

EXCERPT FROM
UNDER CONSTRUCTION:
On Peoplehood, Identity, Arts and Culture

At the most recent UJC General Assembly in Jerusalem I received an advanced copy of Erica Brown and Misha Galperin's forthcoming book *The Case for Jewish Peoplehood* - a rich, thoughtful analysis of the challenges of individuation and constructing a meaningful Jewish identity in a complicated, conflicted, consumerist world. Comprehensive, thought provoking and insightful in so many ways, one is struck by the notable absence of any substantial discussion of culture. Yet how can one discuss definitions and expressions of peoplehood without culture? How can one discuss the ongoing creative act of constructing personal identity without discussing art?

As someone who has been well aware of the so-called "culture wars" for most of his adult life, who has given enormous thought to the role of "identity politics" in the arts, as someone whose personal process of individuation has been deeply bound up in creative expression, cultural production and artistic investigation, I find it almost inconceivable that thoughtful consideration of arts and culture are entirely lacking in Jewish communal conversations on identity and peoplehood. But perhaps I shouldn't be so surprised - we are at a critical juncture in Jewish history, an extraordinary and pivotal moment where we, as a people, are renegotiating our identity; where arts and culture may seem less than a top priority. I would suggest, however, that this is not the case at all, and that, in the words of Arthur Miller, "...attention must be paid."

In a recent report on the changing roles of Jewish arts and culture in America prepared for the Cummings Foundation, Jeremy Hockenstein identifies three distinct phases in the evolution of post-Holocaust Jewish culture in America: Rebuilding, Mainstreaming and Reengaging.

Hockenstein contends that the Rebuilding phase was from 1945-1975 and was characterized by "a concerted effort to transmit and transform the cultural inheritance of Eastern Europe into a usable form for second-generation American Jewish communities grappling with issues of Jewish identity, expanded social and geographic mobility, and acculturation." Hockenstein notes that this phase placed "a strong emphasis on defining American Jewish identity in religious terms" and "a trend towards rebuilding American Jewish cultural life in terms of its relationship to a new world center of Jewish culture: the State of Israel."

The second phase, Mainstreaming, lasted from 1975-1995 and reflected the fact that "as Jews became more integrated into mainstream American life, Jewish culture developed accordingly." Jewish Culture, as it was conceived, was part of the "the broader trend of the American "ethnic revival," resulting in an upsurge of interest in the immigrant experience and the language and culture of now-distant Eastern Europe." This preservationist notion of Jewish identity and authenticity "began to be more and more visible in the American cultural mainstream ... [and] was evident, for instance, in new

academic Jewish studies programs, new publishing initiatives, and major radio and recording projects related to Yiddish culture and the American Jewish experience.”

Then, beginning in the 1990’s, we see a third phase, Reengaging, where the “organized American Jewish community has undergone a self-conscious process of collective cultural and religious renewal.”

Anyone who has been involved in communal Jewish life during the past ten years is by now familiar with the idea of fostering culture as an access point to Judaism and to promote continuity. The idea has been explored extensively, first by the 2005 Steven Cohen and Ari Kelman study “Cultural Events & Jewish Identities: Young Adult Jews in New York,” commissioned by the Foundation for Jewish Culture, followed in short order by Cohen and Kelman’s “The Continuity of Discontinuity”, commissioned by the Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies and re-iterated most recently in June 2008 with the publication of Ari Y. Kelman’s “Legwork, Framework, Artwork: Engaging the Next Generation of Jews” commissioned by Denver’s Rose Family Foundation.

While one can contend that these studies are merely repeatedly re-stating the obvious, the more salient fact is that they miss the point. Culture -and art, as a subset of culture- is not merely a sociological or demographic signifier. Culture actually *means* something. These studies have explored the surface of culture without moving into meaning. As a result, communal support of arts and culture is predicated entirely on “continuity” - which, frankly, undermines the significance of art itself. By reducing art and culture to a “continuity device” we undervalue the importance of the creative imagination and, too often, we mistake art for entertainment. “New” or “alternative” or “contemporary” Jewish culture is not merely a trick to attract young people into institutional Jewish life. It is an integral and irreplaceable component of envisioning and re-imagining the Jewish future.

So what, then, does this new culture mean and how can we use it to envision the Jewish future? Let’s begin by defining culture:

culture n. The totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, **and all other products of human work and thought.**

Culture is not a luxury; it is the totality of human expression, the manifestation of afflatus in the physical world. Culture is the investigation of human imagination, it is how we create hope or despair, it is how we represent ourselves - our lives, our dreams and our values - *to* ourselves. As such one could posit that the generative, creative act is human modeling of the primary divine behavior, that of bringing forth something from nothing. And in the praxis of culture, Art is “pure research.”

In his speech to the GA Shimon Peres spoke of Israel’s commitment to innovation, science, medicine, alternative energy and environmentalism. That same spirit must carry over to the arts -we must foster the “pure research” of cultural innovation, to bring the artistic imagination to the challenges we face. We know that there are various kinds of

intelligence - logical, scientific, social, emotional - and as Jews we must nurture all forms of intelligence, not just the hard sciences.

But what is our relationship to culture? Hockenstein notes that as Jews assimilated into American life our cultural interests moved away from our Jewish identity - we have become enormously successful in the so-called “neutral” space of mainstream American arts and culture - and as a result, innovative investigations of Jewish identity through culture have atrophied. One useful case study for analyzing the changing relationship of Jewish identity, art and culture is the curatorial shift in American Jewish Museums.

In the summer 1999 issue of *Daedalus: A Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, esteemed museum scholar Harold Skramstad published an article entitled “An Agenda for American Museums In the Twenty-First Century.” In this article he asserts that museums should, “engage actively in the design and delivery of experiences that have the power to inspire and change the way people see the world and the possibility of their own lives.” This groundbreaking article led to a revolution in museum practice. From the New Museum on the Bowery to The Whitney to LACMA, museums around the country began innovating their exhibition practices and curatorial priorities.

This ideological shift dovetailed with the rapid assimilation of the Internet and other new media technologies into our daily lives. Within the past ten years we have hurtled headlong into an information age where the cut-and-past aesthetic of early modernism has become the lingua franca of everyday experience. We live in a state of de-contextualization, mash-up, sampling, cognitive dissonance and juxtaposition - both intentional and accidental. We are moving from text-based culture to visual culture; an interactive, hybrid, multimedia world which is rapidly and continually evolving, emerging and morphing.

Contemporary museums embrace and reflect the contemporary experience. The “art” is not necessarily in any one form or even an object – it can be video, live art, sculpture, painting, interactive, digital, installation and sometimes just an idea. It is placed together in unusual juxtapositions, often without extensive explanation. And while a good museum provides the visitor with catalogues, audio guides and other interpretive tools, ultimately we move through these spaces autonomously. We are free to engage with the art as we will, to make our own meaning, to discuss with our peers or a docent, to just “be in the experience.” The art may affirm our existing ideas and beliefs or it may create questions – but the fundamental experience of the contemporary museum is one in which the visitor has personal agency and must take responsibility for comprehending, synthesizing and assimilating the information.

This re-evaluation of the function, place and aesthetic of the museum in society has begun to influence the field of culturally specific museums, thus challenging the conventional wisdom around identity. In the Jewish world we see this most clearly in Chicago at Spertus, in San Francisco at the Contemporary Jewish Museum, Boston at the yet-to-be-build New Center for Arts and Culture and in Toronto at the Koffler Centre.

In fact, Spertus' inaugural exhibition was [*The New Authentics: Artists of the Post-Jewish Generation*](#). The exhibition brought together many artists for whom "Jewish" is not their primary identity and explored how "associations with Jewish culture intermingle with issues of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class, politics, history, and nationality, posing questions, challenging boundaries, and defying easy definition." Spertus even presented a panel discussion moderated by ARTnews editor Robin Cembalest called "Re-Envisioning Difference: Notes From the Forefront of Culturally Specific Museums."

So what are the implications of this cultural shift in terms of constructing a personal Jewish identity and forging a sustainable global identity to underpin the idea of peoplehood?

First we must acknowledge that the shift from text-based to visual culture is as profound as electric lighting erasing the barriers between night and day; highways, cars and telephones changing our experience of distance; television, film and recorded media changing our sense of place and narrative. As "people of the book" we must give thought to how we both preserve a text-based heritage - and consciousness - while innovating for the Information Age. Young people born into the Information Age process knowledge differently than individuals who are just a few years older. Their experience of identity is beyond fluid; they approach the construction of self from an entirely new perspective. And this perspective is reflected in young people's overwhelming support of President-Elect Obama.

Whether you agree with his policies or not, Obama does not merely symbolize the new world, he embodies it. He is the first significant political figure from an ethnic minority to reject the victim narrative of identity politics. He embraces hybridity and the role of individual agency in the construction of personal identity. Obama is not black *or* white, he's black *and* white, he's both local - American by birth - and global by lineage and upbringing. He projects ease and familiarity in mediated spaces and, we are told, is equally comfortable and engaging in person. He comes from modest means but has used education and self-determination as a vehicle for social mobility, thus combining homespun practicality and grounded-ness with intellect and cosmopolitan sophistication. He simultaneously projects approachability and respect, informality and gravitas - and he constructs his identity on his terms.

Beyond his persona and personal history his campaign was - and still is - the most modern and new media-savvy campaign in the history of the planet. His hopeful ideology, regular e-mails, use of social networking, his focus on "thinking globally, acting locally" speaks loudly and clearly to young people who grew up with the internet, iPods and Facebook, who experience their cultural heritage as one of many factors that comprise their identity, who have grown up in a political landscape largely devoid of vision and predicated on fear.

Hybridity is how today's young people have *always* experienced the world - multiracial, multicultural and on-demand. Their identities are not singular, they are partially inherited and partially by-choice, young people today have actively constructed their identity

almost since pre-adolescence, changing it at will and representing the idea of “self” differently in different contexts. This attitude now applies to race, gender, religion, sexual orientation and any number of other components of identity.

And culture is how one expresses identity - which is why Obama is the first president to have an arts policy that places enormous value on creative expression and the role of the artist in fostering innovation. This is a whole new world, one in which culture - the content one creates and/or consumes - is a major building block of identity; and this contemporary culture is “peer-to-peer”, not “top-down” or distributive.

To engage the next generations in a meaningful Jewish life we must understand that the Information Age isn't about authority so much as it is about conversation. We must examine our own preconceptions of Jewish identity and enter into a conversation, not just a monologue. We must encourage the young and/or unaffiliated to *want* to get more information, not just castigate them for not having the knowledge to begin with. And, most challenging of all, we must be willing to relinquish control of the dominant narrative.

It is not about controlling the story anymore; it is about giving people the information, resources and support to make good decisions on their own terms. In this new, networked, information age, identity construction is marked by hybridity; informed questioning of received traditions and personal agency. Personal identity is a combination of many factors – genetics, environment, inherited culture, acquired culture and choice. We can thoughtfully investigate our inherited culture and adapt it to our liking, comment on it, embrace it and reject it at the same time. The essential self exists beyond these external identifiers – it is our responsibility as moral agents to determine things for oneself and act accordingly.

This necessitates an act of enormous courage, faith and trust on the part of those who are currently in the established Jewish world. We must trust that even though the world as we now experience it seems to lack absolutes and fixedness, that is not the same as moral relativism. In fact, embracing hybridity reinforces the moral responsibility of every individual.

Second, we have to support artistic investigations that move beyond - or combine - known forms, which embrace innovation and experimentation, which reflect the contemporary experience. By embracing new forms and innovation we can disrupt stagnant thinking and unleash our imaginations. We must invest in creativity not for the “outcomes-based” strategies that underpin continuity theory but because creative vitality and adventurousness is important in and of itself. It is adventurousness and novelty that continue to make culture relevant and engaging. We must strategically deploy the creative imagination in the process of envisioning our future, develop dramaturgically rigorous “ideas-based” investigations that match artists and scholars; insuring that inspiration and information work together.

This is not an idea without precedent. Before I left for the GA I visited the Jewish Museum in New York to see the exhibit *Chagall and the Artists of the Russian Jewish Theater, 1919-1949*. It was stunning. The exhibition reveals “ a remarkable period in the early years of the Soviet Union when innovative visual artists, including Marc Chagall, Natan Altman, and Robert Falk joined forces with avant-garde playwrights, actors, and theatrical producers to create a theater experience with extraordinary mass appeal.”

In this brief moment “Jewish theaters such as Habima and the Moscow State Yiddish Theater (acronym, GOSET) became a catalyst for modernist experimentation, revolutionizing existing concepts of theater and scene design. Habima performed in Hebrew and its productions of Jewish mythical and folkloric plays were noted for their rich visual effects and their emotional intensity. GOSET, which performed in Yiddish, created daring productions of Yiddish dramas that enthralled audiences with a new expressionistic style of acting. Both groups embraced visual artists who created stage and costume designs combining Russian folk art elements with stylistic vocabularies of cubo-futurism and constructivism.”

Here Jews investigated both their particular Jewish identity while simultaneously envisioning a radical new future for the world at large. Early modernism -whether in the Russian Jewish Theater or in Weimar or other movements - was characterized by a strong Jewish presence and influence. This remarkable cultural moment was extinguished by the Nazis; for the past three generations we have worked to recover and rebuild Jewish communal, religious and intellectual life in America and around the world. But now, with both a homeland and a thriving Diaspora, we have unprecedented wealth and security, and though we face challenges, in many ways we are stronger now than ever. It is time to rebuild our visionary Jewish artistic and cultural heritage in a contemporary context.

Finally, we must re-adjust our notion of peoplehood away from a North American-centered view of the world. More than half of the world’s Jews live in Israel and there are still many Jews living in Diaspora outside of Israel or North America. As America re-assesses its role as a superpower and world leader, hopefully embracing a more cooperative relationship with the world-at-large, North American Jewry must embrace a global perspective as well.

The Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco’s inaugural exhibit, “In The Beginning: Artists Respond to Genesis” provides a fantastic entry point for engaging with ideas of global Jewish identity. The exhibit was thoughtful and surprising with quite a number of interactive, digitally informed works bringing the ancient text of Genesis to life in expansive, relevant and immediate ways. Alan Berliner’s clever interactive piece “Playing God”, Ben Rubin’s sound/sculpture installation “God’s Breath Hovering Over the Waters (His Master’s Voice)”, Shirley Shor’s “The Well” and Trenton Doyle Hancock’s “In the Beginning There Was the End, In the End There Was the Beginning” all provided visceral, profound experiences.

Juxtaposing media, technology, history, religion, text and information into a seamless experience replicates networked culture in such a way that it becomes plausible to

imagine Jewish Diaspora as pre-technological global networked society. In a way, the Jewish Diaspora experience prefigures the information age and the replication of “memes” through a network.

Here we are in the future, living in a global, networked society; a society where economic and social forces have individuals – and even whole populations – traversing geography with unprecedented mobility. From migrant workers to high-end financiers, people move around the world bringing their culture, religion, styles, attitudes, traditions and beliefs with them. Diaspora is the de facto contemporary experience. Like the Jews, balancing assimilation and cultural preservation are a central challenge in many people’s lives.

Artistically and sociologically Jewish culture has long embraced hybridity: in Yiddish and Ladino, Klezmer, regional cuisines, even philosophy, Jewish culture is a central idea that has morphed and adapted as it has moved around the globe. Once again, historical Jewish culture prefigures modernity.

Using Diaspora as a context for Global Jewish Identity and peoplehood is not faddish or convenient, it is actually a necessity. The ideas underpinning a liberal notion of Global Identity - multiculturalism, co-existence, assimilation/preservation, universal emancipation and civil rights - are anything but idealistic; they are, now more than ever, pragmatic responses to reality. We live in a complicated world where economics, mobility, media and information bring disparate cultures, religions, traditions, beliefs, even civilizations, into unexpected and sometimes difficult proximities. We have to learn to live together in it and strict adherence to ideological absolutism and “me-first” tribalism is an endgame no-one wins.

But to return to the original question - why is culture so notably absent from the communal conversation? Perhaps, with so many demographers, academics, lay leaders, philanthropists, social entrepreneurs, politicians and activists devoting so much time and energy to making the world better and supporting Jewish life, with so many in need of so much and with such limited resources, arts and culture seem frivolous. But they’re not.

Arts and culture - as opposed to entertainment- engage us in new and different ways, reflecting the experience of being in the world *as it is now*. Entertainment confirms what we already think we know. Art teaches us to ask questions, encourages us to seek knowledge and take action.

Michael Chabon in his “Statement on the Arts” published as part of President-Elect Obama’s new national arts policy says:

“Every grand American accomplishment, every innovation that has benefited and enriched our lives, every lasting social transformation, every moment of profound insight any American visionary ever had into a way out of despair, loneliness, fear and violence—everything that has from the start made America the world capital of hope, has been the fruit of the creative imagination, of the ability to reach beyond received ideas and ready-made answers to some new place, some new

way of seeing or hearing or moving through the world. Breathtaking solutions, revolutionary inventions, the road through to freedom, reform and change: never in the history of this country have these emerged as pat answers given to us by our institutions, by our government, by our leaders. We have been obliged—to employ Dr. King’s powerful verb—to dream them up for ourselves.

America’s artists are the guardians of the spirit of questioning, of innovation, of reaching across the barriers that fence us off from our neighbors, from our allies and adversaries, from the six billion other people with whom we share this dark and dazzling world. Art increases the sense of our common humanity. The imagination of the artist is, therefore, a profoundly moral imagination: the easier it is for you to imagine walking in someone else’s shoes, the more difficult it then becomes to do that person harm. If you want to make a torturer, first kill his imagination. If you want to create a nation that will stand by and allow torture to be practiced in its name, then go ahead and kill its imagination, too. You could start by cutting school funding for art, music, creative writing and the performing arts.”

Now is the time to invest in arts and culture, to stimulate and sustain this renaissance in Jewish culture, to bring artistic energy to the task of revitalizing Jewish life and artistic imagination in envisioning the future.

As Jews we have been entrusted with a great and wonderful gift - and with that gift, even greater responsibility. We must nurture, sustain and cultivate the creative Jewish spirit; we must find the best and the brightest and support them on their path to accomplishment and recognition. We bear the responsibility of supporting the artists, scholars, visionaries and dreamers who will carry our Jewish legacy into the future, so that our children -and their children and *their* children - do not merely *persist* as Jews but truly *live* and prosper as Jews - one people, with many faces in an ongoing conversation spanning millennia.