

Shaye J.D. Cohen
Harvard University

“Who is a Jew? Who Decides? Who Cares?”

“Who is a Jew?” is one of the most contentious issues for Jews in modern times. Is Jewishness a function of ethnicity, nationality, culture, religion, politics or a combination of these? Is Jewishness achieved or ascribed, the product of nurture or nature? All of these possibilities have been advocated in recent years by one group or another.

Behind the question of “Who is a Jew?” is the no less vexing question of the identity of the authority empowered to answer this question. Whoever gets to decide “Who is a Jew?” also gets to decide “What is Judaism?” This lecture adopts a broad view in surveying these questions and the history of these questions. Ancient analogues to modern questions will help enrich our discussion of contemporary realities.

Mara W. Cohen Ioannides
Missouri State University

“Creating a Community: Who can belong?”

The question of who is Jew reflects on who can have membership in a Jewish community. Every Jewish movement argues the question of membership, and this paper addresses the most liberal movement, Reform Judaism, and its response to membership. In an effort to be all-inclusive, Reform synagogues around the country have opened their doors to those who practice Judaism in different ways and to those who are interested in practicing Judaism. The influence of these non-Jews on the Jewish community has encouraged Jews to question the level at which non-Jews are allowed to participate in Judaism and congregation governance. Tied into this issue is the question of the act of conversion and how important it is in defining oneself as Jewish.

This paper examines the role that non-Jews are allowed to have in Reform congregations and how both Jews and non-Jews feel about this. SMALL TALK, a message board for small Reform communities in North America, has at numerous times hosted conversations on this topic. Here is a gathering of the feelings of these small communities who are regularly threatened with closure.

Netanel Fisher
University of Michigan

“Who is a Jew in Israel? Did Israel Succeed in Untying the Knot?”

This paper aims to present the variety of answers prevailing in Israel to the question, "Who is a Jew?" In Israel of the 21st century, a Jew can be legally identified as such by his passport, but this is not sufficient to allow him to get married as a Jew. Another may be identified as a Jew based on his conversion by the rabbinate, but other Orthodox establishments will not accept his Judaism. On the other hand, the Israeli court recently asserted that in some cases, registration in the Ministry of Interior as a Jew does not require affiliation with the Jewish religion.

By illuminating the maze of categorizations, my main argument will be that the establishment of a Jewish State has not supplied a universally accepted solution to the definition of what constitutes being a Jew. The dispute over this issue, whether Judaism is a religion, nationality, ethnicity, or social affiliation, has been transformed into a struggle in Israel between various groups who try to impose their diverse perceptions on the entire society. Therefore, at a time when there is a demand for recognition of Israel as a "Jewish State," Jewish society itself has not yet succeeded in reaching agreement on what "Jewish" means and on "Who is a Jew."

Rabbi Mark Goldfeder
Emory University School of Law

“Timeless Principles and Timely Applications; Re-examining the Definition of A Jew in the Modern World”

Citizenship and religion are usually formally independent of one another. Since Israeli citizenship is a right “inherent in being a Jew,” however, the conceptual question of how much *religious* “Jewishness” one needs in order to gain the *secular* benefits of citizenship has taken on new and important significance. The argument for a broader definition of Jewish status weighs the desire to foster a more pluralistic national perspective against finding a solution that will keep as many people as possible under one tent.

Some have called for different definitions depending on the context: one for sociological, one for ethnic, and one for religious Jewry. Meanwhile, from an Orthodox Jewish perspective, keeping personal status determinations strictly halakhic is vital because such determinations define and delimit proper marriage partners, giving the attendant legitimacy to children resulting from such unions. Any doubts or confusion in people’s unequivocal halakhic Jewish status (likely to happen in the event of multiple Jewish definitions) could end up dividing the community into small endogamous groups.

This paper presents a pathway toward balancing practical ideals within a strong halakhic framework, focusing on conversion, as a way of widening the tent while answering the question of who, today, is a Jew.

Aaron J. Hahn Tapper
University of San Francisco

**“Will the 'Real' Jew Please Stand Up?
Karaites, Israelites, Kabbalists, Messianists, and the Politics of Identity”**

This presentation explores five case examples of Jewish "boundary communities," groups linked to the *normative* Jewish community that many express doubt as to their Jewishness: Karaites, Samaritans, African Hebrew Israelites (sometimes referred to as Black Hebrews), Kabbalah Centre devotees, and Messianic Jews. All five of these groups exist on the periphery of the current Jewish *mainstream*, albeit in different ways. Looking at the margins of a community offers insight into the center, how the group defines their dominant narrative. This exploration deepens our understanding of the meaning of Jewishness in the twenty-first century, including the seemingly porous nature of the Jewish community's boundaries. It also raises the question of whether or not there are any boundaries at all to being a Jew.

Joseph R. Hodes

Binghamton University (SUNY)

“The Bene Israel and the ‘Who is a Jew?’ Controversy in Israel”

My presentation focuses on the Bene Israel, a tiny Jewish population that according to its own tradition has lived in India for over 2,000 years. It is the largest of the three major Indian Jewish communities, the other two being the Cochin and Baghdadi Jews. The Bene Israel, numbering 20,000 at the height of their population in India, began to make aliyah in 1948, and by 1960, there were approximately 8,000 community members in Israel. Today, there are 75,000 Bene Israel in Israel and approximately 10,000 in India, living mostly in Mumbai. For centuries they lived in villages on the Konkan coast in the state of Maharashtra and self-identified as both Indian and Jewish.

In 1960, twelve years after Israel was born, Chief Sephardic Rabbi Nissim decided that the Bene Israel could not marry other Jews in Israel. He stipulated several reasons for this prohibition, which served to set the Bene Israel as a people apart. This set in motion a civil rights struggle between the Indian community and the State of Israel from 1960 to 1964, which had far-reaching implications. The highest political bodies in Israel and influential members of the international Jewish community became involved. The international media picked up the story, and at one point Egypt even offered the Bene Israel asylum from Israel. After a drawn-out struggle, and under pressure from both the government and the Israeli people, the rabbinate changed its stance and declared the Bene Israel acceptable for marriage. Their experience of being set apart in Israel, after never experiencing persecution in the Diaspora, represents a unique narrative of a Jewish community and raises important questions about Jewish identity, the State of Israel, and who is a Jew.

This presentation therefore discusses a chapter of Israeli history that has never been closely documented. Although most major works on Israeli history discuss

the “who is a Jew?” controversy, no one has ever written about the fallout of the controversy (in any detail). The reason that this has not been documented is that the man at the center of the struggle for religious equality and the leader of the Bene Israel community, Samson J. Samson, had negative experiences with reporters and academics during the struggle. Thus, he would not allow them access to his archives or experiences (despite many attempts by various leading academics over the decades—this is what a reviewer wrote when peer reviewing an article I submitted that included only one citation from Samson- “One citation suggests that the author has gained access to the personal archives of Samson Samson, an early leader of the Bene Israel in Israel, which earlier researchers have not been able to achieve. If this is the case, this rich trove of material should be mined further, especially for an understanding of the community’s early efforts at organization.”-). In 2008, however, Samson decided to grant access to his archives and experience, resulting for the first time in a detailed description of the events. This presentation will come from my forthcoming book, *From India to Israel: the Journey of a Jewish Community*.

Sarah Imhoff
Indiana University

“Traces of Race: Defining Jewishness in America”

As Jon Efron, Eric Goldstein, and others have demonstrated, many nineteenth century Jews used the language of “race” to describe their Jewishness. Since the Shoah, however, this language is no longer a socially acceptable way to conceive of Jewish identity, but the complex questions surrounding the definition of Jewishness have neither resolved nor dissipated.

“Traces of Race” analyzes the ways two contemporary American conversations about Jewishness recall aspects of racial discourse, even while they refuse the term “race.” First, it explores two types of genetic testing: testing for genes related to diseases such as Tay-Sachs, and testing men’s Y chromosomes for the Cohen Modal Haplotype, or “Cohen gene.” While the first seeks to be vigilant about genetic diseases and the second seeks to use scientific discourse to authorize identity claims, both reinforce links between physical bodies and Jewish identity.

Second, the paper turns to peripheral groups who make claims to Jewish identity. By analyzing the testimonies of Americans who identify as Jewish because of crypto-Jewish family roots and Hebrew Israelite groups who claim the Ten Lost Tribes as ancestors, it becomes clear that each of these groups uses biological and geographical discourse—both essential to the social construction of race—to claim Jewish identity.

Steven Leonard Jacobs
University of Alabama

“German-Jewish Identity: Problematic Then; Problematic Now”

Fact: The fastest growing Jewish community on the European continent is that of a now-reunited Germany. [Who could have imagined such a present reality either during the darkest days of the Shoah/Holocaust or its aftermath during the Cold War?] Fact: I am the child of a survivor-escapee Ralph (nee Rolf) Albert Jacobs (né Jacob, 1921-1981), one of only seven to survive from a large German-Jewish family of more than 150 murdered during the years 1939-1945. Fact: I am a dual citizen of both the United States and Germany, the result of a special program offered by the German government to former German-Jewish citizens and their children.

The question of German-Jewish identity has resulted since the end of the Second World War in a plethora of texts examining this question since German-Jewish philosopher and religiously committed Jew Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786) first attempted to bridge the divide between these two communities. This paper examines not only the theoretical frameworks of such understandings but the lives of individual Jews (Heinrich Heine, Hannah Arendt, et al.) as well as the cultural production of these and other Jews, primarily but not limited to the arts and literature. It is thus both an attempt to address the question of such a dual identity presently as well as to survey what has been previously written and thought. The relevant applicability of this question to, for example, the American Jewish community and its seemingly and apparently successful integration into the larger society speaks for itself, though trends then and trends now raise equally uncomfortable questions waiting to be explored.

Misha Klein
University of Oklahoma

“Kosher *Feijoada*, or Blending Contradictions into Identities”

Jews in Brazil construct their identities in relation to Brazilian national ideologies about race, using that framework to explain both their acceptance in Brazil as well as Jewish community organization and practices. This transnational community, which derives from over 60 countries of origin, uses Brazilian ideology to justify both their successful integration and the ways in which they blend influences from many points in the Jewish diaspora to create a distinctive, multicultural community (calling it “the Brazil Effect”).

Drawing on the popular idealization of Brazil as a “racial democracy” and employing associated racial and ethnic idioms, Brazilian Jews engage in practices that appear to contradict the precepts of Jewish practice, such as the consumption of the black bean stew known as *feijoada*, the national dish that is said to symbolize Brazil’s celebrated racial and cultural mixing. An analysis of the varied ways in which Brazilian Jews partake of the pork-based national dish, from consumption of traditional *feijoada* to the creation of alternative versions without pork, and even fully kosher versions, illuminates the ways Jews in Brazil manage the contradictions in their identities and celebrate their Brazilian identity by maneuvering around barriers to belonging and participation.

Naomi Leite
University of Nebraska – Lincoln

“Ancestral Souls and Jewish Genes: Alternative Models of Jewishness from Portugal’s Urban Marranos”

The historical figure of the Marrano is a familiar one in Jewish lore. The product of mass forced conversions in 12th- through 15th-century Spain and Portugal; the Marranos were those who tenaciously maintained what they could of Jewish rituals, at risk of death, while outwardly living as Catholics. Today, the Marranos are commemorated in fiction, in song, in alternative Passover hagaddahs, even in collectable jewelry.

While the image of the Marrano continues to fascinate and move Jews around the world, they are less united in their judgment of the Jewishness of the Marranos’ descendants—even when those descendants express an overwhelming sense of being Jewish themselves, in body, soul, or both. This paper explores the case of Portugal’s contemporary urban “Marranos,” as they call themselves, individuals who feel deeply that they are Jewish at an essential, even cellular level, and attribute this feeling to Inquisition-era Jewish ancestry. Thus they identify not as converts, but as born Jews who must “return.” Based on eighteen months of fieldwork in Portuguese Marrano organizations, I unpack the metaphors and logics through which they articulate their certainty that they are Jewish and explore the intersection of their reasoning with Portuguese and Hasidic models of ancestral and spiritual determinism.

Leonard Levin
Jewish Theological Seminary

“It’s All in the Memes”

Meme: Unit of cultural memory (on analogy of “gene”).

Definition: A Jew is a person with a critical mass of Jewish memes (Jewish knowledge, values, religious commitments, cultural memories), together with the marker: “This applies to me.”

In previous historical times, the biological and cultural criteria of Jewish identity nearly always coincided, so taking the biological criterion as primary usually sufficed. Being born Jewish led automatically to Jewish upbringing, namely, the transmission of cultural memory. Conversion may be viewed on this model as an infusion and adoption of Jewish religious-cultural memory. Religious practice itself served as a transmitter of cultural memory and identity, as an important paragraph in the Seder tells us.

The Talmud obliquely mentions a couple of cases where non-Jews slipped into the Jewish community by personal decision. The universal prevalence of the mikvah was used as an expedient to claim that these individuals were de facto converted without a formal court procedure. (*Yevamot* 45b, 47a)

Today, with the increase of mixed biological heritage, the old patrilineal/matrilineal markers are insufficient to predict where Jewish identity will take hold. In this paper, (see also <http://reblen.blogspot.com/2012/03/purification-of-all-jews-and.html>) I suggest how Talmudic precedent can be invoked to render ritual more malleable to reflect the new social reality.

Menachem Mor
University of Haifa, Israel

“Who Is A Samaritan?”

At the end of the Tractate Kutim, the anonymous editor of the tractate asked a question concerning the Samaritans: "When Shall we take them back?" From the patronizing tone of the question came the answer: "When they renounce mount Gerizim and confess Jerusalem and the resurrection of the dead. From this time forth he that robs a Samaritan shall be as he who robs an Israelite" (Chapter 2, Halaka, 8).

It is very clear that this anonymous editor considered the Samaritans as Jews who in the past had relinquished Judaism. The conditions that he set for their return to Judaism also reflected his view that the Samaritans were a sect that stems from Judaism. The dilemma of "who is a Samaritan?" was a major concern and was hotly disputed in ancient Jewish sources through the ages.

Surprisingly, the question "who is a Samaritan?" has emerged once again in modern times. In 1994 the question was raised before the Israeli Supreme court. The question arose as to the rights of the Samaritans in regard to part of the Israeli "Law of Return."

The legal issue was about the rights of the Samaritans from Nablus (=Shechem) who chose to "immigrate" to Israel and live as part of the Israeli society. Could these Samaritans be considered as Jews?

In the first part of my lecture I will concentrate on the question "Who is a Samaritan?" according to a variety of ancient sources: Biblical, Mishnaic, and Talmudic. The second part will be devoted to the hearing before the supreme court, in which I will try to survey what considerations derived from the ancient sources and how these influenced the Court's final decision.

Katarzyna Person

Center for Jewish History, New York City

“‘We didn’t even know they were Jewish’: Assimilated, Acculturated, and Baptized Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto, 1940-1943”

In my paper I will discuss the story of one very small, but also particular group among the political, cultural, and national identities that formed the population of the Warsaw ghetto—the assimilated, acculturated, and baptized Jews. Unwilling to integrate into the Jewish community, unable to merge with the Polish one, they formed a group of their own, remaining in a state of suspension, on the border of national and cultural identities. In 1940, with the closure of what was officially called the Jewish Residential Quarter in Warsaw, their identity was chosen for them.

When describing the assimilated and acculturated community of the Warsaw ghetto, I will show how diverse this group was and how their pre-war identity shaped their life choices and decisions in the ghetto as well as their relations with the rest of the ghetto inhabitants. I will look at the problems they faced when establishing themselves in the predominantly Yiddish-speaking environment, their involvement in the ghetto administration—the Judenrat and the Order Service—and their contribution to the cultural life of the ghetto. My paper finishes with a short discussion of the place of the interwar assimilated, acculturated, and baptized group in post-war Poland and in shaping the historiography of the Holocaust.

Naftali Rothenberg
The Van Leer Jerusalem Institute

“Conversion in Transition: Conceptual and Halakhic Changes in Israel”

“Who is A Jew?” public debate in Israel of the fifties has had constitutional ramifications but no influence on the situation of conversion applicants. Arguments in the newspapers and at the Knesset struggled with the legal definition of the law that allows automatic citizenship to every Jew in the entire world. At the same time the Rabbinical courts [*Batei Din*] converted to Judaism thousands of applicants in a process that took no more than a year.

The condition of the conversion applicants’ population in today’s Israel is entirely different. The process in rabbinical courts became 4 to 5 times longer than in the past, and many applicants are waiting an extended period of time, sometimes years, for authorization to begin with the process. All this has an effect on a large population in Israel.

In this paper I will introduce a general picture of the conversion status in contemporary Israel and a brief summery of the bureaucratic factors in the current crisis. Views of different streams in Israeli society like Ultra-Orthodox, Religious Zionists, traditional, and secular will be presented.

The main focus will be on the radical halakhic changes regarding conversion that took place in rabbinical courts. Halakhic transformations and differences between rabbinical courts that acted from the fifties to the seventies and rabbinical courts activity in the last 30 years generate a description of two entirely different systems. The essential understanding of this change is critical to the study of “who is a Jew?” in Israel of 2012.

Leonard Saxe
Brandeis University

“The Birthright Israel Generation: Being a Jewish Young Adult in Contemporary America”

Taglit-Birthright Israel engages large numbers of young adults with their Jewish identity, with their history, and with the people and land of Israel. Since its launch in 1999, more than 300,000 young adults (18-26 years old) have participated in Taglit’s educational tours of Israel (200,000 have been from North America). Birthright Israel trips are ten days in length, and participants visit sites relevant to ancient and modern Israel. A key element of the program is a *mifgash* [encounter] with a group of Israeli age-peers who participate for at least half of the ten-day trip. North American participants represent the diversity of American Jewry and include those with little or no prior exposure to Jewish education, those with day school backgrounds, those who emigrated from the Former Soviet Union, and those from families with only one Jewish parent. Birthright Israel receives twice the number of applicants than it can accommodate and uses a lottery-like process to select participants.

Since its inception, a program of research has been conducted with North American applicants and participants, both to describe the population and understand its impact. This work has yielded a portrait of the Jewish identity of contemporary young adults and an understanding of their relationship with Israel and the Jewish community. It has also allowed us to understand the impact of Jewish education and the trajectory of Jewish engagement of the current young adult generation. In contrast to claims made by some analysts about contemporary Jewish life that Jewishness is “melting away” and that American Jews are distancing themselves from the Jewish community and Israel, the present data suggest that there has been a resurgence of interest and engagement in Jewish life. At the heart of what it now means to be Jewish is a connection with Israel and being part of a social network of Jews in Israel and around the world.

Wesley K. Sutton
Lehman College/CUNY

“The Fallacy of Biological Judaism”

Throughout history, Jewish identity has been perceived as more than accepting the tenets and observing the traditions of Jewish religion. Whether drawn from paternal or maternal lines, parentage has historically been used to determine identity as a Jew.

Our recent ability to determine the sequence of DNA in our genomes has given us access to a vast repository of information about our biological heritage. In 1998 researchers claimed to have found a genetic motif exclusive to kohanim. Named the Cohen Modal Haplotype (CMH), later studies seemed to support this finding. The popularization of these findings has led individuals with no familial history of Judaism to claim Jewish identity. In 2009, the original researchers published a study rejecting their original CMH and substituting the “Expanded CMH.”

Here we examine the scientific validity of such claims, asking 1) Are there genetic motifs unique to Jews, or any subset of Jews (e.g., the CMH)? 2) Can DNA be used to distinguish Jews from other Middle Eastern populations? I will present the results of my doctoral research into the genetic history of Hispanics in New Mexico, some of whom, based on scientific misinformation, are claiming descent from crypto-Jews.