

interaction between the self and the group or society. One did not have to cultivate identity. It was simply the product of normalcy.

Mid-century Jews were among the most important thinkers responsible for creating a sense that all people must have an identity in order to be Americans. It is no accident that Jews were crucial theoreticians of identity. For a group of people who had come face-to-face with its mortality in the form of Nazi ideology and who, on the whole, had little connection to belief or religious obligation, the promise of group identity as enduring, inevitable, and thoroughly American was tantamount to an assurance of collective survival.

By and by, identity transmission became the *sine qua non* of identity. Less important than one's own identity was the question of whether that identity would persist in one's children. Just when the model of inevitable identity should have proven its worth, it crumbled. The circumstances that had guarded the line between Jews and non-Jews were shifting: in the decades after World War II, Jews started to learn alongside, live near, work with, and socialize with non-Jews. Even more to the point, a growing number of Jews and non-Jews came

to love one another. By the 1970s, the Jewish community entered into a crisis mode, fueled by rising rates of intermarriage and a deep ambivalence about the anti-authoritarian spirit of the counterculture movement. At the same time, Jewish intellectuals, among others, turned toward post-structural, postmodern renderings of identity, offering up terms like "fragmentation," and "compartmentalization" as correctives to master narratives of self and society. Jews were told that identity was both as complex as a pastiche of multiple selfhoods and as simple as marrying another Jew (and ensuring that one's children did the same).

So what does it mean, today, to want one's children to have a strong Jewish identity? On one hand, this desire implies a straightforward belief in our ability — as parents and as institutions — to mold identity into something that is stable and proper and usable. But it is also an expression of our helplessness. We do not know what it will mean to possess identity in the future, because we do not know what the social world around us will be or for what uses identity discourse will need to be deployed. Put simply, we do not have the faith that mid-century Jewish intellectuals had or, perhaps, feigned. 



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Post-Ethnic, But Not Post-Peoplehood

NOAM PIANKO

Recently, I have been interested in the resurgent popularity of the term "Jewish peoplehood" as a new buzzword for evaluating Jewish identity. To get a better sense of the trend, I have had Google send me a daily alert with a link to every new Web reference to the term. The alerts I've received in the past year indicate a highly ambiguous term referenced in a broad range of contexts. However, most references can be linked to three broad assumptions: concerns about eroding Jewish boundaries, support for the state of Israel, and affirmation of a shared basis of Jewish identity across diverse practices, geographies, and worldviews.

Given these assumptions, it is absolutely no surprise to me that young Jews immersed in what Shaul Magid describes (using a term popularized by the American historian David Hollinger) as "post-ethnic," find the term highly irrelevant, and even morally suspect. The crux of post-ethnic thinking — the rejection of "the idea that descent is destiny" —

strikes a significant blow to the centrality of familial ties in defining Jewish boundaries.¹ Post-ethnic logic forces individuals to choose between two mutually exclusive approaches toward thinking about group identity: an inherently problematic interest in preserving ties grounded in blood, territory, and essentialist claims; or a more progressive desire to create communities that reject birth as the primary criterion for inclusion. Conceptions of Jewishness linked to inherited group boundaries, nationalism, and essential characteristics associate Jewish boundaries with those of the first option. This association leaves the connotations associated with Jewish peoplehood increasingly out of sync with the moral, cultural, and social ideals of American liberalism.

Any theory of Jewish identity today must recognize the post-ethnic trends that erode boundaries connected to descent. But does this rejoinder to ethnic associations grounded in racial categories mean that the concept of "the Jewish people" has no role to play in emerging

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¹ David Hollinger, "Obama, Blackness, and Postethnic America," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, V. 54 no. 25 (February 29, 2008, page B10).

patterns of Jewish identity? Not necessarily. But it does mean that the expectations about post-ethnicity and peoplehood will need to shift quite radically for the key word to remain relevant.

One strategy for creating space for Jewish collectivity is to underscore the limitations of Hollinger's assumption that descent and consent stand in mutual opposition to one another.

The gradual blurring of boundaries between ties of descent and consent popularized by President Barack Obama's narrative bodes well for promoting viable models of Jewish peoplehood.

Hollinger's emphasis on the centrality of the voluntary nature of collective allegiance is an important corrective to the racial logic that has dominated American pluralism. Pluralism in this country has primarily relied on descent to distinguish minority groups and to reinforce social hierarchies. In addressing this concern, however, post-ethnicity creates a false dichotomy between group bonds inherited through one's family and valuable ties formed by voluntary associations. As other scholars have begun to recognize, family ties and historical links (whether real or imagined) cannot be so easily disentangled from an individual's ability to enter and leave groups at will. The Jewish tradition's recognition of both descent and consent as criteria of membership provides a valuable contrast to the post-ethnic model.

So does the autobiographical narrative of President Barack Obama. Obama's speeches and writings challenge the neat delineation between inherited ties and voluntary associations. As outlined in his autobiography, *Dreams from My Father*, subtitled *A Story of Race and*

Inheritance, Obama concludes his journey confidently immersed in the particular aspect of his African-American roots. Yet, the return is not preordained. Obama travels a circuitous journey that allows him to actively choose the group allegiance that speaks to him. He both acknowledges the limits of racial categories and affirms descent as an inevitable guide in shaping his life journey. Descent is not destiny for Obama. However, descent-based ties provide a natural home for individuals linked through family and history to opt into communities of meaning.

The gradual blurring of boundaries between ties of descent and consent popularized by Obama's narrative bodes well for promoting viable models of Jewish peoplehood. Descent traditions provide one important path in the personal search for identity and meaning in an increasingly global and multicultural world. Conceptions of Jewish peoplehood unable to come to terms with collective bonds linked to family and historical ties will fail to capture the imagination of those inspired by the possibilities of connecting to a larger story. At the same time, however, Jewish peoplehood can only thrive in America today by decentering descent — that is, by making peoplehood broader than a dependency on one's familial ties. This will ensure that “post-ethnic” Jews who find the expectation that group allegiance is directly linked to familial ties alienating will be far more willing to engage with peoplehood and its possible meanings. The rejection of descent as destiny does not close the door on creative expressions of Jewish collectivity. Rather, it may hold the key for recovering descent as a meaningful guide for preserving peoplehood in a post-ethnic moment.



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