no. 1 (1997): 25–43; and J. Alan Winter, "Symbolic Ethnicity or Religion among Jews in the United States: A Test of Gansian Hypotheses," *Review of Religious Research* 37, no. 3 (1996): 233–47.
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- 29 *Ibid.*, 9.
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- 36 Shaul Magid, *American Post-Judaism: Identity and Renewal in a Postethnic Society* (Bloomington, Ind., 2013), 5; See also David Hollinger, *Post-Ethnic America* (New York, 2005), and Darren Kleinberg, *Hybrid Judaism: Irving Greenberg, Encounter, and the Changing Nature of American Jewish Identity* (Boston, 2016).
- 37 Magid, *American Post-Judaism*, 5.
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- 39 Rebhun, "Jewish Identity."
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- 42 Eric L. Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton, 2008). See also Batnitzky, *How Judaism Became a Religion*, and Biale, *Not in the Heavens*.
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- 50 *Ibid.*
- 51 *Ibid.*, 457.
- 52 *Ibid.*, 461.
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- 60 Eisen, "Constructing the Usable Past," 461.
- 61 *Ibid.*

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