

This is an electronic version of an article published in the journal *Women and Therapy*, 33:315-331, 2010

Copyright © Taylor & Francis Group, LLC. *Women and Therapy* is available online at <http://www.tandf.com>.

It also appeared in book form as BA Greene & D Brodbar (Eds) (2011) *A Minyan of women*, pp 166-182. New York: Routledge.

## I'VE ALWAYS KNOWN I'M JEWISH, BUT **HOW** AM I JEWISH?

There's an old maxim that says that there are as many definitions of a Jew as there are Jews. My own experience tells me that even one Jew may have many different definitions of herself as a Jew over the course of a lifetime. In this article I will trace a narrative of my identity as a Jew growing up in a particular family, in a particular geographical location, at a particular time in history. I will highlight the ways in which various facets of my Jewish identity have shifted in content and in salience over time. Finally, I will describe some of the ways in which my identity as a Jew impacts my work as a therapist.

### Family History and Jewish Identity

Recent theory and research on identity development support viewing identity as complex, contextual, and fluid. (Barrett, 1998; Bhavnani & Haraway, 1994; Goldberg & Krausz, 1993a; Rathzel, 1994; Steinberg-Oren, 1997) There were particular circumstances in my life that I believe made my sense of my identity as a Jew especially ambiguous and changing. One is that not only my parents but all four of my grandparents had rejected the Jewish religion (although not Jewish identity) long before I was born. Thus Jewish religious beliefs and rituals were never a routine, taken-for-granted part of my daily experience. Another is that my parents were highly ambivalent about ethnic and cultural identities. In their political belief system, the only divisions that mattered had to do with class. Racial or ethnic loyalties were viewed as undermining working class solidarity.

At the same time, my parents' life experience had been such that being Jewish was a major organizer of their lives. This was particularly true of my mother, who had been born in 1907 in Chudnov, a *shtetl* in the Ukraine<sup>1</sup>. My mother's parents, in their youth, had rebelled against the norms of this community. My grandmother had left home to attend a pioneering program that trained midwives in modern

obstetrical techniques. My grandfather, whose parents had wanted him to become a rabbi, wanted to study engineering in Zhitomir, the large city closest to Chudnov. When he was denied admission to engineering school because he was a Jew, he stayed on in Zhitomir and became a political activist. However, both he and my grandmother returned to Chudnov to earn a living and start a family. Thus my mother grew up immersed in the culture of the shtetl, particularly as embodied in the person of her paternal grandmother, while simultaneously hearing her parents' biting critique of that culture.

By the time she was thirteen, my mother had experienced World War I (1914-1918), the Russian Revolution (1917), the Polish-Ukrainian War (1918-1919), the Polish-Soviet War (1919-1920,) and the civil war between the Red Army of the Communists and various White Armies that wanted restoration of the old regime (1919 -1920). Each of these events had included *pogroms*<sup>2</sup> instigated by the armies that advanced and retreated through Chudnov like opposing teams moving up and down a football field.<sup>3</sup>

My father, born in New York City in 1914, had grown up in a neighborhood where various ethnic groups lived side by side but kept their distance from one another. The antisemitic violence he had encountered as a boy in the streets of Washington Heights was far less lethal than the antisemitic violence my mother had witnessed in Chudnov. It had, however, provided frequent reminders that being Jewish was a significant part of his identity.

I am aware of four distinct aspects of Jewishness that are relevant to my identity as a Jew: (1) Jews as targets of persecution, (2) Jewishness as ethnicity, (3) Jewishness as religion, and (4) Jewishness as race. I will discuss each of these in turn.

### Jews as Targets of Persecution

The earliest and most intense messages I got about being Jewish were (1) that being a Jew was not optional and (2) that to be a Jew was to be in danger. I was born in 1942. I was not yet three years old when the concentration camps in Europe were liberated and the full horror of the Holocaust became widely known to the American public. For my mother, the Holocaust confirmed and amplified the lessons of her childhood about the peril inherent simply in being a Jew. She was scornful of people who thought

they could assimilate and disappear into the general population. There had been people in Germany, she told me, whose ancestors had converted to Christianity, people who did not even know that they had Jewish ancestry. The Nazis had tracked them down through public records and had sent them to the concentration camps. When the state of Israel was created in 1948, the Law of Return defined a Jew as anyone who said he or she was a Jew, allowing individual self-definition (and encouraging rapid expansion of the Jewish population of the new state). My mother defined a Jew as anyone *other* people, the people in power, said was a Jew. In retrospect, I realize that my mother was not as thorough-going a social constructionist as this implies. If I had asked her, I think she would have said that her definition applied for all practical purposes, but that the descendants of Jews remained Jews even if no one on the face of the earth knew it or had any way of finding out. At an intuitive level, I agree with her.

From my earliest years, my mother tried to prepare me for life in what she perceived as a hostile, dangerous world. She did her best to negate any notion I might have about the United States being a place of safety for Jews. "Don't ever get the idea that it can't happen here," she would tell me. "It almost did." Among other things, she told me about a pro-Nazi rally that had filled Madison Square Garden before the U. S. entered the war. Since I had been to Madison Square Garden to see the circus, the image of thousands of seats, all of them filled with screaming people who hated me, was very powerful.

My mother firmly believed that all non-Jews were antisemitic, no matter how enlightened they seemed to be. I don't know how old I was when she first warned me to watch out for people who say, "Some of my best friends are Jews." I do know it was before I was nine, because I have a visual image of the conversation taking place in the living room of our apartment in the Bronx, before we moved to Queens. Nor do I remember what, if anything, she said about why such people were dangerous. Thinking about it now, what occurs to me is that the statement is usually made when the person has just been confronted about her or his antisemitic attitudes or behavior. If no one can escape internalizing the oppressive belief systems that are prevalent in their culture, the people who deny their antisemitism are the ones who haven't taken responsibility for recognizing and changing it.

My first direct encounter with antisemitism occurred in the playground when I was seven. A group of children trapped me on the monkey bars and told me that I was going to go to Hell because I had killed Christ. They cited the nuns at the local parochial school as the source of this information.<sup>4</sup> They continued

to taunt me for what felt like a very long time. I had no idea how I was going to get away from them or what they would do to me next. I think they eventually got bored and left. I went home in tears.

Later experiences with antisemitism were much less frightening, but still unsettling. A few examples out of many:

- A girl in my class in high school, who was of German descent, told me with utter conviction that Hitler had done a lot of good things in Germany and that it was a myth that he had murdered 6 million Jews. The story had been made up, she said, by Jews who wanted Germany to pay them undeserved reparations. I was stunned. I had no idea how to begin to formulate a reply.
- A co-worker shared with me his alleged observation that whenever a Jew and a non-Jew owned competing stores in the same neighborhood, the Jew always prospered and the non-Jew went broke. I was not convinced by his claim that he was simply expressing admiration for Jewish business acumen. This time, after the initial shock at what I was hearing, I recovered enough to point out that his statement was a thinly veiled version of an age-old, ugly stereotype. I added that if Jews had some kind of insider knowledge about how to succeed in business, it had somehow bypassed my family. Shortly after arriving in the United States, my grandfather had been swindled into investing in a candy store. Within two years he had filed for bankruptcy because he couldn't bring himself to swindle someone else to get his investment back. I doubt that my words changed my co-worker's thinking, but I did feel less like a helpless victim.
- I have witnessed Jews in progressive and/or feminist settings being interrogated about their views with regard to the state of Israel in order to establish their credibility and right to be heard on issues of racism and antisemitism. Members of other racial/ethnic groups were not subjected to this litmus test.

When *The Diary of Ann Frank* first appeared in English, I was about the age Ann had been when she went into hiding. It was easy for me to imagine myself in her circumstances and sharing her fate. My mother and her parents had fled the Ukraine when the Communists overthrew the democratic socialist regime my grandfather supported. After two years in Poland waiting for visas, they had made it into the

United States by the slimmest possible margin. The immigration laws of the 1920's, drastically restricting immigration from Eastern Europe, took effect after they had received their visas and paid for their passage, but before they had entered the United States. They had been held at Ellis Island while Congress debated a bill allowing entry to people in these circumstances. It was chilling to think that if their departure had been delayed by even a few more months, or if the bill had failed instead of passing, they would have been returned to Europe and would have been in Hitler's path fifteen years later.

The stories I was told at home, the books I found on our bookshelves, the movies I saw had a lasting impact. I still have nightmares about being hunted by Nazis. Something inside tells me not to make myself conspicuous, not to talk too much or too loudly in public settings, not to express my opinions too forcefully, not to be too quick to step into a leadership role. If I do any of these things, I experience a wave of anxiety afterwards. This response is partly the result of gender and class socialization. But it also reflects an unconscious conviction that someone, somewhere, is thinking, "That pushy Jew needs to be taken down a peg," and is getting ready to do the job.

Avoiding appearing boastful, self-confident, or optimistic has another source in Jewish culture: fear of attracting the attention of the "evil eye".<sup>5</sup> My parents would have vehemently denied being influenced by such a superstitious notion. Nevertheless, I think that at some level they felt that not only antisemites but some mysterious, malevolent force would strike them down if it noticed their good fortune.

Another legacy of this transgenerational or intergenerational transmission of trauma (Root, 1992; Schlosser, 2006) was a lot of early training in being constantly on the alert, scanning the horizon for danger, anticipating everything that could possibly go wrong, and finding a way to either prevent it or fix it. I don't think my parents had ever heard of Murphy's Law, but their own version of it was implicit in their interactions with me: "If something can go wrong, it will, and when it does it will be your fault". Even small slip-ups -- an overdue library book, getting caught in the rain without an umbrella -- brought stern admonitions: "How could you have allowed that to happen? You should have known better. You have to pay more attention to what's going on around you." No matter how trivial the real-world consequences of my lapse, it was evidence that I was being careless, and carelessness could be fatal.

I was also expected to be constantly attuned to my mother, who bore the unhealed wounds of layer upon layer of trauma, and to adapt my behavior to what she could tolerate. These expectations

were enforced by my father, whose first priority was protecting my mother. Increasing the difficulty of the task were family secrets I was forbidden to inquire about or figure out for myself, even when numerous clues were lying around in plain sight. I was not to know what my parents' political affiliations had been in the 1930's. I was not to know that my mother was seven years older than my father and had been married to someone else for eleven years. I was not to know that the breast surgery she had undergone when I was seven was a radical mastectomy, not the removal of a benign cyst. I was not to see anything unusual or inappropriate in her intrusiveness, her need to control every aspect of my life, her intolerance of any expression of anger or even difference of opinion. As an only child, I had no allies in my family who could provide a reality check. Nor did my mother permit close relationships with relatives outside our nuclear family. I became a very obedient, if emotionally inhibited and chronically anxious, child, teenager, and young adult.

#### Jewishness as Ethnicity<sup>6</sup>

When I started writing this article, it took me a while to identify the specific content of my family's Jewishness. There was actually quite a lot. My mother used to entertain me with stories about the lighter, more picturesque side of childhood in the *shtetl*. Her first language was Yiddish, and her English was sprinkled with Yiddish words and phrases. We often ate traditional Jewish foods, either cooked by my mother or brought in from the deli and the bakery. There were folk tales, and jokes that celebrated Jewish *chutzpah* (gall, brazenness, impudence) and a particular kind of wacky logic carried to an utterly illogical conclusion. ("In the first place, I never borrowed your pot. In the second place, it was already cracked when you gave it to me. And in the third place, I returned it to you in perfect condition.") We felt a kinship with elements of popular culture that were by and about Jews. We listened on the radio to Jewish entertainers like Eddie Cantor, Jack Benny, and Milton Berle. We read best sellers by Jewish authors about Jewish life, like *Marjorie Morningstar* and *Exodus*. We went to see "Fiddler on the Roof" and my mother pronounced it authentic, except that the characters' clothing was too clean and there wasn't enough mud in the streets. We were proud when a Jew made the news because of a special achievement, and cringed when a Jew disgraced himself publicly.

There were also values that I learned from my parents that they didn't explicitly label as Jewish. One was a reverence for books as physical objects. It was so ingrained in me that it was a long time before I could underline or make marginal notes in my college textbooks. I realized later that the origin of this reverence was probably reverence for the sacred scrolls of the Torah, which are so precious that the text is never touched. I also believe that my parents' commitment to social justice ultimately derived from Jewish teachings dating back to the Biblical prophets.

Often, when my parents heard about a new development on the local, national, or international scene, they asked one another, "Is this good or bad for the Jews?" At one level, this was a metaphor for "What are the practical implications of this? Is it a good thing or a bad thing?" At another, they were quoting the punch line of an old joke about the tendency of (Jewish) human beings to evaluate all information in reference to themselves. Fundamentally, however, I believe that, consciously or unconsciously, the question was an ever-present filter through which they viewed the world.

Eventually I encountered a term for Jews who don't practice Judaism but do identify as Jews: secular Jews. But being a secular Jew is an active process. Secular Jews value the culture and work to preserve it and pass it on to the next generation. As I said earlier, I think my parents' political views were in conflict with what they called ethnic chauvinism. I was taught that there was nothing to be ashamed of about being a Jew, but nothing to be particularly proud of either. There was a *schule* (a school, not to be confused with *shul*, or synagogue) in my neighborhood to which some of my parents' secular Jewish friends sent their children to learn Jewish culture and the Yiddish language. When I wanted to go too, my mother said she could teach me Yiddish at home for free. She borrowed an elementary textbook and went over the first chapter with me. I don't remember what happened next, but we never got past that first lesson.

Thus many of the things that were culturally Jewish about us remained unlabeled fragments with no organizing framework to hold them together. Some were so much a part of generic New York culture that I didn't realize that they were Jewish in origin. Others I thought were my family's idiosyncrasies. I've learned more about what is Jewish about me in anthropology and sociology classes and through my own reading as an adult than I learned growing up. Culturally, I don't feel qualified to claim the title, "secular

Jew”, but I do feel Jewish enough to reject the pejorative label “bagel and lox Jew”, applied by some to people whose sole expression of their Jewishness is what they eat for brunch on Sunday.

### Jewishness as Religion

To most people, one of the defining characteristics of a Jew is observance of the Jewish religion, and in that respect my family definitely didn't fit in. My mother regarded religion as a deliberate hoax designed to pacify the oppressed. She said she didn't believe in God, but she got so angry when she talked about Him that I think she was furious with Him because of the horrors he had allowed to happen in the world. Refusing to believe in Him was how she expressed her rage and pain.

My father was more of an agnostic than an atheist. I asked him, when I was five or six, if there was a God. His answer was that many people believed there was, but that nobody knew for sure. As a boy, he had decided shortly before his 13<sup>th</sup> birthday that he wanted to have a bar mitzvah (in those days a simple religious ceremony followed by modest refreshments, not the lavish social event it has become). He had arranged, completely on his own, to take a crash course in Hebrew to prepare for it. I no longer remember what it was that disillusioned him shortly afterwards; it involved something the rabbi did that he perceived as hypocritical. He stopped attending services, but he didn't become bitter, as my mother had. In college he took an elective course in the history of religion -- an unusual choice for an engineering student. He kept his textbooks and encouraged me to read them and discuss them with him when I was old enough to understand them. He believed that there was a rational basis for religious practices. For example, the dietary laws had probably been sound public health measures in a hot climate with no refrigeration.

Some time before the age of nine, I discovered that other children believed you couldn't be a good person unless you believed in God. For a few years I succeeded in believing, or at least considering it possible, that there might be a God. I prayed nightly for things like world peace and my grandfather's recovery from a crippling stroke. (I also wished for those things on the evening star. I had learned well my parents' lessons about taking multiple precautions.) Then I learned from my Jewish peers that believing in God might help you to be a good person, but it wasn't enough to make you a good Jew. There were 613

commandments you were supposed to obey. My parents explained that we didn't do all those things because what mattered was being fair and honest and kind. That made sense to me, but I also wanted to belong and to be approved of by my friends. I asked for and was given a Star of David to wear on a chain around my neck, and a menorah to light at Chanukah. My parents, for reasons that had nothing to do with religion, sent me to Jewish summer camps for five years. I enjoyed the Friday night and Saturday morning services and memorized some of the prayers and songs. Even after I stopped believing at age 15<sup>7</sup>, I still enjoyed the rituals and the sense of community, although I wasn't motivated enough to attend services other than weddings and bar mitzvahs.

As soon as I started attending elementary school, the Jewish holidays became an issue that I would wrestle with for the next 40 years. The majority of my classmates were Jewish, so on most Jewish holidays our classroom was typically occupied by four Christian classmates and me, trying to explain what I was doing there.

"I thought you were Jewish."

"I am, but we're not religious."

"Then what makes you Jewish?"

"We just are, OK?"

Meanwhile my Jewish friends regarded me as a traitor who caused our (non-Jewish) teachers to question the legitimacy of the numerous Jewish holidays they observed by staying home from school.

My parents did, however, keep me home on the High Holy Days, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. My mother's reason for doing so, and for staying home from work herself, came straight out of her childhood in the *shtetl*: There was no reason for us to flaunt our unbelief. It would be offensive to our religious neighbors to see us so flagrantly violating community standards. People would talk about us.

My father said he stayed home from work because he didn't want a repetition of an experience he had had years earlier: A co-worker had said to him, "The city is so much nicer when the Jews aren't around." I didn't understand until decades later that he was doing more than avoiding an unpleasant experience of antisemitism. He was coming out as a Jew, refusing to pass.

But just taking the day off wasn't enough to avoid causing a scandal. If I left the house I had to wear a skirt, not jeans. I couldn't ride my bike. I couldn't be seen carrying shopping bags home from the

supermarket. It all started to feel hypocritical. Instead of passing as a gentile, I was passing as a Jew, in the sense of “person of the Jewish faith.”

Over the years I've tried various ways of handling the High Holy Days issue. For a while I went to work on the holidays, but there was something alienating and unsatisfying about doing so. Then I stayed home in solidarity with Jews who did observe the holidays and were sometimes penalized for doing so. Later I adopted my father's rationale, staying home as an assertion of my identity as a Jew. Currently I regard the holidays as part of my cultural heritage.

I've recognized for a long time that all religions can have very real benefits for those who participate in them. Belief, ritual, prayer, and community can have powerful and positive psychological and physical effects. I experienced those effects as a child at camp, and again when my son, unwittingly following in his grandfather's footsteps, decided that he wanted to have a bar mitzvah. We accompanied him to services every Friday night and drove him to Sunday school every Sunday morning for three years. It helped that the rabbi was one of the first women to have full charge of a congregation. She was gradually introducing non-hierarchical and gender-neutral elements into the service, and her sermons emphasized ethical and humanistic interpretations of the Scriptures and the Law. She called it *tikkun olam*, the mending of the world. For me, it resonated with my parents' teachings about social justice. I even went to some adult education classes, which I found fascinating, and considered continuing to attend services after my son's bar mitzvah.

Unfortunately, shortly after the bar mitzvah the rabbi decided to move back home to California. Her replacement was a retired army chaplain. He conducted the services in a manner that suggested that they were an annoying obligation to be disposed of as quickly as possible. Needless to say, he had no problem with the hierarchical and sexist elements in the prayers.

Thus ended my brief stint as a Jew in the sense of “member of a Jewish congregation.”<sup>8</sup> It hadn't lasted long enough to be internalized as an enduring part of my identity. It did, however, contribute a lot to my understanding of my heritage. It also increased my receptiveness to spirituality, which to me means experiences of transcendence and community.

## Jewishness as Race

One more aspect of my identity as a Jew has to do with race – specifically with the question, “Are Jews white?” I think it’s useful to break that down into two separate questions, one easily answered and the other more complicated.

The easy question is “Are all Jews white?” The answer, of course, is “No.” There are communities of Jews all over the world who are physically indistinguishable from their non-Jewish neighbors.

The more complicated question is “Are any Jews white?” In my mother’s classification system, Jews were not white and it was dangerous to delude themselves that they were. The KKK targeted Jews as well as Negroes, as I was taught to call them, and the Klan was still a force to be reckoned with in the 1940’s and 1950’s. It followed that Jews should ally themselves with Negroes, because we had a common enemy and similar aspirations.

I think that even for my mother this was more of a political stance than a core identity. She wouldn’t have had to warn me if it hadn’t been easier to think of ourselves as white than as non-white. When I’m with white Christians, I’m more aware of not being Christian than of being or not being white.

Among my family and friends, myself included, there was a certain moral smugness about being a Jew and therefore not white. It allowed us to think we weren’t racist. It came as a shock to me in the 1980’s when I encountered the concepts of white skin privilege, passive racism, and unconscious racism. Acknowledging and taking responsibility for my whiteness was a painful process.

I have come to recognize that in this country, at this time in history, Jews who look like me are functionally white. I think it’s important to keep in mind, however, that that’s a fairly recent development, (Brodkin, 1998; Jacobson, 1998) and that there are some highly organized and vocal groups, such as neo-Nazis and white militia organizations, who still disseminate the old rhetoric. Today if I’m asked if I think Jews are white, I respond with another question (also a Jewish cultural characteristic): Compared to who? I think Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz (1992) got it right when she wrote that Jews are either “the closest of the coloreds to white or the closest of the whites to colored.” (p. 145)

## Contextuality of Jewish Identity

As I move from one social context to another, the salience of my identity as a Jew and the relative importance of its different aspects vary. In New York City I move through my days as a white person with the white person's privilege of not having to think about my race very often. Although only about 25% of New Yorkers are Jewish, Jewish culture is very much a part of the cultural fabric of the city, so I feel that I'm on home ground. New Yorkers are also less likely than other Americans to assume that everyone is a Christian, so I don't feel that I have to keep coming out as a Jew. When I leave New York, things shift.

I lived in Baltimore for two years while my husband finished medical school. The large Jewish community there lived for the most part in the suburbs. We lived in student housing, an all-white enclave in the midst of a poor and working class African-American community. The medical school community was not only almost entirely white and mostly Christian; it was also largely Southern, which to me was synonymous with virulent antisemitism. Those were the only two years in my adult life when I lit a menorah during Chanukah and put it in the window. I did so in a spirit of defiance toward my white, Christian, Southern neighbors. My intended message was, "Whether you like it or not, I'm here and I'm not going to be invisible."

I also spent two years as a graduate student at the University of Cincinnati, which had an almost entirely white, Christian student body and faculty. We lived near the campus in a very white, Christian neighborhood. Everyone seemed to have blond hair and blue eyes. This was the only time in my life when I was self-conscious about my "darkness" (black hair, brown eyes).

Comparing my experience in Baltimore with that in Cincinnati, it seems to me now that in Baltimore the presence of the surrounding African-American community positioned me as one more white person in the medical school community. What differentiated me from the other white people was my Jewishness. In Cincinnati, the marginality of my whiteness was more salient.

## Family Dynamics, Jewishness and Psychotherapy

David Bakan (1958), among others, has written about the parallels between Freudian psychoanalysis and the Jewish mystical tradition. Both regard the surface of what is communicated as concealing a deeper, hidden meaning that must be painstakingly unearthed in order to release its power. Both regard multiple, even contradictory interpretations of a single text or behavior as the norm. The Jewishness of psychoanalytic thinking may have contributed to my receptiveness to it. Although thinking has moved away from some of the content of classical psychoanalytic theory, I remain fascinated by the process of collaborating with my patients to unravel the meanings implicit in the stories they tell about their lives.

I knew in junior high school that I wanted to study psychology. A gifted science teacher gave my class an assignment that sent me to the encyclopedia to look up “mind” and “brain”. I followed the cross-references for hours. The same teacher helped us to understand the disturbing behavior of a teacher who, in retrospect, I would diagnose as narcissistic personality disorder with borderline features. The prospect of learning to understand the behavior of the important people in my life was a lifeline I grabbed with both hands. A year or two later, when I read about the career options for someone with a degree in psychology, I knew that I wanted to be a therapist.

It's hard to imagine a career choice for which years of attempting to meet my parents' needs could have better prepared me. As a therapist I'm rewarded for using the skills I learned as a child: I help people to heal emotionally by engaging with them empathically, striving to see the world from their point of view, and disclosing my own thoughts and feelings only when it's in the patient's best interests. At the same time, I'm not only permitted but required to do what was once taboo: I get to ask all the forbidden questions, bring up unmentionable subjects, point out inconsistencies, and piece together the answers to the mysteries. Professional ethics mandate that I maintain the boundaries appropriate to the relationship even if the patient wants us to overstep them. Thus I have firm backing for meeting with the patient only at the designated time and for the designated duration, limiting telephone contact between sessions, and declining offers to enter into a dual relationship. Professional ethics also require me to give a high priority to my own self-care in order to preserve my ability to be an effective therapist. This provides a dramatic and welcome contrast with the self-abnegation demanded of me by my parents. When I am working with

a patient who persistently tries to shift the boundaries, I sometimes feel an internal pull to go to excessive lengths to accommodate what she has persuaded me she needs. At those times, I find it useful to discuss my work with colleagues. I count on them to ask, “Why on earth would you be willing to do that?”

Family dynamics have influenced my therapeutic style in both positive and negative ways. Sensitized by my mother’s controlling and intrusive behavior, I am wary of replicating it. Thus I lean toward a nondirective approach. Based on the patient’s responses to my interventions, I intuitively adjust my activity level. I want her to experience my presence as supportive without distracting her from her focus on herself. I also tend to be reserved in my expression of emotion. This meets the needs of some patients, matching their own preferred level of emotional intensity. For others it provides a calm and reassuring stability within which they can give free expression to their own emotional storms. On the other hand, some patients need more expressiveness from me than I can currently provide, and experience me as cold or aloof. When verbally attacked, I still sometimes fall back on my old response of doing my best to disappear (a strategy that worked well with my parents, less well elsewhere). When this happens, some patients feel abandoned, while others seem not to notice. Bringing myself back into connection with the patient involves remembering that I am not in danger in the present. Often this takes the form of silently reassuring and comforting my own inner child.

Jews have historically been perpetual outsiders, and this is a role I find very familiar. For most of my life I have perceived myself as marginal to whatever group I found myself in, including groups of Jews. Throughout my childhood I consistently chose adult approval over that of my peers and assumed that conforming to the adults’ expectations was the way to get that approval. As a result, I remained on the fringe of every peer group, from my neighborhood to school to summer camp. As a psychotherapist, I am paradoxically both inside and outside the patient’s life. My patients tell me their most private thoughts and feelings, their life stories, and their hopes for the future. Over time, if the therapy goes well, we come to deeply appreciate and care about one another. On the other hand, we do not participate in each other’s lives outside of my office. I hear a lot about the people in the patient’s life, but I rarely meet them. Thus being a therapist allows me to experience some of the rewards of an intimate relationship while remaining within my comfort zone at the periphery.

When I'm working with a Jewish patient who is religiously observant, has had an extensive secular Jewish education, or is an ardent Zionist, I am vulnerable to feeling that she perceives me as not enough of a Jew or the wrong kind of Jew. There is a temptation, which I try to resist, to display what knowledge I have acquired about things Jewish in a fruitless effort to win the approval I longed for as a child.

Remnants of my mother's indoctrination about the ubiquity of antisemitism influence my emotional response when a non-Jewish patient expresses a stereotypical belief about Jews. There's an internal lurch that I feel when a non-Jew says that Jews are rich, or smart, or clannish, or greedy, or that Jewish men make good husbands. (Jewish patients may also express antisemitism, but I am less hypervigilant in that situation.) The first challenge for me is to notice my emotional response and then set it aside for later self-exploration. I remind myself that the fact that I hear a statement as antisemitic does not mean it actually is, in the present context. If the comment is tangential to the issue the patient is working on, I may say nothing about it. If the time is right for exploring the basis for her beliefs about Jews, I look for an intervention that will encourage her to do so but will not induce shame. This is particularly delicate when the patient hasn't thought about whether I'm Jewish and suddenly realizes, after the fact, that I may be.

As a therapist, I am frequently faced with deciding whether and how to come out as a Jew, with all of the concerns that accompany any act of coming out. My intent is to handle self-disclosure as a Jew the same way I handle other aspects of self-disclosure, such as my sexual orientation or whether I have children. I don't routinely identify myself as a Jew to new patients, nor do I mention it in my handout about myself and my practice; it feels intrusive to provide the information before it's requested. I do, however, give a direct answer to a direct question, as part of the process of informed consent to treatment.

I don't remember a non-Jewish patient ever asking at intake whether I'm Jewish; most Jewish patients don't ask at intake either. Jewish patients who do ask usually put it in a context of wanting a therapist who will understand their experience as a Jew. Of course, as this article and the other articles in this volume amply demonstrate, there are many different ways of being a Jew, and being Jewish has different meanings and different consequences for different people. There may be things it is easier for me to understand than it would be for a non-Jewish therapist, but that may not always be the case. There may even be times when we both assume that I do understand and it may be some time before we real-

ize that we're talking about two different things. Furthermore, even when our experience coincides, it will be important for the patient to put her experience into her own words and to connect with her own emotions about it. It's the telling and re-telling in the presence of an empathic other that opens up possibilities for change.

Some Jewish patients may seek out a Jewish therapist in order to ensure that the therapist isn't antisemitic, although I don't remember any of my patients ever stating that explicitly. It is worth noting here that Jewish therapists, myself included, may harbor some degree of conscious or unconscious anti-Semitism. There may also be a difference of opinion between therapist and patient about whether a particular belief or attitude is antisemitic.

If an orthodox Jewish patient asks if I'm Jewish, I will volunteer the information that I'm not religious, because I think that has direct and legitimate relevance to her decision whether or not to work with me. Similarly, if I know a patient was referred to me because I'm Jewish, I'll ask if it's important to her to work with someone who's religious, and we will decide together whether to immediately refer her to another therapist or explore the issue further.

Even if the question doesn't come up in the initial interview, I think most Jewish patients quickly recognize that I'm Jewish, whether from my last name, from how I talk, or from my familiarity with aspects of Jewish culture or religious practices. Non-Jewish patients may pick up the same cues. If our usual appointment time coincides with one of the High Holy Days, I will say explicitly that I need to reschedule because of the Jewish holiday. If the question is asked later in the therapy, I will also answer it concisely, and then explore what prompted them to ask and what it means to them that I am.

## Conclusion

I started writing the paper that evolved into this article in 2001. Not surprisingly, given the conceptualization of identity that I set forth at the beginning of this article, my relationship with my Jewishness has not remained static over the past decade. The writing process itself has involved summoning up memories, thoughts, and emotions going back fifty years and more, and trying to put them into words that will make sense to others. Hearing the narratives of other contributors has shaped my own account by

showing me where my experience has been similar to theirs and where it has been different. Reading published accounts of Jewish identity and experience (Goldberg & Krausz, 1993b; Siegel & Cole, 1991, 1997) has furthered the process.

My writing process has coincided with and interacted with my participation in an ongoing series of dialogs with diverse groups of people who share a commitment to expanding our own self-knowledge, listening deeply to one another, and building a network of enduring, heartfelt relationships to support sustainable leadership for social justice at the individual, the interpersonal, and the institutional level. These dialogs have taken place within Be Present, Inc., a national, nonprofit organization founded by Black women, then opened to women of all races, and then to men of all races.<sup>10</sup> I have had numerous opportunities to talk in an emotionally connected way, and in the presence of both Jews and non-Jews, about the role my Jewishness has played in my life. I have heard other Jews talk about their experience of being Jewish, and heard non-Jews talk about their experiences with and perceptions of Jews. Be Present has become my home community, a community in which my way of being a Jew is a valued contribution to the collective process that furthers our shared goals. It is in this setting, more often than in any other, that I participate in Jewish religious rituals. I am able to do so without feeling inauthentic because part of my contribution to the ritual is speaking about my relationship to it as a non-believing, non-practicing Jew.

In writing this article and in my work in Be Present I have been gathering up the labeled and unlabeled fragments of my identity as a Jew and giving them greater coherence, clarity, and specificity. I now have a more solid sense of my location in the vast, multidimensional array of ways of being a Jew. I have a better understanding of how I got here, why it makes sense that I am here rather than somewhere else, and why “here” can feel very different depending on what is going on around me. I am no longer perplexed by the question, “**How** am I Jewish?”

### Author's Note

I am grateful to Arlene Q. Allen, PhD, writing buddy extraordinaire, who listened patiently to seemingly endless revisions and asked numerous fruitful questions. Thank you for accompanying me on this journey. I am also grateful to Robert Holzman for his expertise in the use of Endnote, among other things to numerous to list here.

## References

- Bakan, D. (1958). *Sigmund Freud and the Jewish mystical tradition*. Princeton, N.J.: Van Nostrand.
- Barrett, S. (1998). Contextual identity: a model for therapy and social change. *Women & Therapy, 21*, 51-64.
- Bhavnani, K.-K., & Haraway, D. (1994). Shifting the subject: A conversation between Kum-Kum Bhavnani and Donna Haraway, 12 April 1993, Santa Cruz, California. *Feminism & Psychology, 4*, 19-39.
- Brodkin, K. (1998). *How Jews became white folks and what that says about race in America*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press.
- Channon, J. & Hudson, R. (1995). *The Penguin historical atlas of Russia*. London: Penguin Books.
- Evil eye. (2009, July 21). In *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*. Retrieved
- Goldberg, D. T., & Krausz, M. (1993a). Introduction: The culture of Identity. In D. T. Goldberg & M. Krausz (Eds.), *Jewish identity* (pp. 1-12). Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Goldberg, D. T., & Krausz, M. (1993b). *Jewish identity*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Jacobson, M. F. (1998). *Whiteness of a different color: European immigrants and the alchemy of race*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Kaye/Kantrowitz, M. (1992). *The issue is power: essays on women, Jews, violence, and resistance* (1st ed.). San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books.
- Polish-Soviet War. (2009, July 21). In *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*. Retrieved July 22, 2009 from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Polish-soviet\\_war](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Polish-soviet_war)
- Polish-Ukrainian War. (2009, July 15). In *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*. Retrieved July 22, 2009 from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Polish\\_Ukrainian\\_War](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Polish_Ukrainian_War)
- Prior, R., Wilson, T., & Keegan, J. (1999). *The First World War*. London: Cassell.
- Rathzel, N. (1994). Harmonious 'heimat' and disturbing 'auslander'. *Feminism & Psychology, 4*, 81-98.
- Root, M. P. P. (1992). Reconstructing the impact of trauma on personality. In L. S. Brown & M. Ballou (Eds.), *Personality and psychopathology: Feminist reappraisals* (pp. 229-265). New York: Guilford Press.
- Russian Civil War. (2009, July 19). In *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*. Retrieved July 22, 2009 from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian\\_Civil\\_War](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian_Civil_War)
- Schlosser, L. Z. (2006). Affirmative psychotherapy for American Jews. *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training, 43*, 424-435.
- Siegel, R. J., & Cole, E. (1991). *Jewish women in therapy: Seen but not heard*. New York: Harrington Park Press.
- Siegel, R. J., & Cole, E. (1997). *Celebrating the lives of Jewish women: Patterns in a feminist sampler*. New York: Harrington Park Press.
- Steinberg-Oren, S. (1997). Bris, Britah: Parents' first lessons in balancing gender, culture, tradition, and religion. In R. J. Siegel & E. Cole (Eds.), *Celebrating the lives of Jewish women: Patterns in a feminist sampler* (pp. 9-17). New York: Harrington Park Press.
- Ukrainian People's Republic. (2009, July 3). In *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*. Retrieved July 22, 2009 from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ukrainian\\_Peoples\\_Republic](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ukrainian_Peoples_Republic)

<sup>1</sup> A shtetl was a village inhabited entirely by Jews. It was a close-knit, culturally and religiously homogeneous community surrounded by non-Jews who were intensely antisemitic.

<sup>3</sup> The American Heritage Dictionary defines a *pogrom* as “an organized, often officially encouraged massacre or persecution of a minority group, especially one conducted against Jews.”

<sup>4</sup> Armies that were active in the region between 1914 and 1920 included the Imperial Russian Army, the German Army, the Polish Army, the Ukrainian Army, the Communist Red Army, various counter-revolutionary White Armies, and the Cossack Army. There were also deserters and demobilized soldiers from the various armies who were making their way home, as well as bands of brigands taking advantage of the breakdown of authority. (Channon & Hudson, 1995; Polish-Soviet War, 2009; Polish-Ukrainian War, 2009; Prior, Wilson, & Keegan, 1999; Russian Civil War, 2009; Ukrainian People's Republic, 2009)

<sup>5</sup> It wasn't until the Second Vatican Council in the early 1960's that the Catholic Church decreed that Jews were no longer to be held personally responsible for the Crucifixion.

<sup>6</sup> “**Evil eye** is a look that is believed by many cultures to be able to cause injury or bad luck on the person at whom it is directed. The term also refers to the power, superstitiously attributed to certain persons, of inflicting injury or bad luck by such a look.” (Evil eye, 2009)

<sup>7</sup> The Jewish culture described in this section is, more specifically, Eastern European Jewish culture, which is one among many Jewish cultures worldwide.

<sup>8</sup> Re-reading this, it occurs to me for the first time that my mother married the engineer her father had wanted to become. Interesting.

<sup>9</sup> The death of a family friend in a loft fire, along with 25 other victims, was something I couldn't reconcile with the existence of an omnipotent and benevolent God.

<sup>10</sup> My son's participation also ended. He later encountered neopaganism and became a Wiccan high priest. But that's another story.

<sup>11</sup> More information about Be Present, Inc. can be found at [www.bepresent.org](http://www.bepresent.org).