

WHAT ARE THE JEWS?

"Are the Jews an ancestral group?"

That question was put to the JCRC last week by the California Fair Employment Practices Commission. It could bear on a case where it is discovered that a Jew, who is discriminated against, does not attend synagogue and does not consider himself "religious."

After all, the "protected groups" are designated in the civil rights laws. It is illegal to discriminate against you because of your religion or nationality (ancestral group). Suppose you are "non-religious," although identifying as a Jew? Can you then be classified as part of a religious group? If not, then you have to qualify as part of an ancestral group.

We are back to the problem of classifying the Jew in a way that will fit the conventions of the society around us. The problem is deeper than that for the future of the Jew.

The 15 thousand Bay Area Jewish families which receive the *Bulletin* were asked, in a large random sample, whether they perceived the Jewish group as religious, ethnic, nationality, historic or cultural. They were allowed to choose more than one category. Almost all, over 96 per cent, agreed that the Jews were a religious group. But almost 9 out of 10 also agreed that the Jews were an historic group. Over 8 out of 10 agreed that the Jews are a cultural group; and almost 8 out of 10 agreed that the Jews are a nationality group. Only 4 out of 10 agreed that Jews are a cultural group.

Most of the Jews chose at least 4 out of the 5 categories as valid descriptions, further emphasizing the difficulty of classifying Jews in conventional terms, many of which overlap. However, when these Jews were forced to choose the single category they thought "the most important and critical definition of Jewish identity," 45 per cent chose "religious group;" 20 per cent chose "a historic people;" 17 per cent chose "ethnic group;" 13 per cent chose Cultural group," and 5 per cent chose "nationality."

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Many days could be spent discussing the implications of these responses. But the quickest sense can be made of it all, by lumping 4 of those categories into one. The U.S. Senate, for legislative purposes, once defined an ethnic group as any group whose members share a common history, culture or national origin. After all, it is because the Jews are an "historic people" that they have a common major culture (in which there are indeed sub-cultures); and it is because they are an "historic people" that they have a prevailing pattern of ancestral (or nationality) origins.

The latter fact makes it easy to give an answer to the question posed by the California Fair Employment Practices Commission. However, the needs of Jewish continuity require more complex attention. If "historic people" is one big category, subsuming not only common experience, but culture and ancestral origins -- including that artificial term, "ethnicity," -- then how does it relate to the other big category, "religious group?"

One distilled answer is that any given individual can consider himself to be *either* a historic Jew *or* a religious Jew, or both. There is, after all, some tradition of "secular Jews" who identify through what they call "Jewish culture," but disavow religious affiliation or belief. Or sometimes the avowedly non-religious are not even very "cultural," but identify as "historical Jews" only through a more abstract sense of "sharing a common fate." Israel creates a new dimension, wherein some avowedly non-religious Jews identify not only through culture and shared fate, but through a specific geographical sense of nationhood.

Whereas there are "historical Jews" who claim not to be religious, the reverse is not true. Religious Jews always conceive of themselves as part of an historic people, because that is the nature of the Jewish religion, which has been expressed through the history of the Jews. Of course, if "religion" is not just to be a euphemism for "history," then it must entail a specific belief in and engagement with the God of Israel.

And the ultimate question is not whether any given individual can legitimately consider himself a Jew on an historical or an ethnic basis alone. The ultimate question is whether the Jews can endure as an historical people if they are not, in some substantial part, a religious people. There is just no reason to believe that they can so endure, or that Jewish history and Jewish religion can be torn apart artificially, without both eventually disappearing. That, of course, is *the* problem of the Jews and modernity.

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