

# Samuel edelman essay sample



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Samuel Edelman describes his personal choices in nurturing and sustaining his Jewish cultural and religious identity in the face of the many pressures to assimilate and thereby blur the lines separating Jews from their non-Jewish neighbors and friends. Through descriptions of his journeys to Central Europe and to his hometown in Pennsylvania, Sam explains the alternative possibilities facing Jews in the United States. This essay also provides a larger framework for understanding the experiences of people who must live among and interact with those from more dominant cultural groups.

### To Pass or Not to Pass, That Is the Question: Jewish Cultural Identity in the United States

Samuel M. Edelman

Not long ago, with only a few weeks between them, I took two voyages into my past. On the first I toured Poland, the Czech Republic, and Germany with 27 professors of the Holocaust. On the second I returned to my hometown in central Pennsylvania to see my parents and to show my children where their father grew up. I returned from these trips a changed man.

In Poland I discovered memorials to millions of dead Jews. Before World War II Poland had a Jewish population of 3.8 million people; today it is 2,500. Yet with almost no Jews remaining, I also found a schizophrenic Poland—anti-Semitic to the core, yet curious about and searching for a culture that is as Polish as Poland but was eradicated. Poland seems to have a split personality. Much of the wall graffiti is violently anti-Jewish, blaming communism and all of Poland's ills on phantom Jews, on the ghosts of the murdered. Newspapers, politicians' speeches, and Polish parish priests' sermons rail against

hidden Jews; during the last presidential election, one of the candidates was “accused” of being Jewish. At the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp several Polish skinheads even confronted us as we toured. I was stunned by the anger in their words and actions. Yet other Poles forcefully confronted the skin-heads, who were ultimately carted off by the police.

The most disturbing image burned into my mind was a sight in the beautiful city of Krakow. Before the war Krakow had one of the oldest and most distinguished Jewish communities in Europe. Now only a hundred or so elderly Jews remain. Krakow boasts of its Jewish section, its fine shops, its restaurants, a cemetery, and an ancient synagogue that is now a museum. It was there that I heard a klezmer band playing hauntingly beautiful Jewish melodies. Yet the klezmer band had no Jewish members. Jewish culture, burned alive in Auschwitz and Treblinka, was now on display in Krakow at a living museum without Jews.

In Poland I also witnessed a Jewish renaissance without Jews. In Warsaw, Krakow, Lublin, and other places there were Jewish film festivals, Jewish cultural festivals, and Yiddish readings. There were searches for Jewish roots by thousands of young Poles who had discovered that they had Jewish grandparents or that one of their parents was Jewish.

One warm evening we were relaxing at an outdoor cafe in Warsaw after visiting Jewish cemeteries, monuments, and synagogues. A young man overheard our discussion and asked if any of us were Jewish. Two of us were, and we said so. He asked if he could join us, and we welcomed him. It turned out that he was 36 years old and his father had died a few weeks earlier. Going

through his father's papers he had discovered a packet of letters and other family materials; one of the letters was addressed to him.

In the letter his father confessed that he was a survivor of one of the worst killing sites in Europe. After his escape, his father was protected and hidden by a young Polish woman, with whom he eventually fell in love and then married after the war. Because of the rampant anti-Semitism in Poland, his father hid his Jewish heritage from his children. Now, as he came closer to death, his father wanted to reveal his roots to his son, hoping that he would search out other Jews, find out more about being Jewish, and decide for himself what to be.

The man's father's death and his discovery of his own Jewish roots were emotionally overwhelming. He asked us if we knew where he could go to learn more about Jews and his heritage. It so happened that we had just returned from the Warsaw Jewish Documentation Center, and we suggested that he go there to discover more. I heard later that he did, indeed, go and began to discover his long-lost Jewish connections.

The man was not alone in his yearning to discover his identity. While anti-Semitism in Poland was growing without Jews, so, too, was interest in all things Jewish. A Jewish journalist told us that to have Jewish roots was "in" among Polish liberals. We learned that the phenomenon of this man's discovery was happening all over the country. The Jewish renewal without Jews was both puzzling and exciting, just as anti-Semitism without Jews was puzzling and disturbing.

My second journey was to my hometown, Altoona, Pennsylvania. When I lived there 40 years ago it was a small community of about 49, 000 people in the middle of coal and railroad country. There were roughly five hundred Jewish families, two synagogues, two kosher butchers, and a few kosher bakers. Yiddishkeit, or Jewishness, thrived. There was also the standard anti-Semitism of small towns, such as the yearly swastika that was chalked on the sidewalk, soaped on the window, or painted on the front door. And there was the name calling – “ Jew-boy,” “ Kike,” “ Christ killer” – coupled with periodic cross burnings by would-be Kluxers.

Today the Jewish population of Altoona is substantially reduced. Though there are still two rabbis and two buildings, the synagogues have had to put aside their religious differences to combine into one religious school. There is a struggle to keep going. The Reform and Conservative Jewish cemeteries sit side by side, never to meet formally. There are no butcher shops for kosher meat, and no kosher bakeries. There seems to be a tiredness about the place. What is most frightening is the significant part of the Jewish population that is no longer Jewish.

Friends and acquaintances with whom I grew up have married non-Jews and have given up their culture and religion – their children are being raised as Christians. Most of my school friends have either converted to Christianity, have become gastronomic Jews who eat ethnic foods on Saturday night or Sunday morning, or – worse yet – are nothing. They are Jews without Judaism; Jews without culture; Jews without history; Jews at best vaguely aware of their heritage. Only a handful remain practicing Jews. Most are lost forever. A few have spouses who converted to Judaism, and fewer still have

spouses who helped their children grow up as Jews even though they did not convert.

These two voyages both point to a common image of Judaism and Jewish culture in the United States at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Jewish culture, religion, and life are at a crossroads in the United States. One path leads to Altoona and Poland, to anti-Semitism without Jews. The other path leads to Jewish renewal and renaissance. One path leads to Jews passing as non-Jews and disappearing; the other leads to community and continuity.

In my parents' time, those who gave up their heritage were in the minority. For my generation, the size of that group grew significantly. Among to-day's college students, the number of Jews who are lost to Judaism is more than double that of my generation. Many demographers believe that if the trend continues, the Jewish population in the United States will decline until the middle of the twenty-first century, when it will be negligible. Thirty years ago the Jewish population in the United States was 5.8 million people; today, after the arrival of Jewish immigrants from many parts of the world and a sizable increase in the total number of U. S. residents, the Jewish population is essentially unchanged.

Where there should have been a substantial net increase, there is none. Zero population growth, coupled with a massive rate of assimilation, is the basis for the fear that within the next 25 years Jewish culture will disappear from America. Ironically, anti-Semitism is probably at its lowest point ever in the annals of the United States. Jewish intellectual, political, and economic

power in the United States is strong. Yet the very existence of Jewish culture is facing its greatest threat.

Assimilation has always been a significant part of Jewish life in America, from the first recorded Jewish settlement in 1654 until today. Each wave of immigrants, and the successive generations of their children, has had to choose between passing as non-Jews or publicly embracing and maintaining their Jewish roots as Jewish Americans. 2

For the Jewish community in the United States, there are four competing choices in dealing with assimilation and its benefits and threats. One choice, of course, is anchored in the vision of the Protestant majority: the United States ought to be a “melting pot,” and any hint of foreignness is a threat to American culture and should be eliminated. Like the view often expressed in Europe following the French revolution and the Napoleonic period, the goal of this choice is the disappearance of Jews – both as a culture and as a religion – into the larger society.

The force at play is the attractiveness of Americanization, which is sufficiently seductive that Jews will turn their backs on their “other” culture and eventually disappear. The disappearance of Jewish culture, or ethnocide, is happening all over America. Many American Jews have intermarried and, for a variety of reasons – laziness, a desire to pass, ignorance – watch passively as their children grow up with no Jewish education, intermarry again, and finally lose all touch with their heritage.

The second competing choice about how to deal with assimilation is one emphasized by such Jewish leaders as Rabbi Mordechai Kaplan, the founder

of the Reconstructionist Jewish Movement. This choice involves an equilibrium between mainstream America and traditional Jewish values. These two sets of values are not antithetical but flow, one into the other, like a balancing act between particularist and universalist perspectives. Kaplan's view is that Jewish culture, history, and religion – important ingredients in the maintenance of Judaism – can easily live side-by-side with American values and culture. This choice verges on what one might call intercultural communication. Some communication scholars might term this approach “biculturalism.”

As an example of this second choice to being Jewish in the United States, consider the experiences of one of my very close Jewish friends. More than 15 years ago he met a Catholic woman. They started to date, fell in love, and eventually were married by a Reform rabbi who wanted to keep intermarried families in the orbit of Judaism. After a few years, they had two girls in quick succession. He was ambivalent about his roots, but she was not about hers and felt a tension between them and her obligations to her children. They struggled with such issues as whether to have a Christmas tree in their house and whether to celebrate Christmas and Easter with her parents. They argued over what messages of ambivalence and inclusiveness would be sent to their children if they permitted both religions in the household.

Their decision was to give up all Christian practices, even though she had not converted. This was a wrenching decision for her, which she did for the sake of her children. She also knew that because she had not converted to Judaism, the children would not be considered Jewish under Jewish law unless they chose to convert themselves. She therefore opted to have the



girls educated in the syn-agogue, and when they were older she encouraged them to go through the cer-emony of conversion. Recently they completed the conversion ceremony, and both had their Bat Mitzvot in the synagogue. Now she, too, is beginning to study to convert.

The third and fourth choices for dealing with assimilation both involve a separation from American culture, but in very different ways. The third choice involves living in the United States while rejecting secular American values. This alternative is adopted by ultra-Orthodox Jews such as the Hasidim. The Hasidic approach places physical and psychological barriers around the Jewish community to separate it from what its members view as the profane. Television is restricted, pop culture is avoided, and anything not Jew-ish – according to halacha, or strict Jewish law – is not permitted. This ideol-ogy, which is similar to that of the Amish and other separationist communities, is at the center of the Hasidic way of dealing with secular Amer-ican values.

The fourth choice, while not rejecting American culture, involves leaving the United States for a political, cultural, linguistic, and religious existence as a Jewish majority in Israel. This Zionist approach encourages as many Jews as possible to make aliyah and emigrate to Israel. The horrors of the Shoah (the Holocaust), the unwillingness of the allies and others to save European Jewry, the antagonisms among Jewish political groups that left them splin-tered and ineffective, and the creation of the State of Israel by the United Na-tions in 1948 all acted as catalysts for many American Jews to propose Zion-ism to combat assimilation and extermination.

It is mind-numbing to realize that, had a Jewish nation existed, millions of Jews could have survived the Shoah. The success of the State of Israel is an important and critical counter-balance to assimilation, conversion, intermarriage, indifference, and anti-Semitism in America and throughout the world. An economically developed, intellectually advanced, and politically stable Israel suggests that Zionism has been successful in achieving its broad goals. The core belief of Zionism is that what happened to Europe's Jews should never happen again. Connection to this idea and to Israel has become a secular religion for many American Jews. While Zionism initially held that one should make aliyah to Israel, it now supports the idea that one also serves who stays in America and fights in support of Jewish communities under threat throughout the world.

Another useful typology for understanding the American Jewish community is provided by Daniel J. Elazar. <sup>3</sup> Elazar describes American Jewry as seven concentric circles that radiate outward from a core of committed Jews toward a vague sense of Jewishness on the fringes. At the core are the “integral” Jews, for whom Jewishness is a central factor in their lives and a full-time concern. Elazar estimates that they represent 5 percent of the Jewish population in the United States. Surrounding the core is a second group of U. S. Jews, the “participants,” who regularly engage in Jewish life and who view expressions of their Jewishness as important but not full-time activities. They may be officers in Jewish organizations, participants in pro-Israel activities, contributors to Jewish educational experiences, or professionals employed by Jewish agencies. Elazar estimates that they represent from 10 to 20 percent of U. S. Jews.

The third circle is made up of “ associated” Jews, who are affiliated with Jewish institutions or organizations in some concrete way but are not very active in them. This group is made up of synagogue members whose activities are limited to High Holy Day services, participation in Jewish rites of passage, and memberships in Jewish social and political organizations such as Hadas-sah and B’nai B’rith. Elazar suggests that this group is fairly large, making up about 30 to 35 percent of the Jewish population.

The fourth circle, “ contributors and consumers,” consists of Jews who make periodic donations to Jewish causes and occasionally use the services of Jewish institutions, but who are at best minimally associated with the Jewish community. He estimates that 25 to 30 percent of Jews are in this circle.

The fifth circle includes what Elazar calls the “ peripherals,” who are recognizably Jewish in some way but are completely uninvolved in Jewish life. They have no interest in participating in Jewish experiences and rarely make donations to Jewish causes. About 15 percent are in this circle.

The sixth circle, the “ repudiators,” are Jews who actively deny their Jewishness. Some are extremely hostile to all things Jewish, while others simply react with hostility to their Jewish origins. This group, which once was very large but has experienced an extensive decline, now makes up less than 5 percent of U. S. Jews. Finally, there is a group Elazar labels “ quasi-Jews.” They are neither fully inside nor entirely outside the Jewish community. They may have intermarried but have some connection to a personal Jewish label. They make up about 5 to 10 percent of the population.

Growth at both the core and on the periphery of Judaism is increasing. The core grows as young Jews return to Jewish religious life and become Baal Teshuva, conforming to Jewish laws and rituals. The proselytizing activities of some of the more aggressive fundamentalist groups, such as the Lehavitcher Hasidim, have been very successful with disaffected Jewish youth. There is also substantial population growth among Orthodox Jews, especially among the ultra-Orthodox. The movement toward religious return and revival, coupled with a phenomenal birth rate, contributes to growth in the core. Simultaneously, however, the intermarriage rate among those in the third and fourth circles of Jewish involvement, who comprise the majority of the U. S. Jewish population, is also on the rise. The intermarriage rate among these Jews -who often label themselves Conservative, Reform, or Reconstructionist Jews- now approaches 57 percent.

Intermarriage has both positive and negative consequences. Although increasing numbers of young Jews are intermarrying, there is also a growing number of their non-Jewish spouses who are converting to Judaism. The rate of conversion has been increasing in the last decade, but the relative numbers are still small. Of greater interest is the number of non-Jewish spouses in in-termarried couples who join a Jewish communal group as quasi-Jewish participants. This phenomenon is most evident in rural or small Jewish congregations that exist where the Jewish population is relatively isolated from mainstream Jewish communities. For example, my own community of Chico, California, has one small synagogue and a congregation that dates back to the early days of the gold rush.

Over the last 20 years the membership has tripled to about 90 families. Until recently we had an active religious school but only a part-time rabbi, who did not live in the community, to provide our religious services. Now we have a rabbi who lives here. A significant proportion of those who affiliate with the synagogue come from intermarried families in which the non-Jewish spouse is the catalyst for involvement of both the children and the Jewish spouse. Many of these men and women support Jewish communal and religious involvement despite resistance from their Jewish spouses. These Jewish affiliate members, as I call them, are integral to the development and maintenance of Jewish life in our community. This is the reality of what some of us call frontier Judaism.

Colleagues from other small and rural communities report observations similar to mine in Chico. This suggests to me that the most peripheral areas of Jewish involvement may provide the greatest potential for the future of Jew-ish America. It is because of these non-Jewish yet affiliated members of inter-married couples that Jewish life is transmitted to a new generation of Jews hitherto thought lost to Jewish life. If the Chico phenomenon is typical, then it is clear that a rethinking of the age-old negative vision of intermarriage must be undertaken.

I view myself as among the ranks of what Elazar calls the “integral Jew.” I have taken a roundabout path to this place I am now in. Growing up in my hometown, I defined myself in terms of my Jewishness. I never denied it, and sometimes flaunted it. There was even a time when I thought seriously about becoming a rabbi; I still have dreams of doing that. I became, instead, a communication professor.

I have experienced various incidents of anti-Semitism. One such incident occurred when I ran for township supervisor in Pennsylvania. Though it was a close race, it was only as election day approached that I discovered a secret my campaign staff and friends had been keeping from me: flyers accusing me of being part of a Zionist conspiracy and a “Christ-killer” had been distributed throughout the district. I doubt that I lost many votes because of these smears, but I did feel pain. I truly felt like an outsider.

I explored the option of making aliyah to Israel. I did not move there because, at the time, I couldn’t find work and my wife didn’t want to go. Nevertheless, I regret that I didn’t immigrate, for when I am in Israel I feel truly at ease and not “the other.” Instead, I choose to identify as a Jew in the United States, not only in my home but also in my work. Over the last 20 years I have gradually spent more and more time researching and studying Jewish subjects related to communication studies.

I now identify more with my Jewish work than with my disciplinary involvement in communication. As I became successful in teaching and researching such subjects as the Holocaust and Israeli public address, I experienced a greater sense of ease. I also feel lucky to have supportive colleagues and friends who have encouraged me to do my own thing. My mentor at Penn State, Gerald Phillips, felt bitter that his peers in the communication discipline never provided him with similar latitude to work on Jewish topics.

Today I coordinate a Jewish studies program and am working toward developing a field of study called Jewish rhetoric. My wife is Jewish and my chil-

dren are being educated and brought up in the Jewish faith. Even though I live in a small California town, I bring my Jewishness with me. I define myself through it and see the world through Jewish eyes. I am what I am. Hineni, here I am. I am content.

Being Jewish to me requires participation in a community, involving one-self in the rituals, ceremonies, and frames of reference that are typically Jewish. There are many types of Jews in the United States, but at the heart of all is the concept of the community-*klal yisrael*, the community of Israel, and *am yisrael*, people of Israel. 4 For many Jews in the United States passing has become a way of life. It is not hard to do. One simply has to choose not to be observant and not be a part of the Jewish community. To be Jewish is to be active, at least to some extent, in the community. Even though the religious law defines Jewishness based on the mother's religion, it is clear that actual affiliation goes far beyond that definition.

The second most defining event for Jews in the twentieth century, that of the Shoah, or the Holocaust, eliminated the choice of passing. To pass or not to pass was no longer the choice of the Jew; rather, the Nazis said that you were Jewish no matter what. The first most defining event for Jews in the twentieth century was the creation of a Jewish homeland in the State of Israel, which also rejected the idea of passing. Only those who take the action of declaring themselves to be a part of *klal yisrael* can be a citizen of Israel.

As I consider friends and relatives in my old hometown, many of whom have intermarried and have found it easier to reject their connections to their Jewish communal heritage, I see Jews who are as lost to me as my relatives

who perished in the Shoah. The legacy for their children will be empty synagogues, museums to a culture that disappeared, cemeteries covered with weeds, and klezmer music without Jews to play it. Their legacy will be to succeed in doing what the Nazis failed to complete in Europe. Judaism will continue in the United States, but the declining number of those willing to make the choice for communal involvement and against disappearance concerns me. To be accepted fully by mainstream America has been a benefit that many generations of Jewish immigrants have sought and are finally achieving. Time will tell if Jewish Americans thrive or die because of such kindness.

## Culture Concepts

### Ethnic Group

Ethnicity or ethnic groups are terms that refer to groups who share a language, historical origins, religion, nation-state, or cultural system. The nature of the relationship of a group's ethnicity to its culture depends on a number of important characteristics. For example, many European American people in the United States still maintain an allegiance to the ethnic group of their ancestors who emigrated from other nations and cultures. In other cases, the identification of ethnicity may coincide more completely with culture. It is also possible for members of an ethnic group to be part of many different cultures and/or nations. For instance, Jewish people share a common ethnic identification, even though they belong to widely varying cultures and are citizens of many different nations.

### Assimilation and Integration as Forms of Adaptation

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Two issues shape the response of individuals and groups to prolonged intercultural contact. The first is whether it is considered important to maintain one's cultural identity and to display its characteristics. The second involves whether people believe it is important to maintain relationships with their out-groups. Assimilation occurs when people think it is relatively unimportant to maintain their original cultural identity but it is important to establish and maintain relationships with other cultures. Integration occurs when people retain their original cultural identity while seeking to maintain harmonious relationships with other cultures. Both integration and assimilation include a desire to maintain positive intercultural relationships.

**Separation, Segregation, Seclusion, and Marginalization as Forms of Adaptation** When people do not want to maintain positive relationships with others, several outcomes are possible. If people do not want positive relationships with another culture and also wish to retain their cultural characteristics, separation may result. If the separation occurs because the more politically and economically powerful culture does not want the intercultural contact, the result of the forced separation is called segregation. If, however, a non-dominant group chooses not to participate in the larger society in order to retain its own way of life, the separation is called seclusion. When individuals or groups neither retain their cultural heritage nor maintain positive contacts with the other groups, marginalization occurs.

Notes

1. Reform and Conservative Judaism are separate movements. In the United States they comprise the two largest denominations. 2. There have been four waves of Jewish immigrants to the United States: the initial Sephardi Jews (Spanish origin), who immigrated prior to the birth of the United States; the immigration of German and central European Jews in the first third of the nineteenth century; the largest wave, of almost 3 million immigrants from eastern Europe, between 1882 and 1914; and the most recent wave, after World War II, that has included survivors of the Holocaust and, more recently, Jews from the Soviet-occupied lands, Jews from Arab lands, Iranian Jews, and Israelis. 3. Daniel J. Elazar, *Community and Polity: The Organizational Dynamics of American Jewry* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1976). 4. These terms refer not to the State of Israel but to the biblical children of Israel, or all who call themselves Jewish.

### Learning AmongUS

1. How do the types of choices that Edelman describes overlap with the forms of adaptation described in the reading's Culture Concepts boxes? Edelman touches on points from ethnic groups, the Jews, to assimilation, the Catholic woman forgetting her beliefs to blend her family into a Jewish household, to segregation, seclusion, and marginalization where others do not accept each other and have no need to form positive relationships. The example that comes to my mind is when Edelman is on his voyages trying to learn more about his roots and his heritage and he learns of all the disgust people put onto the Jews.

2. Edelman describes the personal choices of several families with one parent who is Jewish and another who is from a different religious background. Using those examples, do you believe it is possible within one family to create traditions that honor different ethnicities and religions? I think it is a very hard thing for any family to go through and actually overcome. One of the examples was a Jewish father and a Catholic mother. Growing up so differently and trying to mesh the two of them together is not possible. As a Catholic, you celebrate the traditional Christian holidays. As a Jew, you don't celebrate anything close to these holidays. Giving up these holidays for the sake of your children would be pretty big and disheartening.

3. In addition to Jews, identify other groups that can be described as an ethnic group. How do these groups differ from cultural groups? Examples of other ethnic groups would be: Hispanics, Asians, Greeks and so on. These differ from cultural groups because of language and different lifestyles each group portrays.

4. Based on your readings and your own experiences, identify one or more cultures that have chosen to follow each of the following five responses to living among other cultures: assimilation, integration, segregation, seclusion, and marginalization. I have noticed that the Hispanic cultures have started to assimilate more and more to the United States way of life. As they have started to learn the English language, and the basics of the American lifestyle they are also segregating themselves in a way too. Even though most can hold at least a small conversation in English some still choose to speak on in Spanish. Working with the general public, I have found that not all Hispanics want to speak to me in English so they will talk to their little

children (in English) for them to tell me what they are wanting. So in a way, I see that the Hispanics are starting to assimilate to, or blend into, the American culture.