Who Is a Jew?

By MITCH SILVER

This article is the first of a series in which the Editorial Board proposes to deal with the central issues of secular Jewish life in the United States. The question posed by its title was first raised in the early books of the Bible and is still alive and well today, confounding many secular and religious Jews in both the United States and Israel — the two largest Jewish communities in the world today. Past experience indicates that this is a subject on which many readers will wish to express their comments, and we invite them to do so. — Ed. Bd.*]*

THE editors have invited me to initiate a discussion among JEWISH CURRENTS readers on some of the fundamental issues of secular Jewish life, and have suggested that a good place to start is with the question, "Who is a Jew?" The question, of course, is not a concern unique to Jewish secularism. Almost all subdivisions of the Jewish world have debated or pronounced on the issue. But it seems plausible to think that a secularist perspective might give the discussion a new and revealing shape.

"Who is a Jew" can perhaps be more precisely expressed as "What criteria must a person meet in order to be a Jew?" Upon some reflection, it struck me that the question was more interesting than any possible answer. Or, rather, what is interesting is the reasons for and circumstances of its asking. Who is asking this question? Why do they want to know? To what use will they put the answers?

There may be questions that have correct answers regardless of the social consequences of those answers. We may wish the answers were otherwise, but, as the saying goes, "the facts are the facts." I say that there may be such questions because a considerable school of contemporary philosophers (following an ancient strand in the Western philosophical tradition) denies that there are any "true" answers independent of their social usefulness. For this school, no questions have correct answers outside of any social context, and none are asked out of purely disinterested "scientific curiosity."

But we need not wade into such deep metaphysical waters. Even if we are firm in the common-sense belief that the answers to some questions are simply true or false based on the facts, "Who is a Jew?" is not one of those questions. No amount of research into the natural or social world will discover an objectively true answer. At best, such research will tell us how others have answered the question, or how they would be inclined to answer it. A different sort of inquiry is required to tell us how we *ought* to answer it.

I suggest that the initial proper response to the

(Continued on page 31)

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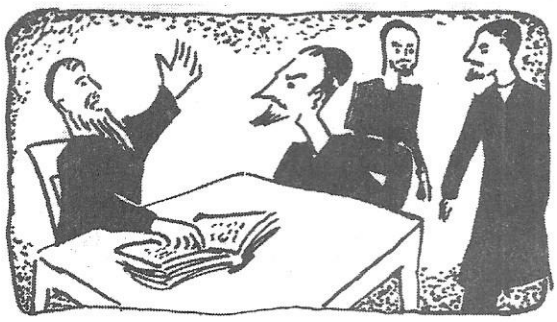
(Continued from back cover)

question "Who is a Jew?" is "Why do you ask?" We will better know how to answer once we determine what the questioner is trying to find out. Indeed, we will only understand what is meant by the question by delving into its motivation. When Hitler asks the question, we can take him as asking "Who are the genetically inferior, evil, parasitical subhumans, eternal enemies of the Germans, who deserve to be killed?" The right answer to that question is "There are no Jews," that is, that Hitler's "Jews" are a figment of the anti-Semitic imagination. There are no evil subhumans. No one deserves to be murdered and tortured. When Nazis came to the doors of courageous gentiles who were hiding Jews and asked if there were any Jews about, the gentiles did not lie when they denied knowledge of hidden Jews. The "Jews" of the Nazi mind were not there, only Jews whom the Nazis murdered in their stead.



There is an alternative interpretation of Hitler's "Who is a Jew?" We can take him as asking, albeit subconsciously, "Which group can serve as a foil for my paranoid fantasies of omnipotent enemies? Onto which group can I project my fear and insecurity of the modern world?" To this question we might answer that a number of groups might have served, but that given German history, traditional Christian Jew- hatred, the role of Jews in the creation of modernity and their role in 20th-century European society, we see why those of Jewish ancestry were Hitler's chosen ones.

More genteel, less murderous anti-Semites might be asking, "Who represents vulgar, foreign ways? With whom is association demeaning to my social status?" For such a questioner, I would certainly qualify as a Jew, but the Baron de Rothschild might not.

Unsurprisingly, the "Who is a Jew?" question is nowhere more contested than in Israel. There the question is asked by the state, and major issues of public policy turn on the answer. Sometimes the Israeli state is asking, "To whom shall we grant automatic immigration rights, fast-track naturalization, and first-class citizenship?" In other modes the Israeli state is asking, "Who can only be married by rabbis? Who must close their business on *shabbes*?"

If you believe that anyone persecuted or discriminated against because they are considered a Jew by others ought to have Israel as a refuge, you will answer parts of the first question posed by the Israeli state one way. If you believe that every state should treat all its citizens equally, you will respond differently to the first question. And if you believe that it is wrong to coerce observance of religious tradition, you should refuse to answer the second question altogether.

How shall we interpret the Hasid who asks the "Who is a Jew?" question? Perhaps something along the lines of "Who would a consensus of my peers accept as one of us because he (or she) meets the traditional criteria my group considers necessary and sufficient for membership in the Jewish people (i.e., one who was born of a Jewish mother or has undergone a conversion process sanctioned by three rabbis we Hasidim acknowledge)?"

For the more liberal religious Jewish establishments — Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist — the question boils down to "What are the implications of letting such and such persons become full-fledged members of our community? How will it affect our self-image and self-understanding? How will it affect how we are viewed by other Jewish groups? By gentiles? What will it mean for institutional strength and growth?" The correct answer for each group will depend on its constituency, circumstances, aspirations and values. I will not propose an answer. It is best left as a discussion for those groups' insiders.

Before turning to a secularist take on "Who is a Jew?" we should note that, like most definitions, it is a question of what to include and what to exclude. Because being a Jew is a matter of personal status, the question is a tool for including some people and excluding others. Sometimes this selection is made for purposes of conferring benefits, especially the benefit of fellowship. Sometimes it serves the pernicious ends of the anti-Semite, in the extreme case a "selection" in the most evil sense. But benignly or

malignantly motivated, "Who is a Jew?" is always a prelude to classifying and selecting people.

Why would a secularist ever want to do this? For what purposes do we need to distinguish Jews from non-Jews? Are we interested in denying membership to anyone who seeks to join our organizations and abide by our institutional norms? Should any family wishing to send their children to a *shule* (in full knowledge of the school's curriculum and mission) be turned away? I think not. Secular Jewish organizations should welcome all who are interested in being good members of our community. Because it is a community that celebrates Jewish holidays, sings Jewish songs, studies Jewish languages, learns Jewish history, tells Jewish stories, enacts Jewish traditions, debates Jewish politics and has an affinity for Jewish foods, it will naturally most appeal only to those who consider themselves, or want to be, Jews. But if someone who does not consider himself or herself a Jew is drawn to our community, let us say "*Boruch haboh*" (Blessed is the one who comes). We have no need to ask "Who is a Jew?" for we will do nothing with the answer.

BUT there is an analogous question that the secularist must ask, namely, "Am I a Jew?" Again, this is not a question of fact, although facts are relevant. The non-factual essence of the question lies in whether you choose to identify with the Jewish people, enjoy a common life with them, and share their fate. Different people will think that different facts are relevant to this essentially non-factual question. Some relevant facts might be the answers to such questions as, "Did my parents consider themselves Jewish? Did they wish me to consider myself Jewish? Will others see me as Jewish no matter what I do? Do I feel formed by the history and traditions of the Jewish people? Am I most at home in a Jewish cultural milieu? Are the values I find in Jewish tradition those I endorse? Those I wish to influence my children's character?" and "Will I lead a better life, or at least a life that feels more honest and in character, if I lead it as a Jew?" The answers to these questions cannot definitively tell you that you are, or ought to be, a Jew. But they will surely be factored into the decision to remain or become a Jew.

So, for the secularist, the answer to "Who is a Jew?" when it is asked of others, is easy — "A Jew is whoever sincerely claims to be a Jew." But when it is asked of oneself — "Are *you* a Jew?" — the question becomes trickier. Recognizing a sincere claim is easier than making one.

Part of the difficulty in deciding to include yourself among the Jews is a concern with what you would be excluding yourself from. No Jews, not even the most extreme ultra-Orthodox, view Jewish identity as so all-encompassing that it excludes all other social identities. The Satmar Hasidim allow that you can be Jewish and a man, Jewish and a shopkeeper, Jewish and a legal resident of Brooklyn. Reform Jews are happy to countenance Jewish and separate national identities — French and Jewish, German and Jewish, English and Jewish. I've noticed that various mainstream liberal religious Jews are even happy to couple Jewish identity with other religious traditions; Buddhist Jews have proliferated in recent years and are invited to speak at synagogues and temples throughout the land (Christian Jews, for understandable historical and social-psychological reasons, have had a more difficult time getting their dual identity accepted by other Jews.)

Secularists, having a close association with universalist social and political values, and free from any concerns that divine fiats need to be considered, are at liberty, more than most Jews, to combine Jewish identity with other social and philosophical identities. Some couplings will be harder than others. But I know of Jewish Seventh Day Adventists, so social reality can certainly transcend my poor powers of imagination. And the existence of Jewish fascists shows that Jewish identity can, for some people, be compatible with self-definitions I find repugnant.

In our Boston *shule* we have had graduates who have proudly proclaimed their identities as Jews and as Mexicans, Peruvians, African-Americans; the loyal offspring of Catholic fathers or Methodist mothers, and a host of other identities. As a community, we have kvelled at these proclamations of multiple identity. Of course, any given individual runs a risk of trying to be so many things that they fail to be anything well. Still, although commitment to many competing identities may make it difficult to be a good Jew fully immersed in Jewish life, for secular Jews no other set of identities precludes Jewish self-identification. One hates to appropriate U.S. Army advertising slogans, but there is an appeal in being all that you can be. If you can be in solidarity with the long, heroic, glorious, tragic and ongoing story of the Jewish people, and simultaneously maintain other identities important to you, it can make for a very rich life. ■