

The Jews of Kingston

A Comparative Study of Organized and Non-Affiliated Jews

(A Preliminary Report)*†

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Résumé

Seulement 50% environ des Juifs vivant à Kingston et, d'après des statistiques, dans la plupart des centres urbains au Canada, était officiellement affilié à des institutions religieuses juives existantes. Cependant, très peu de chercheurs, s'il en fut, ont systématiquement documenté ce que sont les différences de positions intra-groupe et inter-groupe actuellement, des Juifs "affiliés" et des Juifs "non-affiliés" en regard à des sujets tels que la religion, l'identité, la survie culturelle du Judiasme et l'appui envers l'Etat d'Israel.

Ceci, à une échelle limitée, est l'essentiel de mon oeuvre. Le document suivant est un rapport préliminaire de certaines de mes découvertes à ce jour.

A l'origine, la recherche visait à faire l'esquisse du profil sociologique de Beth Israel, la Communauté Juive Orthodoxe de Kingston.

Toutefois, peu de temps après le début de la recherche, deux, facteurs devinrent importants à l'élargissement de son étendue:

1. La découverte, par 15 familles, de Iyr-Ha-Melech, une petite congrégation réformiste qui accrut la complexité de la vie juive à Kingston;
2. La découverte, grâce à Statistiques Canada (recensement de 1971), à l'effet que près de la moitié de la population juive ne pouvait pas être décomptée par le biais de l'affiliation à une synagogue.

La première étape, c'est-à-dire le profil sociologique de Beth-Israel fut néan-

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† Documentation for this paper is available through the Editor

moins brossée, tout comme à l'origine, comme une unité distincte et fut prête pour fin de publication en 1978.

L'étude de la congrégation Iyr-Ha-Melech et la recherche des Juifs manquant de Kingston fut entreprise par après.

Only about 50 per cent of Jews living in Kingston and, it is estimated, in most Canadian urban centres, affiliate formally with existing Jewish religious institutions.¹ Yet, very few researchers, if any, have so far systematically documented what are the present day intra- and inter-group attitudinal differences of "affiliated" and "non-affiliated" Jews with respect to subjects such as religion *per se*, identity, cultural survival of Judaism and support for the State of Israel.²

This, on a limited scale, is the thrust of my work. The following paper is a preliminary report of some of my findings to date.

Originally, the research aimed at drawing a sociological profile of Beth Israel, the Orthodox Jewish community of Kingston.

Shortly after the start of the research, however, two factors became influential for the broadening of its scope:

1. The founding, by 15 families, of Iyr-Ha-Melech, a small Reform Congregation, which increased the complexity of Jewish life in Kingston;
2. The discovery, thanks to Statistics Canada Census Track 1971, that nearly half of the enumerated Jewish population could not be accounted for through synagogue affiliation.

The first step, i.e. the sociological profile of Beth Israel, was nevertheless handled, as originally intended, as a separate unit and was ready for publication by 1978. The study of Congregation Iyr-Ha-Melech and the search for the missing Jews of Kingston proceeded thereafter.

The following are some preliminary findings concerning these three constituencies of Jews, some of their demographic characteristics, as well as their attitudes towards some specific matters of Jewish concern.

Beth Israel

To be located in Kingston is to benefit from the advantages which come with a small big-town. The city with its surroundings is the site of an unusually large number of service institutions for its size (approximately 60,000

inhabitants in the city, or 100,000 including the immediate surroundings). Among these institutions are: the military, five federal and provincial prisons, three major hospitals and the university. Not all have had a direct impact on Beth Israel. Very rarely did Beth Israel include a transient member connected with the military. Never, to my knowledge, was any member employed by the penal system. However, the proportion of physicians and academics, connected with Queen's University, grew steadily from the 1960's onwards. Within a period of approximately fifteen years, the composition of Beth Israel Congregation thus changed into a bimodal pattern. On the one hand, there were the old-timers, i.e. the merchants, who settled in Kingston prior to 1960; on the other hand, there were the newcomers, the professionals and academics, who came to Kingston after 1960, mainly attracted by the expanding university. Indeed there were no newcomer merchants and only four old-timer professionals at the time of the 1976-77 survey. We shall return to this point later on.

Very briefly, the first known Jews in Kingston were two Germans, Abraham Nordheimer [1846] and Simon Obendorffer [1848], who came from Bavaria because of a slump in trade, and special taxes and restrictions which led to a wave of emigration starting in 1836. For some time, Nordheimer was the music master of the Governor General, Sir Charles Bagot. Eventually, he left for Toronto and founded the Nordheimer Piano Company. Obendorffer started a cigar factory in Kingston. In time, he became the first president of the Kingston Jewish Congregation.

The vast majority of Beth Israel's 192 members, studied in 1976, are from East and Central Europe by descent. By birth, 65% are Canadian, 77% are of North American origin, and only 14.3% of the membership actually immigrated from Europe. As can be seen, in terms of geographical origin, the membership is strongly homogeneous. Not so homogeneous, as mentioned earlier, is the division of the membership into newcomers, the professionals/academics, and the old-timers, the merchants. Making room for the former was bound to result in some displacement; some shifting of power was unavoidable.

It is not surprising, therefore, that, in the course of this research, we found some differences in attitudes, sometimes reflecting the resentment generated by the need to integrate — as it were, overnight — an "invasion" of academics.

For instance, the membership's attitude towards education revealed some

interesting ambivalences among the old-timer merchants: 83% of this group felt that “education” helps to solve complex problems, but over half, 54.5% thought that “too many were getting too high an education.” At the same time, there was no difference of opinion between the old-timers and the newcomers when it came to their expectations for their children. 98.5% of the combined group were hoping for a university education for their boys and 97% favoured it for their girls.

Comments made by members of the business community, during in-depth interviews, are enlightening about their feelings regarding the academics, who have increasingly imposed their own and different perspective. At times, this new way is perceived as being out of touch with the realities of life and lacking in business acumen.

“I think what’s happening is that the shul . . . is run by the Board made up mainly of professionals who are not businessmen. They are doing things idealistically and we are always in the red.”

As for the education of their own children, the old-timers were hoping that they would possess both learning and wealth.

“. . . I would have thought that what would have happened [is that] my sons would have had a good education . . . and would have been in business. But . . . it was a never-ending business of going to school it seemed . . . X, he is 28, hasn’t earned a great sum of money even on his summer holiday, sort of thing. When I was in business for four years, I was making more money than my father was making.”

Education, in short, must not be carried too far if it is not to become dysfunctional. Alas, some of the offsprings became what they were playing at, mainly doctors and lawyers.

As has already been seen, there is some disagreement among the two groups as to how the congregation should be run.

About the informal and autocratic ways of the old-timers, one of the academics commented:

“. . . X took it upon himself, many years ago, to look after Committee Y . . . He did that by putting his own money into certain developments without asking permission . . . far be it from me to detract from the important things that he did . . . (but) certainly from the standpoint of simply running the Committee, X had no business taking upon himself to operate . . . as if it was his private domain.”

In short, with the arrival of the new breed of professionals, more formalized and less paternalistic procedures were introduced. At the same time, the above illustrates well the sense of profound identification the old-timers had with their congregation.

Differences notwithstanding, members of Beth Israel, the Orthodox Congregation, are overwhelmingly "Conservative" by their own definition as well as by their life-style. A nostalgic attachment to orthodoxy, as detected by Kalen.³ among Conservative affiliates of Toronto, is also evident here. The renewed support for an Orthodox synagogue, following the foundation of Iyr-Ha-Melech, is frequently perceived as a bulwark against assimilation. It is hoped that orthodoxy, as a "higher religious model", will induce the children to stay within Judaism. Indeed, a commitment to socialize the children into a strong Judaic tradition is equally shared by the two components of the congregation.

Asked how important it was to her that her children should remain in the Jewish faith, the wife of a businessman replied:

"... intellectually, I have reason to suspect that it's not that important. I have knowledge and a certain feeling, in an intellectual way, that it isn't. And yet, emotionally, by my heart and by everything else, I would say it is very, very important that they remain in the Jewish faith."

Remarkably similar feelings were expressed by a professional.

"... If you look at it coldly and calculatingly and unemotionally, there is no reason to me why that shouldn't happen [that the children intermarry]. And yet, if you look at it emotionally, it's a betrayal..."

It is interesting to note that more than twice as many respondents of childbearing age than those aged 61 and over declared that intermarriage was intolerable. The older members preferred statements such as "regrettable" or "sometimes unavoidable".

Next to the shared feeling of the necessity to socialize the young into the Jewish tradition is the shared unquestioning support for and identification with the State of Israel. In fact, these two areas of consensus constitute the main bonds between the members of Beth Israel, transcending age as well as time of arrival in Kingston.

Representative of these feelings is the emotional appeal made during a Hadassah meeting by one congregant, who expressed her thoughts about Jews critical of the State of Israel:

"... It is extremely disconcerting that so many Jews in the diaspora are to-day speaking out against Israel. How strange. Must we always try to pacify disinterested and unconcerned Gentiles. Are they going to look after us? ... In taking care of ourselves, a positive attitude is always best. So it goes with Israel, financial support won't help if we are destructive by expressing negative opinions..."

In summary, historical events were the factors which determined the bimodal structure of Beth Israel Congregation. A commitment to the cultural

survival of Judaism and the survival of the State of Israel are the main bonds and integrative forces of the community.

For the second part of this research, these elements were used as indicators of closeness or remoteness from current Jewish concerns in the study of Iyr-Ha-Melech and of the non-affiliated Jews of Kingston.

Iyr-Ha-Melech

The small membership of Iyr-Ha-Melech does not allow for any generalization which could be deemed relevant for Reform Judaism. The Congregation is considered here only as a distinct part of the Jewish community of Kingston.

In 1979, 17 families were known to belong to the synagogue. Of 16 of these families, 28 individuals were interviewed with at least one member from every family present. The following are some salient characteristics of the group:

Half of the interviewed families were intermarried.

All but one couple were 40 years old or younger.

All, but the older couple, which had formerly belong to Beth Israel, settled in Kingston after 1960.

One third of the respondents came from the United States.

Half the Jewish members define themselves as agnostics; a few as atheists.

The group is homogeneous in its level of education: 23 members have university degrees, 3 are college graduates, 13 are instructors at Queen's University, 5 others are students.

All members have positive feelings towards cultural Judaism. In most cases, socialization of the children is the reason given for joining the Reform Synagogue. One member, who calls himself a non-believer, gave the following, rather typical reasons for joining:

"... I would like to give them [the children] some consciousness of just what it means to be Jewish. Consciousness of the fact that they are Jewish and some idea of the hardships that has entailed."

"I suppose I want to hedge my bets as far as their moral development is concerned. I am not quite sure what the balance is between religious doctrine, which I am not too worried about; Zionism, which I am somewhat worried about; and religious ethics and morality, which I would like them to have."

Why Jewish ethics, given the fact that the respondent is not worried about Jewish doctrine?

“Well, I don’t really care whether they are religious or not. I would rather have them skeptical about religion. But I would rather have them skeptical Jews than skeptical something else.”

As for Israel, all gave verbal support for the survival of the State; 11 considered it their duty to come to its rescue in times of need. For half the members, however, support of the survival of the State of Israel did not preclude the right to criticize it. Only a minority of the members was known to support it financially.

In summary, it can be said that Iyr-Ha-Melech plays a vital role in the cultural survival of Judaism for those members who are religious skeptics and/or would have difficulties in an orthodox synagogue because of their intermarriage status.

The Non-Affiliated Jews

To find the missing Jews, which could not be accounted for through affiliation with either one of the two synagogues, I resorted to a method known as “snow-balling” (asking non-affiliated Jews for the names of others). In this way, I assembled a list of approximately 80 names. So far, 39 of the families thus listed have been approached and have been sent a questionnaire, which 34 returned completed. This represents a return rate of 87%, the highest of the three groups under study. By comparison, questionnaire returns for the two congregations were 40% for Beth Israel and 83% for the small Reform Congregation Iry-Ha-Melech. The fact is worth noting, for it reflects the enthusiasm with which the vast majority of the non-affiliated Jews greeted and co-operated with the research.

Some characteristics of the 39 families or 78 individuals of the Non-Affiliated Group contacted so far are:

- there are at least 29 intermarriages;
- 64 individuals have university degrees;
- 27 families include at least one academic; 52 persons originated in North America, with 32 being born in Canada and 20 coming from the U.S.A.

The remaining population of non-affiliated Jews immigrated from 3 continents and a great variety of countries: i.e. in Europe, from England, Holland, Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland and Sweden; in Africa, both South Africa and Morocco were represented. Individuals from South America

came from Argentina and Brazil. Finally, there was one Israeli.

Academics of Queen's University did not, by preference, associate with other Jewish academics. Among colleagues within the same discipline, being Jewish did not appear to play a role in predetermining friendships and/or other types of relationships. In short, an informal network of Jewish academics did not appear to exist.

As one might expect, skepticism about religion per se, not Judaism alone, was widespread. However, there were some notable exceptions. In its extreme form, non-affiliated skepticism was pointed enough to label it as hostile. Religion is often perceived as a devious force and as offering wrong solutions to human problems:

"I don't like religion because it separates people . . . Religion is often a way of avoiding responsibility . . . [it] gets people thinking in terms, which are not conducive to solving problems."

OR

"I have feelings about religion. In general, they are negative . . . Not very specifically about any religion, but religion in general. It may do certain things for people . . . [but] I think there are better alternatives. I would think that a social structure that would provide for the needs of a population as a whole, both in an economic sense and also in a social sense, would certainly help to do away with mythology . . . it [religion] leads to social inaction as opposed to social action."

On the other hand, non-affiliation was not necessarily correlated with negative feelings towards religion.

"While I consider "religion" i.e. the belief in a god-centered universe and ultimate purpose of things an indispensable ingredient of my personal life, I feel far less certain if "religion" is meant to imply the observation of denominational ties."

"Aside from the fact that I could only feel "at home" in an ecumenical type of religious service, I particularly reject the customary linkage of religion and nationalism [Israel as a central concern of modern Judaism]; the narrow and exclusive concern of Jewish culture based, in large part, on traditions, I sincerely respect . . ."

But while the respondent expresses discomfort with the linkage of religion and nationalism, there is no doubt as to where he stands with respect to the State of Israel:

"As to Israel: Regardless of outdated questions (Zionism vs. assimilation etc.) [it is] a fact and decisive factor of Jewish life to be reckoned with and consequently supported."

Perhaps most revealing of all are comments by individuals most hostile to religion and most critical of the politics of the State of Israel. For instance:

"I'm ambivalent . . . Don't have strong sentiments as some Jews have, including non-religious Jews. I get quite angry at certain actions of the Government of Israel . . . At the

same time I am not as hostile to Israel as I would be, given my political background, if I had not been brought up as a Jew . . . I guess I am more reasonable when it comes to the Middle East than I am about other countries . . . because the affect makes me examine my political convictions . . . It is easy to forget that there are human beings involved in political struggles; it is not so easy to do that in this case.”

In summary, it seems fair to say that, based on my research to date, the vast majority of the non-affiliated group has a strongly critical view of Israel. But this is tempered by emotional ties. Those interviewed often expressed understanding of Israeli reactions but believed that other political solutions were preferable.

Nor was nostalgia for a ritual religious past altogether absent. It was possible, so I found, to be an intermarried non-affiliated atheist and have one's boys circumcized by a mohel. Above all, a significant number of non-affiliated individuals expressed mild to strong interest in some form of secular Jewish education. Asked to rate from 0 to 10 the question:

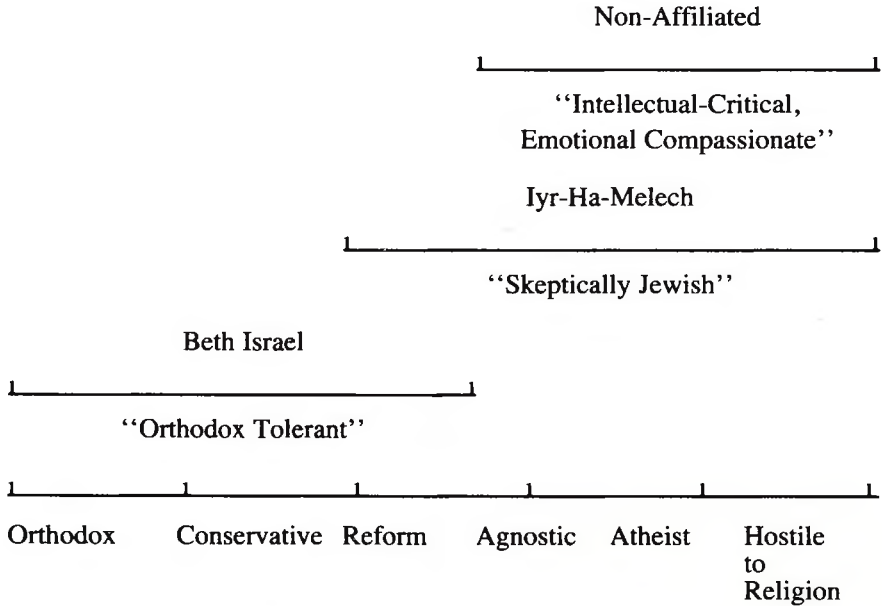
“If a secular Jewish education, based on Jewish culture and history, were available, would you like your children to receive this education?”

29% answered strongly positive, i.e. 7-10, while another 23.5% showed at least some mild interest, i.e. ratings from 3-6.

Conclusion

Ambivalence about one's religious attitudes appears to be a characteristic feature common to members of the three constituencies of Kingston's Jews. Graphically, the three groups could be represented as three partly overlapping bands forming a continuum going all the way from orthodoxy to hostility towards religion. On this continuum, Beth Israel, the oldest synagogue, which, for a long time served as an umbrella organization for all Jews desiring to affiliate formally, displays the widest span of all. It reaches from a sprinkling of orthodox Jews all the way to agnosticism. Representative of Beth Israel is the Jew who chooses orthodoxy not because of religious convictions but as a higher model, “the orthodox tolerant Jew”. The Iyr-Ha-Melech member is best characterized as a “religious skeptic, but skeptically Jewish”. As for the non-affiliated Jews, at least as far as the research has shown so far, “intellectual-critical, emotional-compassionate” is possibly the best characterization. Attitudes towards Israel are predominantly effective in all three groups, with rare exceptions claiming total detachment and disinterest. However, criticism of Israel is most prominent among the non-affiliated Jews and very much present among the Reform Synagogue members.

The Jews of Kingston Continuum of Religious Attitudes



Beth Israel remains the centre of greatest Jewish activity religiously, in its tangible support of the State of Israel as well as in cultural and charitable undertakings.⁴ All three groups are vastly overrepresented in higher education. However, the exceedingly high rate for non-affiliated Jews, both in level of education and academics, has to be considered cautiously. It is important to remember here that the profile of the non-affiliated group may well change when data for the total known population will be analyzed. Nevertheless, previous research⁵ about religiosity indicates that irreligiosity increases with level of education. Also, it must be acknowledged that academics of the non-affiliated constituency are possibly more visible than other occupations. A special effort to find these is underway.

One further comment about the high overrepresentation of Jews in academia seems in order. As a whole, Jews are overrepresented at least sevenfold at Queen's University in relation to their percentage of the total Canadian population.

Most of the data covering non-affiliated Jews and collected to date remains to be analyzed and more needs to be gathered. This may well change some of the findings, it certainly will provide further information on more aspects of the life and attitudes of the non-affiliated. One point stands out so far: the vast majority of all individuals contacted, affiliated or not, has positive feelings towards Judaism.

NOTES

1. 1971 Census of Canada publications: 92-723, 92-724.
1961 Census of Canada publications: 92-545, 92-546.
2. For instance, E. Kallen in *Spanning Generations, A Study in Jewish Identity*, Don Mills, Ontario, Longman, Canada, 1977, p. 64 states: "Although there is little "hard data" on the estimated 50% of Toronto Jews who do not belong to synagogues (demographic report) or the 16% of "non-religious" Jews (Richmond), observers of Jewish life and behaviour in contemporary, urban North America seem to agree that many of the unaffiliated and allegedly non-religious Jews are essentially similar to the Conservative and Reform Jews in their current expressions of Jewish identity." See also Rosenberg, *The Jewish Community in Canada*, Toronto, McClelland and Steward, 1970, and M. Sklar, *America's Jews*, New York, Random House, 1971, p.125.
3. *ibid* p. 72
4. The following are some of the activities connected with Beth Israel:
 1. Synagogue — religious
 2. Women's Auxiliary
 3. Hebrew School including Kindergarten
 4. Adult education
 5. Youth group
 6. Archives committee
5. For instance Rodney Stark, Columbia University 1957 found that irreligiosity increased with the degree of exposure to scholarly perspectives.

The Jews of Kingston Probable Composition

