

“THERE’S THE JEWISH CULTURE AND THEN THERE’S THE RELIGION”:
EXPLORING THE POTENTIAL OF CULTURAL IDENTITY FOR JEWISH
ADOLESCENTS

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ABSTRACT

MARIA W. VAN RYN: “There’s the Culture and then There’s the Religion”: Exploring the Potential of Cultural Identity for Jewish Adolescents
(Under the direction of Lisa D. Pearce)

This paper aims to address how Jewish adolescents themselves label, describe, and understand their identities. Specifically, I look to see how Jewish adolescents integrate the traditionally Jewish practices in which they engage with their perceptions of what it means to be Jewish. In order to pursue the growing number of ways in which adolescents can identify with Judaism, I examine how Jewish adolescents respond to the burgeoning label, "culturally Jewish. " I use both quantitative and qualitative data from the National Study of Youth and Religion to compare that category with the more traditional "religiously Jewish " so that I can test the validity, importance, and relevance of the "culturally Jewish " classification. I also examine the contributions of belief and practice to contemporary adolescents’ American Jewish identity.

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CHAPTER ONE: CULTURAL JEWISH IDENTITY

Introduction

Since Jews first arrived in North America in the late sixteenth century, understandings and representations of Jewish-American identity have undergone myriad changes and interpretations (Hertzberg 1997). Jewish Americans have been exiled from North American territories and newly-created states, restricted in what professions they might occupy, and refused entry to elite colleges and universities. But they have also overcome much of the antisemitism that once prevailed in the United States, now enjoying the freedoms and opportunities supposedly accorded to all Americans. Some argue that this transition came about due to a willingness on the part of Jewish Americans to assimilate into the greater American culture (Goldscheider and Zuckerman 1984). Thus, from the onset of Jewish-American identity, religion and culture have been intertwined, a development that leads to the possibility of many identities under one heading.

In this paper, I will examine the relationship between cultural and religious identities and the practices that help to define them for a particular subset of Jewish Americans, adolescents. As a stage in the life course when individuals question who they are and are becoming, adolescence provides a glimpse into how people struggle to invent themselves. Adolescents are beginning to emerge from the close care and protection of their parent(s) but yet are not fully adults. They have increasing opportunities to choose for themselves what they want to do and who they want to be. Though these freedoms

vary greatly by family and likely by individual, generally the American adolescent experiences a period of exploration not available in earlier years.

Among the areas of investigation open to adolescents is the realm of religiosity. As adolescents examine their priorities and worldviews, religion is an avenue through which they can determine their visions of the world and their place in it. Studying adolescent perception of religious identity thus includes an element of agency in its recognition of choice. However, this analysis also gives credence to the power of structure by identifying the continuing importance of institutional practices commonly recognized to be associated with Judaism's deep history. This interchange allows for an examination of how structure and agency might interact in identity formation, a question central to the sociological study of culture (Smith 2001).

This paper aims to address how Jewish adolescents themselves label, describe, and understand their identities. Specifically, I look to see how Jewish adolescents integrate the traditionally Jewish practices in which they engage with their perceptions of what it means to be Jewish. In order to pursue the growing number of ways in which adolescents can identify with Judaism, I examine how Jewish adolescents respond to the burgeoning label, "culturally Jewish." I use both quantitative and qualitative data to compare that category with the more traditional "religiously Jewish" so that I can test the validity, importance, and relevance of the "culturally Jewish" classification. Upon its successful completion, this project will speak to the broader sociological issues of how minority groups maintain identity in the United States, how adolescents participate in their own identity formation, and how practices engage with ideologies. I look to address the following research questions:

1. What does it mean to be religiously vs. culturally Jewish? Do adolescents make such a distinction in their own Jewish identity?
2. How does Jewish adolescent identity relate to the Jewish practice(s) of that population? How might belief and practice interact in identity formation?
3. How might the adolescent Jewish population speak to the question of Judaism's survival in the United States?

Review of the Literature and Theoretical Framework

Religiosity can play a large part in identity development. Scholars of family and religion generally agree that the largest impact by far on adolescents' religious affiliation and practices is those of their parents (Erickson 1992; Ozorak 1989; Pearce and Axinn 1998; Perkins 1978; Smith and Sikkink 2003). However, as Ozorak notes, there is 'wiggle room' in this relationship; adolescents "seem prone to revise their religious beliefs" but do so within the framework given to them by their parents (1989:449). Again, this emphasizes the dialectic between social structure, such as the family, and individual choice in religious identity. Beyond parental involvement, there is a dearth of research on the religious practices, beliefs, and identities of American youth (Smith and Denton 2005).

Religious identity, in its countless forms, offers a prime example of interaction between the self and society. Cultural identity can also serve this function. Though its definition is as contested as any other, cultural identity "can . . . be characterized as a continual uprooting from one's roots, projecting toward the future, renewing assumptions and foundations, and rejecting any ossification of the self" (Charmé 2000:147). In pluralistic countries such as the United States, religion is often intrinsically linked with culture and ethnicity, as immigrants use religious behaviors to maintain connections to

their former homeland (Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000; Gibson 1988; Hammond 1988; Warner and Wittner 1998). Works abound of immigrant and minority populations in the United States using religious and cultural institutions in this country to transmit identities (Bankston and Zhou 1996; Chong 1998; Kurien 1998; Ng 2002; Yang 1999). Both ethnic culture and associated religious traditions, operating as mechanisms that unite people in cosmological pursuits, can help to pass down identity from generation to generation. Indeed, Demerath argues that cultural religion operates as a way by which “religion affords a sense of personal identity and continuity with the past even after participation in ritual and belief have lapsed” (2000:127). Noting the growing trend of descriptions of such forms of religious identity (Davie 1990; Geertz 1973; Hervieu-Léger 2000). Demerath suggests that “cultural religion may well become a dominant syndrome in the post-millennial West, if it is not already” (2000:137).

The changes brought about by the transition into a postmodern world make now an excellent time to study identity. The rise of reflexivity, individualization, and deinstitutionalization that have characterized modernity (and postmodernity to an even greater degree) have vast implications for understanding the self (Berger and Luckmann 1967; Côté and Levine 2002; Giddens 1991). These eras also give credence to the processual nature of identity development. As Hall contends, modernity and postmodernity mean that cultural identity is “becoming” rather than “being” (1990). Hall’s thesis is an especially pertinent idea in studying adolescence, as it leaves room for adolescents to create and re-create their own identities in tandem with the socialization they experience.

Review articles of identity studies call attention to the shift in focus from the individual to the collective (Cerulo 1997; Howard 2000). However, several social psychological perspectives provide a middle ground, integrating the micro and the macro. Helpful definitions of identity interweave larger structures with the individual. Peek defines identity as a description of “an individual’s sense of self, group affiliations, structural positions, and ascribed and achieved statuses,” and further notes, “identity results from internal subjective perceptions, self-reflection, and external characterizations (2005:217). Identity then has to do with self-perception but also with assessment by and association with others. The collective wields a varying amount of power over its members, especially as it creates categories and maintains boundaries between them (Cerulo 1997).

The social constructionist perspective, pioneered by scholars including Peter Berger and Erving Goffman, provides an anti-essentialist paradigm through which to examine identity. The more general social constructionists work with categories such as race and gender. For them, there can be no single way to be black or white or to be male or female. That is to say, there are no essential qualities for any one identity. Additionally, social constructionists maintain that identity is dynamic and constantly undergoing modification (Nagel 1994). This fluidity can lend additional power to the individual to change over the life course. Wuthnow says this agentic identity comes from the “Sovereign Self,” which downplays ascribed identities in favor of what the individual elects (1998). Cadge and Davidman find that the dichotomous definition of identity may be losing relevance, as their Jewish and Buddhist respondents “often fall along a continuum between these two conceptual categories, and most incorporate both elements

into their accounts of their religious identities” (2006:24). Today’s identity studies thus point more and more toward choice while maintaining a careful eye on structural power (Schnoor 2006). Indeed, Ammerman notes that current research on religious identity mandates flexibility. According to Ammerman, “the transcendent referent that makes identity narrative a religious one is neither a fixed set of institutional symbols nor an utterly chaotic experience in which selves and situations are redefined by divine fiat. It is at once both structured and emergent” (2003:224).

The desire to explain American Judaism stems primarily from the larger fear that Judaism is dying out. Demographers, measuring Jewishness in a number of ways, declared in the 1960s that trends such as intermarriage and a declining birthrate were slowing Jewish population growth to a halt (Bershtel and Graubard 1992; Goldscheider 1986). In a post-Shoah world, and one where the second largest population of Jews resides in an United States city, it is especially important to the Jewish community that the religious freedom that the United States accords does not also lead to Judaism’s slow demise. So, identifying as a Jew carries with it the hope that one is continuing a tradition and peoplehood thousands of years old.

Scholars are generally split between two perspectives: the more pessimistic assimilationist view that Jews lose their Jewishness as they adopt an American identity, and the more optimistic stance that Judaism in America is transforming rather than fading away. According to the latter perspective, American Judaism is undergoing a “revival” (Cohen 1988; Goldscheider 1986; Silberman 1985). Rather than turning to demographic evidence, those who hold this viewpoint argue that affiliation is not the only criterion of Jewishness. Instead, researchers should look for interest in and concern for Judaism at all

rather than measuring Jewish practices or attendance (Bershtel and Graubard 1992). Indeed, the mere existence of services such as Jewish dating websites and contemporary Shabbat celebrations should indicate that we must change how we study American Judaism (Gubkin 2000).

The history of the Jews in America indicates multiple new forms of Judaism emerging in the United States in the past four centuries. Events such as the Emancipation of Jews in Germany in the nineteenth century (Mendes-Flohr and Reinharz 1995), the emergent Jewish-American culture (Falk 1995; Sarna 2004) and the question of Zionism brought increased attention to the prospect of secular Jewishness. Paul Mendes-Flohr describes this process and its impact on Jewish identity: “Since the Enlightenment and Emancipation, Jewish identity is no longer exclusively defined by loyalty to the Torah and God’s commandments. Indeed, formal definitions of identity – membership in the community, acceptance of its norms, teachings, values, aspirations – are no longer the only self-evident criteria of Jewish identity” (2000:261). Instead, Jewish identity has been understood by many to have no prerogative for either orthodoxy or orthopraxy, leaving other factors open to contribute to the creation of Jewish identities.

The difficulty in defining who exactly is a Jew complicates research design but is also an asset to the study of identity. The plethora of types of Jewishness means that there are countless ways to approach definition (Sandberg 1986); like the social constructionist perspective mandates, there is simply no one agreed-upon method of separating Jews from non-Jews. One snapshot of Jewish identity notes that Jewishness is passed on either through descent or consent (Mayer, Kosmin, and Keysar 2002), though the strict guidelines of the Orthodox for what constitutes either branch do not adhere to

those of Reform Jews, for example. The ultra-Orthodox require a Jewish biological mother or an Orthodox conversion to be considered Jewish; others label the essential conditions of Jewishness as broadly as “Jewish feelings and affective behaviors” (Linzer 1998:2). Some scholars go so far as to allow for multiple Jewish identities at once, assigning interview respondents “relative positions” on scales of religiosity and other factors (Amyot and Sigelman 1996). This study will also take the polysemic approach.

“Long before the word became fashionable among psychoanalysts and sociologists, Jews in the modern world were obsessed with the subject of identity” (Meyer 1990:3). Meyer hits the proverbial nail on the head when he acknowledges the intense Jewish interest in identity. Combining the history of persecution of the Jews with the arguably human need to come to understand oneself, and then adding in the complexities of Jewishness, gives the social scientist a unique group through which to study larger social trends and problems. For instance, though the secularization theory popular in the 1960s and 1970s is generally considered passé, the secularization of Judaism in particular is overwhelmingly taken for granted (Goldscheider 1986:181). Jewish leaders are increasingly alarmed that generational socialization efforts are no longer working (Sandberg 1986; Sklare and Greenblum 1979). However, identity itself, rather than sheer numbers of Jews left in the United States, has been curiously neglected: “There is little published research that attempts to capture the dynamic quality of religious experience, or to examine how individuals define, construct, and manage their religious identity” (Sinclair and Milner 2005:94). Hence, there is still a need to examine ethnic, cultural, and religious identities and their overlap.

Feingold, who studies efficacy in Jewish education, goes so far to label the contemporary setting as “postsecular,” arguing that Jewish education must adapt to “a world composed of highly individuated people who strive for self-fulfillment and resist fetters that would curtail their individual freedom, but that also has room for subcultures that do not infringe on the freedom of others” (1999:173). Therefore, the study of Jewish identity does not only give insight about that group but also about how minority groups might fit into a society whose ideals they do not share. The goal of ‘preservation of a culture’ (Linzer 1998:10; Sklare and Greenblum 1979:7) applies to a setting much more vast than the realm of religion.

Also beyond its existence as a religious group, American Jews can be a useful example of social change and its effects on group cohesion (Goldscheider 1986; Linzer 1998). As the United States undergoes social changes, scholars can look to Judaism as an example of how macro transformations might trickle down to smaller groups. Much of this kind of work has been pursued, including topics such as Judaism’s adaptation to the growth of suburbia (Diamond 2000)(Diamond 2000) and the Jewish response to homosexuality (Greenberg 2004). However, much of the sociological work on American Judaism is written with a focus on the Jewish case and little extension beyond, especially in studies with policy implications (Heilman 1982; Kadushin et al. 2000; Phillips 1991). While this report will certainly be applicable in that setting as well (see, for example, its relevance to the 14 general categories of general sociological inquiry in American Judaism named by Heilman (1982); this paper falls into at least half of these categories) it also makes an effort to broaden the perspective, underscoring the sociological relevance and importance of the American Jewish case.

Jewish identity has its own significant relationship with the changes brought about by modernity. To some, modernization is a threat to the Jewish way of life, “best understood as the historical process whereby increased exposure to non-Jewish ideas and symbols progressively erodes the given generational communities” (Meyer 1990:7). However, the growing consensus is that this threat is, at worst, not as bad as it could have been, but at best, conducive to a whole new way of understanding Jewish identity (Goldscheider 1986). To the latter group of scholars, the instability of identity and lack of a *sine qua non* for the Jewish nomenclature actually provoke deeper thought and analysis than was previously conducted (Charmé 2000; Kaufman 2005). For some, there is no other lens better to study modernity through than that of American Jews: “The Jews are not *encountering* modern America; they *are* modern America, like other Americans whose origins are also rooted in immigrant cultures from around the world” (Bershtel and Graubard 1992:5). Finally, the choices that American Jews make in response to their identities and groups can show us how modernity affects us all. Like many of us, “the Jewish people don’t know who they are, only that they exist, and that their disconcerting existence blurs the boundary, inaugurated by modern reason, between the public and the private” (Finkelkraut 1994:169). The universal dilemma of who we are and who we appear to be has only in modern times become a valid question to ask. The idea that one could choose to be Jewish has, in the past, been as foreign as the idea that one could choose his/her parents; this is no longer the case (Bershtel and Graubard 1992; Charmé 2000; Linzer 1998; Reisman 1992).

A special case within contemporary American Judaism is its young people. Charles Kadushin and his research team, emphasizing to his audience the importance of

their study on American Jewish teenagers, accurately and eloquently capture the unique position of these Americans:

Jewish youth have a particular dilemma. They are two generations removed from World War II and the *Shoah*, perhaps the most difficult era in the history of Jewish people. Young American Jews live in a society overfilled with material goods and devoid of the overt anti-Semitism that shaped their grandparents' lives. The ways these young Jews define, or fail to define, their Jewish identity gives us a glimpse into the future of the Jewish people. They also speak volumes about the future of our society and the place for spirituality in a sea of materialism. (2000:56)

Kadushin, et al demonstrate how the conditions and status of a particular group can speak volumes about itself but also the larger societal context. Given the “rigorous age stratification” of Jewish youth (Kadushin et al. 2000:56)(Kadushin, et al 2000:56) and the declining number of Jewish role models (Sandberg 1986:123), Jewish youth provide much room for analysis of the interaction between age and identity development. Indeed, changes in behaviors related to identity in the past several decades mean that this cohort of young Jews merits updated investigation from the more classic identity studies of the 1970s and 1980s (Fishman 2000).

Previous social scientific studies of American Jews have told us much about various aspects of the current state of affairs. Financed mostly by grants from Jewish organizations, scholars of American Judaism have implemented several national and many local studies, running the full gamut of quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods. However, keeping the contributions of each in mind, there is still a dearth of attention paid to Jewish youth and especially to non-religious Jews.

Generally, quantitative studies find that the Jewish population is declining (as measured by intermarriage rates and synagogue membership), and that those who do remain affiliated may not engage in the practices that one might expect (Himmelfarb and

Loar 1984; Winter 1996). The Jewish Adolescent Study finds that though Judaism and Jewishness are important to adolescents, they “do not express this allegiance by engaging in practices that might separate them not only from their non-Jewish peers but also (in denominational terms) from one another” (Kadushin et al. 2000:73). This is a major finding, and one that validates examination of both behavioral and non-behavioral expressions of Jewishness. Unfortunately, the sample only includes *b’nei mitzvah* (those who have had a Bar/Bat Mitzvah), eliminating the voices of unaffiliated Jewish youth.

In response to the approximately one-third of Jews who identify as secular or somewhat secular (Mayer, Kosmin, and Keysar 2002), Jewish organizations and researchers are beginning to recognize and even call attention to Jews who are not sure that they are religious. The National Foundation for Jewish Culture (NFJC) was founded in 1960 and calls itself the “leading advocate for Jewish cultural creativity and preservation in America” (“Commission Report on the Future of Jewish Culture in America: Preliminary Findings and Observations”). It is also a significant source of grant support for research about contemporary cultural Judaism, offering doctoral dissertation fellowships and coordination of the Council of American Jewish Museums and the Council of Archives and Research Libraries and Jewish Studies. More recently, the Center for Cultural Judaism (CCJ), founded in 2003, names as one its goals “to engage non-religious, secular, and cultural Jews in Jewish life” (“History of the Center”). The Center highlights the “emergence of a very large population of Jews - and for many their non-Jewish spouses as well - who do not find meaning in Judaism as a religion, but for whom Judaism as a culture is meaningful” and says that it will focus its work to advocate on behalf of this large, underserved population (“History of the Center”). In

order to service this population, the CCJ offers educational programs and resources as well as grants for teaching and scholarship. Both the NFJC and the CCJ have strong ties to research, but neither has yet tapped into the Jewish adolescent population. Their validation of cultural Judaism as a growing, important, and relevant phenomenon lends credence to the importance of using other sociological resources to explore this form of religious identity.

Methodology

In order to address the questions of belief, practice, identity, and the future of American Judaism, I turn to a recent comprehensive study of American youth. The National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR) started with a nationally representative telephone survey of adolescents from ages thirteen to seventeen conducted from July 2002 to April 2003 and followed with in person semi-structured interviews conducted with a subset of 267 of the survey respondents in the summer and fall of 2003. For this paper, I rely on both the survey and interview data from the first wave of this study.

Households were eligible for the NSYR telephone survey if they had at least one teenager between the ages of thirteen to seventeen who lived in the household for at least half the year. To obtain a nationally representative sample, researchers obtained phone numbers through a random-digit-dial method. Households that agreed to participate underwent two different surveys: one with either a father or mother and one with a teenager. This portion of the sample included 3,290 respondent households.

Though not nationally representative, the dataset also includes a Jewish oversample of 80 households. Drawing from a list of 200 “Jewish” surnames given by the National Jewish Technical Advisory Committee, researchers called a set of telephone

numbers corresponding to these names. Once researchers identified Jewish households, these households were evaluated for use for the survey in the same manner as were the nationally representative households. The oversample also includes surveys of both parents and adolescents. The overall response rate for the National Survey of Youth and Religion was 57 percent with an N of 3,370. While including the oversample problematizes the generalizability of the results, it increases the power of the statistical analyses presented here. To this end, I do not estimate generalizable national trends but instead aim to provide a descriptive account of what a subset of Jewish-American adolescents thinks and feels about identity. Because of my focus on Jewish youth, I restrict the sample to those who were asked whether they felt they were culturally or religiously Jewish and dropped the four cases who did not respond to the question of whether or not they had had a Bar/Bat Mitzvah. This gives a final analytic sample size of 102 Jewish youth.

For the in-person interview section of the NYSR, a sub-sample of 267 adolescents was selected using a stratified quota sample for more in-depth study. The interview guide for this component of the project consisted of questions that touch on the issues in the survey and allow for more detailed responses. The questions were open-ended and allowed for in-depth discussion between the interviewer and respondent. The interviews ranged in length from an hour and a half to three hours and were recorded digitally and conducted in person. All 17 interviewers attended a two-day training meeting and obtained parental permission for each interview. The majority of interviews took place between March and August of 2003, with some being conducted as late as January 2004. Respondents were given a \$30 incentive to participate in the interview. Among this sub-

sample, I identified any respondents who identified themselves in the survey as Jewish or had a Jewish parent. From that group of interviews, I removed any from the latter subset who did not identify as Jewish in any way. This left me with 16 in-depth interviews for analysis.

This project approaches American Judaism through analysis of identity, belief, practice, and demographics. The NSYR includes an array of variables with which to operationalize the key ideas of this study. Sampling limits the study to self-identified Jews, and I measure identity further by identification as culturally or religiously Jewish. I measure this concept with the corresponding survey question, “Do you consider yourself to be religiously Jewish or mostly culturally Jewish?” The question, asked of the adolescents (i.e. not their parents), comes after a series of two other questions. The first asks about religious service attendance, and the second asks, “Do you generally consider yourself to be a Christian, Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, another religion, or not religious?” If the respondent answered “Jewish” or said that s/he was “half and half” or that both of two religions were equal and one of these two was Jewish, s/he was then asked the cultural or religious question. The responses were coded as “cultural,” “religious,” “both,” “don’t know,” or “refused.” For this study, I drop cases in the “refused” category, as this study focuses on answers to this one particular question. I do, however, retain the respondents who answered, “don’t know” in order to address some of the ambiguity that corresponds with identity.

To assess the potential relationship between practice, belief, and identity, I chose eleven measures that explore different avenues of potentially religiously or culturally significant practices and belief. I decided on a relatively large number of variables

measuring practice and belief in order to capture practices that are synagogue-based, home-based, family-oriented, and those that overlap these categorizations. I also wanted to be sure to capture practices that express participation in both institutional and non-institutional ways. Those that I selected have been widely used in other surveys of American Jews. Table 1 summarizes the measurement of each identity, practice, and belief variable.

Table 1: Question Wording and Descriptive Statistics for Identity, Practice, and Belief Variables (N=102)

Identity/Practice/Belief	Question	Responses and Percentages
Type of Jewish Identity	“Do you consider yourself to be religiously Jewish or mostly culturally Jewish?”	Religious=22.55% Cultural=63.73% Both=7.84% Don’t Know=5.88%
Bar/Bat Mitzvah	“Have you had a Bar/Bat Mitzvah?”	No=18.63% Yes=81.37%
Youth Group	“Are you CURRENTLY involved in ANY religious youth group?”	No=65.69% Yes=34.31%
Hebrew School Attendance	“In the last TWO years, have you taken any classes to study Hebrew, Jewish history, traditions, or modern Jewish life?”	No=42.16% Yes=57.84%
Service Attendance	“Do you attend religious services more than once or twice a year, NOT counting weddings, baptisms, and funerals?”	No=14.71% Yes=84.31% Don’t Know=0.98%
Light Candles	“In the last year, have you burned candles or incense that had religious or spiritual meaning for you?”	No=46.08% Yes=53.92%
Shabbat	“Do you regularly practice Jewish traditions observing the Sabbath, or not?”	No=50.00% Yes=50.00%
Talk with Family about Religion	“How often, if ever, does your family talk about God, the Scriptures, prayer, or other religious or spiritual things together?”	A few times a week=2.94% About once a week=9.80% A few times a month=16.67% A few times a year=32.35% Never=37.25% Refused=0.98%
Belief in God	“Do you believe in God, or not, or are you unsure?”	No=2.94% Yes=72.55% Unsure/Don’t Know=24.51%
Wear Religious Jewelry/Clothing	“In the last year, have you chosen to wear jewelry or clothing that expresses religious or spiritual meaning?”	No=52.94% Yes=47.06%
Read the Torah Alone	“How often, if ever, do you read from the Torah to yourself alone?”	Never=74.51% Less than once a month=8.82% One to two times a month=7.84% About once a week=1.96% A few times a week=3.92% About once a day=2.94%
Pray Alone	“How often, if ever, do you pray by yourself alone?”	Never=28.43% Less than once a month=28.43% One to two times a month=15.69% About once a week=12.75% A few times a week=3.92% About once a day=10.78%
Rosh Hashanah	“In the last year, did you do anything to celebrate Rosh Hashanah?”	No=7.84% Yes=92.16%
Yom Kippur	“In the last year, did you do anything to celebrate Yom Kippur?”	No=6.86% Yes=93.14%
Simchat Torah	“In the last year, did you do anything to celebrate Simchat Torah?”	No=57.84% Yes=42.16%
Sukkot	“In the last year, did you do anything to celebrate Sukkot?”	No=43.14% Yes=56.86%
Hanukkah	“In the last year, did you do anything to celebrate Hanukkah?”	No=0.00% Yes=100.00%
Passover	“In the last year, did you do anything to celebrate Passover?”	No=0.96% Yes=98.04%

The first group of measures attends to activities primarily taking place in the synagogue. This includes whether or not the respondent had a Bar/Bat Mitzvah, current

involvement in a youth group, and frequency of Hebrew school and service attendance. The second set of variables measures Jewish observances that typically take place in the home or family context. These questions ask respondents about how often they light candles for religious purposes, observe Shabbat, and talk about religion with their families. The third collection of variables measures the respondents' observation of Jewish holidays. The holidays selected cover both the High Holidays and others spread throughout the calendar year. Respondents were thus asked about their observance in the past year of Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Simchat Torah, Hanukkah, and Passover. Fourth, I measure individual practice and belief with questions about belief in God, wearing of religious jewelry, reading the Torah on one's own, and praying alone. Demographic measures include age, gender, and parents' religious affiliation.

Finally, to address my third research question, I also examine potential generational identity changes. I measure parents' Jewish identity as the interviewed parent's self-identified religious affiliation as well as that of his/her spouse. I then compare households with one Jewish parent, two Jewish parents, and no Jewish parent to the number of self-identifying Jewish adolescent respondents. I also include demographic variables measuring age and gender.

In order to assess the potential relationship between Jewish identity and a wide range of practices and belief, I examine the bivariate relationships between each practice or belief measure and the culturally/religiously Jewish question. The resulting cross-tabulations demonstrate who performs which rituals.

To understand the meaning behind practice and its relationship with identity, I analyze 16 Jewish in-person, semi-structured interview transcripts in search of how the

respondents describe their Jewish identities in ways that go beyond the answers available in the telephone survey. Sections of the interview ask respondents directly what it means to them to be Jewish, and these portions will provide most of my qualitative data, but frequently, respondents' Judaism arises in response to other topics. I then use their responses and assessments of Judaism and Jewish identity to flesh out the possible meaning and importance of practices engaged in and beliefs held by the larger Jewish survey sample. I look specifically for differences between culturally and religiously identifying young Jews, hoping to understand how and why respondents make that distinction as well as what that signifies for the future of American Judaism.

Results

In order to approach my first research question, I examine the question of whether or not adolescents identify as religiously or culturally Jewish. Referring again to Table 1, we can see a significant difference between the religious, cultural, both, and don't know categories. Though I do not analyze those who respond with the two latter categories due to small cell size, I keep them in the tables to demonstrate the ambiguity of the categories. Nearly a quarter of Jewish respondents say that they are religiously Jewish, compared to nearly two-thirds who say they are mostly culturally Jewish. It is important to note that the wording of the question (i.e., the inclusion of the word "mostly") may mean that some respondents in the "cultural" section could also belong in the "both" category, which is small at 7.74%.

Turning to practice and belief variables, we see that practices and beliefs intertwine with forms of Jewish identity. There is a significant difference between religious, cultural, and other Jewish adolescents in terms of age, reading the Torah,

attending services at a synagogue, attending Hebrew school, observing Shabbat, talking about religion with one's family, and celebrating the holidays of Sukkot and Simchat Torah. This wide range of practices spans the categories mentioned earlier. The bivariate relationships are demonstrated in Table 2.

Table 2: Practice and Belief Variables by Type of Jewish Identity (N=102)

Practice/Belief	Response	Type of Jewish Identity				Total (percent)	Chi ² , p
		Religious (percent)	Cultural (percent)	Both (percent)	Don't Know (percent)		
Age	13	39.13	24.62	12.50	0.00	25.49	23.56, 0.023
	14	17.39	7.29	25.00	50.00	13.73	
	15	17.39	16.92	37.50	0.00	17.65	
	16	21.74	27.69	12.50	0.00	23.53	
	Total	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	
Read Torah Alone	Never	47.83	86.15	50.00	83.33	74.51	30.27, 0.011
	Less than once a month	4.35	7.69	25.00	16.67	8.82	
	One to two times a month	21.74	3.08	12.50	0.00	7.84	
	Once a week	4.35	1.54	0.00	0.00	1.96	
	A few times a week	13.04	1.54	0.00	0.00	3.92	
	About once a day	8.70	0.00	12.50	0.00	2.94	
Hebrew School Attendance	No	13.04	55.88	25.00	33.33	42.16	13.82, 0.003
	Yes	86.96	44.62	75.00	66.67	57.84	
	Total	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	
Service Attendance	No	0.00	21.54	12.50	0.00	14.71	23.30, 0.001
	Yes	100.00	78.46	87.50	83.33	84.31	
	Don't know	0.00	0.00	0.00	16.67	0.98	
	Total	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	
Shabbat	No	21.74	64.62	25.00	33.33	50.00	15.57, 0.001
	Yes	78.26	35.38	75.00	66.67	50.00	
	Total	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	
Talk with Family about Religion	A few times a week	4.35	1.54	12.50	0.00	2.94	36.26, 0.002
	About once a week	21.74	6.15	12.50	0.00	9.80	
	A few times a month	34.78	12.31	0.00	16.67	16.67	
	A few times a year	26.09	35.38	25.00	33.33	32.35	
	Never	13.04	44.62	50.00	33.33	37.25	
	Refused	0.00	0.00	0.00	16.67	0.98	
	Total	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	
Simchat Torah	No	30.43	70.77	25.00	66.67	57.84	15.27, 0.002
	Yes	69.57	29.23	75.00	33.33	42.16	
	Total	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	
Sukkot	No	26.09	55.38	12.50	16.67	43.14	11.48, 0.009
	Yes	73.91	44.62	87.50	83.33	56.86	
	Total	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	

As might be expected, there appears to be a ‘Bar/Bat Mitzvah effect,’ wherein the percentage of religious Jews tapers off after age 13. While a greater percentage of 13-year-olds are religiously rather than culturally Jewish, that relationship reverses by age 16. The trend continues after 17, the age at which youth who have stayed in Hebrew school have their graduation.

Reading the Torah on one’s own, an individual practice, acts as expected. The less frequently one does so, the more likely one is to identify as culturally rather than religiously Jewish. However, it is important to note here that a vast difference exists between the “never” category and the remainder of the categories. Indeed, nearly half of religious Jews say that they never read the Torah on their own, and 86.15% of cultural Jews concur. Turning to practices occurring at the synagogue, a majority of respondents say that they have attended some kind of Jewish education in the past two years.

Religious adolescents are much more likely to have attended Hebrew school, though 44.62% of culturally Jewish adolescents have also done so. Attendance at religious service also acts in this manner. Importantly, the service attendance question asks for attendance more than one or two times per year, discounting their presence at High Holy Day services. Not surprisingly, religiously identifying Jews attend services significantly more often than their cultural counterparts. 100% of religious Jews respond yes to this question, in comparison to 78.46% of cultural Jews. Still, three times as many cultural Jews attend services as those who do not. Hebrew school, then, is more evenly split for cultural Jews than is service attendance.

Two of the family practices, regularly observing Shabbat and talking with family about religion, increase in frequency when the respondent is religiously Jewish. While

over three-quarters of religious Jews regularly observe Shabbat, this percent drops to a little over a third for cultural Jews. Perhaps occurring at around the same time, religious Jews also talk to their families about religion more than cultural Jews do. The most notable result here lies in the least frequent categories; 44.62% of cultural Jews never talk with their families about religion, and an additional 35.38% do so only a few times a year. The results for religious Jews are more evenly spread, especially across the middle three categories.

Finally, the holidays for which the religious and cultural distinction matters are Sukkot and Simchat Torah. As compared to Hanukkah, where 100% of respondents reported celebrating, and the 92% to 93% who celebrate Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah, 56.86% of all respondents celebrate Sukkot and 42.16% do so for Simchat Torah. Though the split is more even for cultural Jews, the trend again is that more religiously Jewish respondents observe these holidays than do culturally Jewish ones. The rationale for this trend has to do with both the significance of the holidays and their placement on the Western calendar; Hanukkah and Passover have increasingly been associated with the Christmas and Easter ‘seasons,’ and Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah are the High Holidays, among the most important days in the Jewish year.

In over half of the practice and belief variables, I do not find a significant difference between religious and cultural Jews. Again, the practices measured here are from each of the five categories of comparison: demographics, individual practices and beliefs, home-based practices, synagogue-based practices, and Jewish holidays. Perhaps most interesting, given the doctrinal mandates evident in other faith traditions, is that

belief in God does not distinguish religious from cultural Jews. This finding reinforces the importance of measuring practice in analyzing Jewish identity.

As mentioned, the greatest impact on youth religiosity is overwhelmingly said to be from parents and other family. To assess this relationship in this study, I look at the religious affiliation of parents and compare it to that of adolescent respondents. Table 3 demonstrates the relationship between parent Jewish affiliation, in various combinations, and youth Jewish affiliation. Surprisingly, six respondents identified as Jewish without having either parent do so. When added to the households with at least one Jewish parent, this brings the total number of Jewish households in the survey to 146. As Table 3 shows, from these 146 households, 34 respondents do not self-identify as Jewish, which amounts to 28.29%. So, loss of Jewish identity from generation to generation may be a valid concern. However, it is important to note that a large number of identified Jewish adolescents say that they are more culturally than religiously Jewish. As noted above, a great number of these youth do not attend services regularly, do not attend Hebrew school, and generally practice less than religiously Jewish youth. Self-identification is thus a crucial element in identifying Jewish survey respondents; measuring Jewishness solely by practice could falsely raise the percentage of ‘lost’ Jews.

Table 3: Youth Jewish Affiliation by Parental Religious Composition (N=3370)

	Culturally	Religiously	Both	Don't Know	Not Jewish	Total
Two Jewish Parents	13 16.67%	42 53.85%	6 7.69%	3 3.85%	14 17.95%	78 100.00%
One Parent Jewish, One Parent Not Jewish	12 19.35%	25 43.32%	2 3.23%	3 4.84%	20 32.26%	62 100.00%
Neither Parent Jewish	5 0.16%	1 0.00%	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	3,224 99.81%	3,230 100.00%
Total	30 0.89%	68 2.02%	8 0.24%	6 0.18%	3,258 96.68%	3,370 100.00%

Note: $\chi^2 = 3258.38$; $p < .001$

The in-depth interviews provide a more nuanced and yet less generalizable picture of adolescent Jewish identity. Three major themes emerged as interview analysis progressed. First, there is such a thing as being culturally rather than religiously Jewish. This is evident especially when we consider that no question directly exploring the cultural and religious distinction was included on the interview guide and the issue was rarely brought up by the interviewer. Instead, participants initiated the topic on their own, using their own words. Second, Jewish belief goes beyond standard survey questions about God, Scriptures, and the like. Interview participants express a sense that one can believe in a broader essence of Judaism without adhering to the beliefs their community may espouse. Finally, practice may or may not be a part of Jewish identity. Adolescents generally support choice and consider each to be legitimate and valid, even when it differs from their own.

Throughout the interviews, participants deal with issues of identity both directly and indirectly. The question of whether one is religiously or culturally Jewish arises frequently. Megan, a 17-year-old from the midwest, says openly, “I mean, people talk about that there’s the Jewish culture and then there’s the religion. I think I’m more part of the culture.” New England resident Hilary, 16, agrees. Hilary does not participate in almost any Jewish practices but is very involved in a Jewish affiliated, socialist, Zionist camp that greatly contributes to her Jewish identity. She explains, “like, the camp I go to, it’s a youth movement also, and it’s more like a cultural thing, and it’s a secular camp and it’s a lot of culture, a lot of Jewish culture, so I feel like more, I mean, like more part of the culture and not of the religion.” Both Megan and Hilary make the religious/cultural distinction without interviewer prompting and are at least moderately

able to describe what that difference entails. Importantly, they also link their identity to larger institutions and communities. Megan has clearly heard others discussing various ways to identify as Jewish; she does not come up with the difference between culture and religion on her own but instead has a larger point of reference. Hilary implies that the camp she attends touts itself as primarily cultural. After years of being part of that community, she has a strong Jewish identity but resolutely denies religiosity. She takes cues from the camp as to what kinds of Jewish identification are valid.

When asked what being more culturally than religiously Jewish means to her, Karen describes the differences as having “to do with family life and, um, attitudes.” A 17-year-old from the east coast, Karen repeatedly relates her Jewishness to that of her parents and links her identity to how she was raised. For her, being culturally Jewish seems to be the way she was born. She is not as articulate as others her age about the meaning of cultural Judaism but instead takes her Jewishness for granted. Regardless of what practices she engages in, she is Jewish.

Though many Jews certainly profess religious beliefs, the interviews show that adolescents’ beliefs may have more to do with the Jewish community and general moral principles and less to do with a higher power. 14-year-old Beth, from California, explains, “I guess for me, Judaism is more of like, how you live your life, like, how you be a moral person type thing. And so, as far as that goes, like I guess observing those laws is like just a part of everyday life that you should do.” Beth does not necessarily justify her practice in terms of belief but rather separates her beliefs into a larger moral code. The Jewish activities she participates in are not guided by God but instead a firm belief in the soundness of Jewish norms.

Jen, 15, from the northeast, agrees, stating, “I don’t believe in it, but I think Judaism has good morals to teach.” We are left unsure what exactly “it” refers to, but Jen is able to separate out the parts of Jewishness that she wants to retain without leaving behind the whole tradition. Becca, a 14-year-old also from the northeast, says that Judaism is a very broad concept: “I mean, Judaism to me is more of a way of life than it is a religion.” Becca has a definition of religion that does not include how to live one’s life. She makes a distinction between Judaism and religion by making her Jewishness a more comprehensive phenomenon than what she sees as a religious mindset.

For others, the belief in the importance of the Jewish legacy may be the driving force behind retaining one’s Jewish identity. Ben, 14, from the east coast, says, [being Jewish] means heritage, kind of religion . . . most of my beliefs are probably from Judaism, but not all.” Implicit in his response is that Judaism does not provide all of the answers to his cosmological questions. Hilary adds that what interests her about Judaism is “like, maybe the roots and feeling of identity.” For both of these young people, Judaism is a basic part of where each comes from and who s/he is. Being Jewish is a genealogical notation.

Belief may unite Jews even when they are not unanimous. New York City native Kate, 18, says that being Jewish allows her the freedom to discover what beliefs work for her without her having to lose her Jewish identity. When asked whether her beliefs had changed over time, Kate responds, “Uh, yeah, I used to be like, I believed more like what they said in temple and stuff like that, but when I got older, then I created my own views. . . . That’s the thing I actually like about Judaism. Like, when we’re in temple. . . they tell us to question everything.” Kate clarifies that this may have to do with her affiliation

with Reform Judaism, but she does emphasize that her beliefs do not make or break her acceptance within the Jewish community. In fact, it might be just as crucial to be Jewish when one does not adhere to the same doctrines as other Jews. When asked how often she would go to services if it was up to her, Kate answers, “I probably wouldn’t go at all, but I’m kind of glad that my mom forces me every so often, because, um, ‘cause I mean, even though like, I don’t definitely believe in it, it’s something like, I don’t want it to, even though I don’t believe in it, I don’t want it to just like, disappear.” Kate shares demographers’ concern about the decline of Judaism, and her presence at synagogue is one way of combating that, even if she is not in agreement with basic Jewish theology. She and several others express that change in their beliefs are part of becoming a Jewish adult. Becca says that she has grown into her beliefs: “I just think when I was younger, I was Jewish, but I didn’t know that much about it or didn’t really know why I was Jewish. But I think that I actually believe in Judaism and [was] not actually just raised Jewish.” Beliefs may grow stronger or decline in importance, but they are something young Jews do consider.

The priority placed on tradition in Judaism means that though belief may be ambiguous, the question of whether or not to practice Jewish rituals does not have to be predicated on a particular doctrine. The youth interviewed in this project concur, many times admitting that they separate out belief from the way their Jewishness manifests itself. Jen says, “I don’t really believe in any of the religious things, I go to Hebrew school, I have to be confirmed, I had a Bat Mitzvah. Like, I wanted to do some, but I’d rather be kind of like the Reform kind of thing.” Jen wrestles with Jewish practices that her parents make her do and those she wants to do on her own, but her lack of belief does

not lead to rejection of all practice. Becca also mentions her parents' impact on the practices in which she engages. When she is asked what the most important influences on her faith have been, she replies, "Um, my parents, I guess, and just being at temple and things like that. . . . [I'm] not involved in my temple as much, just because my family is so busy. But I mean, we're there at all the holidays and we celebrate the holidays, and even though I'm not there, I'm still Jewish all the time." Though Jewish rituals and celebrations definitely do factor into Becca's Jewish identity, their impression goes beyond their immediate effect. Regardless of whether or not Becca is at services on a Friday night or Saturday morning, her history of involvement permanently shapes her identity. Mark, an 18-year-old from the northeast, makes a similar comment about his family: "We're not actually religious, you know, we don't, I mean, in my family, we don't, we don't really see it as something, we don't have to go to synagogue, and we don't have to read the Torah every week to be a Jew, you know?" Mark's Jewish identity is not negotiable, regardless of belief or involvement. He does not identify as religious, and yet he does identify as Jewish. While this might appear to be inconsistent to some, it is simply not an analytical problem for many Jewish adolescents.

Discussion and Conclusions

At the beginning of this study, I outlined three research questions that would drive my research. Briefly, this project aims to analyze the adolescent Jewish population in order to examine the possibility of a culturally Jewish identity, to understand the relationship between belief and practice, and above all, to gain insight about the future prospects of American Judaism and its study. The currently existing literature is torn

between pessimism and optimism, and I investigate emerging forms of cultural Judaism in an attempt to adjudicate between these perspectives.

My quantitative and qualitative findings build on one another to suggest that adolescents do identify with cultural Judaism and that this identification can exist in tandem with their religious beliefs and practices. Labeling oneself as culturally Jewish does not prescribe or proscribe any particular ideology or set of rituals but instead emphasizes the legitimacy of choice in the Jewish tradition. While there are particular practices that are more common to religious Jews, cultural Jews do not view their lack of participation in these rites as detracting from their Jewish identity. Their identities are dynamic and individualistic while retaining a core sense of immutable Jewishness. Though Jews remain a small minority in the United States, the youth in my study do not express pressure to conform to the mainstream. They do not mention the kinds of discrimination that previous generations experienced, and they are proud to be Jewish and different. Their embrace of their Jewishness suggests that in the multicultural United States, certain minority traditions are a benefit rather than a hindrance. Seeing how nearly two-thirds of the sample identifies as culturally Jewish, and that interview transcripts show that adolescents are thinking about and retaining this identity, Demerath's prediction of a dominance of culturally religious identity seems to be on the mark. This would suggest that we should extend the cultural/religious distinction beyond Jews to other minority traditions in the United States to test its broader significance.

The social constructionist perspective holds up well in this study, as the flexibility that it demands is clearly a part of the ideology of Jewish adolescents. Given the steadfast pride in Jewishness that many of my respondents display, even from those who

are not from predominantly Jewish areas, this study implies that social constructionism may also be widely accepted by the larger community of American adolescents.

Respondents not only maintain flexibility in their own self-definition but also refrain from placing rigid constraints on the identity of others. By and large, Jewish youth say that they are in charge of their own identities. While they may have first received their Jewishness from their parents, they have the right to decide what that identity means to them.

Speaking to the idea that Judaism is dying out, my study demonstrates that consistently negative effects remain to be seen. Even in cases of intermarriage, Jewish adolescents largely still identify as Jews. Studies measuring Jewishness by doctrine or practice, especially those asking about belief in God, service attendance, and Hebrew school enrollment, may very well be underestimating the Jewish population by missing cultural Jews. However, it remains to be seen how a large number of cultural Jews will transmit this particular identity. Without the assistance of the same levels of tradition and structure, socialization of a new generation of Jews will have to employ new tactics. That being said, some comfort must be taken by Jewish leaders to see that young Jews are holding fast to their Jewish identities. If there is an untapped resource in contemporary Judaism, it appears to be young cultural Jews. “There’s the Jewish culture, and then there’s the religion,” says Megan, and her categories must be taken seriously. In a time when choice is paramount, Jewish adolescents in the United States are choosing to remain Jewish. In doing so, they affirm the value of their heritage and community. If Jewish adolescents are making this choice, what other youth might be doing the same?

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