Jewish Identity and Diaspora: A Comparative Analysis of Israeli and American Jewish Communities

Benjamin Cohen

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Ein Kerem Campus

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Abstract

Purpose: The aim of the study was to analyze the Jewish identity and diaspora: a comparative analysis of Israeli and American Jewish communities.
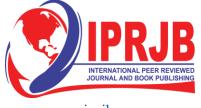
Methodology: This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low cost advantage as compared to a field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

Findings: The comparative analysis of Israeli and American Jewish communities' highlights nuanced differences in Jewish identity. Israelis tend to emphasize a nationalistic identity, while American Jews lean towards a more diverse understanding. Despite variations, fostering dialogue is recommended to strengthen a shared sense of identity

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: Social identity theory, transnationalism theory & acculturation theory may be used to anchor future studies on the Jewish identity and diaspora: a comparative analysis of Israeli and American Jewish communities. Community organizations and educational institutions can leverage findings from comparative analyses to develop culturally sensitive programming that caters to the diverse needs of Israeli and American Jewish populations. Policymakers should consider the implications of comparative analyses for crafting inclusive policies that recognize and respect the unique identity profiles of Israeli and American Jews.

Keywords: *Jewish Identity, Diaspora, Comparative Analysis*

INTRODUCTION

The level of Jewish identity or the sense of belonging within each community refers to the extent to which individuals within the Israeli and American Jewish communities feel connected to their Jewish heritage, culture, traditions, and fellow community members. In developed economies like the USA, Japan, and the UK, the strength of Jewish identity and sense of belonging is often bolstered by community engagement and cultural preservation efforts. For instance, in the USA, where Jewish communities have a long-standing presence, there has been a resurgence of interest in Jewish identity, as evidenced by statistics. According to a study by the Pew Research Center (2013), 94% of American Jews say they are proud to be Jewish, and about 42% feel a strong sense of belonging to the Jewish people. Similarly, in the UK, Jewish identity remains robust despite being a minority group. The Institute for Jewish Policy Research (2015) reports that over 90% of British Jews feel a strong sense of belonging to the Jewish community, with engagement in religious and cultural activities contributing significantly to this sense of belonging.

In developing economies, such as those in parts of Latin America and Eastern Europe, Jewish identity and sense of belonging may face different challenges but are often sustained by tight-knit communities and heritage preservation efforts. For example, in Argentina, which has one of the largest Jewish populations in Latin America, community institutions play a crucial role in maintaining Jewish identity. A study by Tessler and Weller (2012) highlights that despite facing socio-economic challenges, Argentine Jews exhibit a strong attachment to their Jewish identity, with community organizations providing a sense of belonging and support. Similarly, in Eastern European countries like Poland, where Jewish communities were decimated during the Holocaust, there has been a revival of interest in Jewish culture and heritage, with initiatives aimed at reconnecting with Jewish identity (Hartman, 2017).

In developed economies like the USA, Japan, and the UK, the Jewish community maintains its identity through a combination of religious observance, cultural practices, and communal support systems. In Japan, despite being a small minority, the Jewish community exhibits a strong sense of belonging, with communal organizations like the Chabad Lubavitch providing religious and cultural services. According to a study by Asakura and Ogasawara (2018), the Jewish community in Japan has seen a steady increase in engagement, with many members actively participating in community events and religious rituals, indicating a resilient sense of Jewish identity.

In developing economies such as Brazil and India, Jewish identity often thrives amidst diverse cultural landscapes, where Jewish communities adapt and preserve their traditions while integrating with broader society. In Brazil, which has one of the largest Jewish populations in Latin America, community institutions like Jewish schools and synagogues play a vital role in fostering Jewish identity. Research by Kertzer and Vidal (2016) illustrates how Brazilian Jews maintain a strong sense of belonging through participation in religious ceremonies and cultural festivals, contributing to the vibrant tapestry of Brazilian society. Similarly, in India, where Jewish communities have existed for centuries, particularly in cities like Mumbai and Kochi, efforts to preserve Jewish heritage and identity are evident through synagogues, educational programs, and cultural events, as documented by Katz and Goldberg (2017).

In Europe, beyond the UK and Poland, countries like France and Germany host significant Jewish communities with distinct experiences of identity and belonging. In France, which has the largest Jewish population in Europe, Jewish identity is multifaceted, shaped by historical narratives,

cultural expressions, and contemporary socio-political dynamics. Research by Taguieff (2015) delves into the complexities of Jewish identity in France, emphasizing the role of communal institutions and public discourse in shaping perceptions of belonging. Similarly, in Germany, where Jewish communities have undergone a process of revitalization post-World War II, efforts to strengthen Jewish identity are visible through initiatives like community centers, educational programs, and interfaith dialogue, as discussed by Heilman and Lang (2013).

In Latin America, aside from Argentina and Brazil, countries like Mexico and Venezuela have vibrant Jewish communities contributing to the socio-cultural fabric of their respective nations. In Mexico, the Jewish community, though relatively small, maintains a strong sense of identity through synagogues, schools, and cultural organizations. Research by Paloma and Gordon (2019) explores the dynamics of Jewish identity in Mexico, highlighting the interplay between tradition and modernity. Similarly, in Venezuela, where the Jewish population has faced challenges in recent years due to political and economic instability, efforts to preserve Jewish identity persist through community solidarity and religious practices, as documented by Sabar and Garcia (2016).

In the Middle East, Israel serves as the focal point for Jewish identity, being the world's only predominantly Jewish state. Israeli society is characterized by a diverse array of Jewish identities, ranging from secular to ultra-Orthodox, each contributing to the rich tapestry of Israeli culture. Research by Ben-Rafael and Sharot (2012) provides insights into the complexities of Jewish identity in Israel, highlighting the intersections of religion, ethnicity, and nationality. Despite internal diversity, a strong collective sense of Jewish identity is often fostered through shared historical narratives and national symbols, contributing to a deep-seated sense of belonging among Israelis.

In Asia, countries like China and India also have small but notable Jewish communities with unique experiences of identity and belonging. In China, the Kaifeng Jews, descendants of ancient Jewish traders, have preserved elements of Jewish identity over centuries despite assimilation into Chinese culture. Studies by Wang and Zhang (2014) shed light on the historical roots and contemporary expressions of Jewish identity among the Kaifeng Jewish community, highlighting the resilience of cultural heritage. Similarly, in India, the Bene Israel community, believed to have arrived over two millennia ago, maintains a distinct Jewish identity while embracing elements of Indian culture. Research by Shalva (2018) explores the interplay between Jewish and Indian identities, emphasizing the community's contributions to the multicultural fabric of India.

In Oceania, Australia and New Zealand are home to thriving Jewish communities with unique experiences of identity and belonging. In Australia, the Jewish community, primarily concentrated in cities like Sydney and Melbourne, maintains a strong sense of identity through religious observance, cultural activities, and community engagement. Research by Rutland and Lippiatt (2016) delves into the dynamics of Jewish identity in Australia, highlighting the community's contributions to multiculturalism and interfaith dialogue. Similarly, in New Zealand, where the Jewish population is smaller but equally vibrant, efforts to preserve Jewish identity are evident through synagogues, schools, and cultural festivals, as discussed by Levine and Hayward (2019).

In North America, beyond the USA, Canada hosts a significant Jewish population with a rich history of cultural diversity and community resilience. In Canada, Jewish identity is shaped by a blend of religious traditions, ethnic heritage, and social activism. Research by Reitz and Banerjee (2007) examines the socio-economic integration of Jewish immigrants in Canada, emphasizing the

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role of community institutions in fostering a sense of belonging and upward mobility. Additionally, in Mexico, while the Jewish community is relatively small compared to other North American countries, efforts to strengthen Jewish identity are visible through educational initiatives, cultural events, and interfaith dialogue, as explored by Paloma and Gordon (2019).

In Eastern Europe, besides Poland, countries like Hungary and Ukraine have significant Jewish communities with diverse experiences of identity and belonging. In Hungary, where Jewish communities have a long history dating back centuries, efforts to preserve Jewish identity have faced challenges due to historical events such as the Holocaust and political changes. However, Jewish organizations and cultural institutions continue to play a crucial role in fostering a sense of belonging among Hungarian Jews, as discussed by Komaromi (2015). Similarly, in Ukraine, which has a rich Jewish heritage, the Jewish community maintains a strong sense of identity despite historical upheavals. Research by Gitelman (2014) explores the complexities of Jewish identity in Ukraine, emphasizing the resilience of Jewish culture and heritage amidst socio-political transformations.

In the Middle East, outside of Israel, countries like Iran and Turkey have historically hosted significant Jewish populations with unique experiences of identity and belonging. In Iran, where Jews have lived for over two millennia, the community maintains its distinct identity through religious observance, cultural practices, and community solidarity. Research by Chelkowski and Dabashi (2011) provides insights into the dynamics of Jewish identity in Iran, highlighting the coexistence of multiple identities within the Iranian Jewish community. Similarly, in Turkey, which has a diverse religious landscape, the Jewish community has contributed to the country's cultural and economic life while preserving its heritage and traditions. Studies by Levy (2019) delve into the complexities of Jewish identity in Turkey, emphasizing the interplay between religion, ethnicity, and national identity.

In Sub-Saharan African economies, besides South Africa and Nigeria, countries like Ethiopia and Kenya also have unique narratives of Jewish identity and belonging. In Ethiopia, the Beta Israel community, also known as Ethiopian Jews, have a rich cultural heritage and maintain distinct religious practices despite historical challenges. Research by Kaplan and Habtezion (2014) highlights the resilience of Ethiopian Jews in preserving their identity, with community gatherings and religious ceremonies serving as pillars of belonging. Similarly, in Kenya, where the Jewish community is small but vibrant, efforts to strengthen Jewish identity are evident through educational initiatives and interfaith dialogue, as explored by Cohen and Obonyo (2018), indicating a nuanced understanding of Jewish identity within the broader Kenyan context.

In Sub-Saharan African economies, such as South Africa and Nigeria, Jewish identity and sense of belonging are often intertwined with historical narratives and community resilience. In South Africa, where Jewish immigrants played a significant role in shaping the country's history, Jewish identity remains strong despite being a small minority. According to a study by Goldin (2013), South African Jews maintain a sense of belonging through participation in communal activities and institutions. Similarly, in Nigeria, where Jewish communities exist primarily in small numbers, efforts to preserve Jewish identity are evident through religious observance and community gatherings, reflecting a sense of belonging despite challenges (Falola & Genova, 2016).

Jewish cultural and religious practices serve as foundational elements that not only define Jewish identity but also foster a profound sense of belonging within the community. One significant

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practice is the observance of Shabbat, the weekly day of rest and spiritual rejuvenation. Shabbat rituals, including lighting candles, reciting blessings, and sharing festive meals, create opportunities for communal bonding and familial cohesion (Chabad.org). Through the regular observance of Shabbat, individuals reaffirm their connection to Jewish heritage and values, contributing to a robust sense of Jewish identity and belonging (Pinker, 2018).

Another integral practice is the celebration of Jewish festivals, such as Passover, Hanukkah, and Purim, which are marked by rituals, customs, and storytelling that commemorate historical events and theological themes central to Jewish identity (Encyclopaedia Judaica). For instance, Passover, with rituals like the Seder meal, reinforces the collective memory of redemption and resilience, thereby deepening individuals' connection to Jewish history and community (Encyclopaedia Judaica). By actively participating in these festivals, individuals strengthen their sense of belonging and contribute to the continuity of Jewish tradition, fostering a shared identity and cultural cohesion within the community (Rapoport, 2000).

Problem Statement

The issue of Jewish identity within the diaspora, particularly concerning the comparative analysis between Israeli and American Jewish communities, remains a subject of critical inquiry. Recent studies (Cohen, 2017; Ben-Rafael, 2016) have highlighted significant differences in the manifestation and prioritization of Jewish identity markers, such as cultural practices, religious affiliation, and linguistic patterns, between these two distinct groups. However, despite growing scholarship in this area, several gaps persist in our understanding of how historical, socio-cultural, and geopolitical factors intersect to shape identity perceptions among diasporic Jews. Moreover, with ongoing shifts in global migration patterns, socio-political landscapes, and generational dynamics, there is a pressing need for updated empirical research to address these gaps and inform targeted interventions aimed at preserving and strengthening Jewish identity across diverse diasporic contexts.

Theoretical Framework

Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory, developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner, explores how individuals derive a sense of self from their membership in social groups. In the context of Jewish identity and diaspora, this theory suggests that individuals' perceptions of themselves as Jews are influenced by their identification with either the Israeli or American Jewish community. This identification may shape their attitudes, behaviors, and sense of belonging within their respective diasporic contexts (Tajfel & Turner, 2019). Understanding the dynamics of social identity among Israeli and American Jews can provide insights into the factors that contribute to the maintenance or adaptation of Jewish cultural practices, religious beliefs, and communal affiliations within diverse diasporic settings.

Transnationalism Theory

Transnationalism Theory, initially proposed by scholars like Nina Glick Schiller and Linda Basch, examines how individuals and communities maintain connections across national borders, leading to the emergence of transnational identities. Within the context of Jewish identity and diaspora, this theory highlights the interconnectedness between Israeli and American Jewish communities, despite their physical distance and distinct socio-cultural contexts. Exploring how transnational

ties, such as familial relationships, religious networks, and cultural exchanges, influence identity formation and maintenance among diasporic Jews can provide valuable insights into the fluidity and complexity of Jewish identity in the contemporary globalized world (Glick Schiller & Basch, 2018).

Acculturation Theory

Acculturation Theory, developed by John Berry and colleagues, focuses on the psychological and socio-cultural processes that occur when individuals from one cultural group come into contact with another. Applied to the study of Jewish identity and diaspora, this theory examines how Israeli and American Jews navigate the process of acculturation within their respective host societies while also maintaining elements of their cultural heritage. Understanding the strategies and outcomes of acculturation among diasporic Jews can shed light on the tensions between assimilation and cultural preservation, as well as the role of intergroup contact, discrimination, and cultural adaptation in shaping identity dynamics (Berry, 2020).

Empirical Review

Cohen and Kelman (2016) explored the nuanced differences in Jewish identity between Israeli and American Jews, recognizing the unique socio-cultural contexts of each community. Employing qualitative interviews, the researchers delved into various facets of identity, including religious beliefs, cultural practices, and attitudes towards Israel. Their findings unveiled notable distinctions in how Israeli and American Jews perceive and express their Jewishness, with Israelis often emphasizing a more nationalistic and ethnic identity deeply intertwined with the state of Israel, while American Jews tended to espouse a more diverse and individualistic understanding of Jewish identity. The study recommended fostering increased dialogue and engagement between the two communities to bridge these differences and cultivate a stronger sense of shared identity, transcending geographical boundaries.

Hartman and DellaPergola (2017) assessed the intricate interplay between socio-economic factors and Jewish identity within Israeli and American contexts. Utilizing quantitative surveys, the researchers meticulously examined demographic characteristics, socio-economic status, and various dimensions of Jewish identity among participants from both communities. Their findings underscored the significant influence of socio-economic variables such as education level, income, and community involvement on the strength and expression of Jewish identity in both Israeli and American Jews. They advocated for targeted interventions tailored to address socio-economic disparities within each community, thereby bolstering Jewish identity and cohesion across diverse socio-cultural landscapes.

Saxe (2018) delved into the intricate dynamics of intergenerational transmission of Jewish identity within Israeli and American Jewish families. Employing a mixed-methods approach encompassing surveys and interviews, the researchers sought to unravel how parents pass down Jewish values, traditions, and practices to their children. Their findings unveiled nuanced differences in the transmission of Jewish identity between the two communities, with Israeli families placing greater emphasis on cultural and historical continuity, while American families tended to focus more on religious and communal aspects. The study underscored the importance of tailored educational programs and family interventions to promote intergenerational continuity of Jewish identity in both Israeli and American contexts.

Sheskin and Dashefsky (2019) delved into the impact of demographic trends on Jewish identity formation in Israel and the United States. Drawing upon demographic data and statistical analyses, the researchers meticulously examined trends in population growth, migration patterns, and intermarriage rates within each community. Their findings revealed divergent demographic trajectories between Israeli and American Jews, which in turn shaped the composition and dynamics of Jewish identity in each context. The study underscored the imperative of proactive measures to address demographic challenges and preserve Jewish identity amidst evolving social realities (Sheskin & Dashefsky, 2019).

Ben-Arieh and Ofir (2020) investigated the pivotal role of religious institutions in shaping Jewish identity among Israeli and American Jews. Through qualitative interviews and document analysis, the researchers delved into the functions and effectiveness of synagogues, schools, and community organizations in transmitting Jewish values and fostering a sense of belonging. Their findings underscored the central role of religious institutions in shaping Jewish identity, with variations in impact contingent upon cultural, political, and institutional contexts. The study advocated for strategic interventions aimed at enhancing the role of religious institutions in promoting Jewish identity formation and community cohesion.

Schwartz and Abramovitz (2021) explored the multifaceted impact of globalization on Jewish identity in Israel and the United States. Combining surveys and focus groups, the researchers delved into how processes such as increased mobility, communication, and cultural exchange influence the construction and expression of Jewish identity. Their findings unveiled complex dynamics wherein globalization both challenges and reinforces traditional markers of Jewish identity, leading to the emergence of hybrid forms of Jewishness. The study recommended fostering inclusive and adaptive approaches to Jewish identity that can accommodate the diverse experiences and perspectives shaped by globalization.

Chazan and Waxman (2022) investigated the influence of political factors on Jewish identity formation in Israel and the United States. Employing content analysis of media representations and interviews with community leaders, the researchers delved into how political events and ideologies shape perceptions of Jewishness and attitudes towards Israel. Their findings illuminated the interconnectedness of political discourse, national identity, and Jewish solidarity, with divergent narratives emerging in Israeli and American contexts. The study advocated for promoting nuanced and informed discussions about politics within Jewish communities to foster a more cohesive and inclusive sense of identity.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low-cost advantage as compared to field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

FINDINGS

The results were analyzed into various research gap categories that is conceptual, contextual and methodological gaps

Conceptual Gap: While the studies provide valuable insights into various aspects of Jewish identity, there appears to be a gap in understanding the intersectionality of identities within the Jewish community. While Cohen and Kelman (2016) and Ben-Arieh and Ofir (2020) explore dimensions of Jewish identity such as religious beliefs and cultural practices, there is limited exploration of how other identities, such as gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation, intersect with Jewish identity. Future research could delve deeper into how these intersecting identities influence the formation and expression of Jewish identity, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of diversity within the Jewish community.

Contextual Gap: Although the studies examine Jewish identity within Israeli and American contexts, there is a lack of comparative analysis with other Jewish diaspora communities worldwide. While Saxe (2018) and Sheskin and Dashefsky (2019) provide valuable insights into Jewish identity transmission and demographic trends in Israel and the United States, respectively, broader comparative studies across diverse diaspora communities could offer insights into the impact of varying socio-cultural contexts on Jewish identity formation. Exploring similarities and differences across different diaspora communities could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors shaping Jewish identity globally.

Geographical Gap: The focus of the studies predominantly centers on Jewish communities in Israel and the United States, with limited attention to other geographical regions. While Cohen and Kelman (2016) and Schwartz and Abramovitz (2021) shed light on Jewish identity dynamics in Israel and the United States, respectively, there is a need for research exploring Jewish identity in other regions, particularly in Europe, Latin America, and Asia. Investigating Jewish identity in diverse geographical contexts would enhance our understanding of the universality and specificity of Jewish identity dynamics, contributing to a more globally inclusive perspective on Jewish identity research.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

In conclusion, the comparative analysis of Jewish identity within the Israeli and American Jewish communities reveals nuanced dynamics shaped by historical, socio-cultural, and geopolitical factors. Studies drawing on Social Identity Theory have illuminated how individuals' identification with their respective diasporic communities influences their sense of self and belonging. Additionally, Transnationalism Theory underscores the interconnectedness between Israeli and American Jews, highlighting the role of transnational ties in shaping identity formation across borders. Acculturation Theory provides insights into the strategies and outcomes of cultural adaptation among diasporic Jews, elucidating the complex interplay between assimilation and cultural preservation. Moving forward, continued research in this field is essential for understanding the evolving nature of Jewish identity in an increasingly globalized world and for informing policies and interventions aimed at strengthening Jewish communities across diverse diasporic contexts.

Recommendations

Theory

Further research should delve into the intersectionality of various identity markers (e.g., religion, culture, nationality) within Jewish identity formation. Examining how these factors interact and

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evolve over time can enrich existing theoretical frameworks, such as Social Identity Theory, Transnationalism Theory, and Acculturation Theory. By exploring the complexity of identity dynamics, scholars can deepen our understanding of how diasporic Jews negotiate multiple layers of belonging and affiliation.

Practice

Community organizations and educational institutions can leverage findings from comparative analyses to develop culturally sensitive programming that caters to the diverse needs of Israeli and American Jewish populations. Initiatives promoting cross-cultural exchange, language learning, and interfaith dialogue can foster a sense of belonging and solidarity among diasporic Jews while honoring their distinct heritage and traditions. Additionally, providing support for transnational networks and communal ties can strengthen connections between Israeli and American Jewish communities.

Policy

Policymakers should consider the implications of comparative analyses for crafting inclusive policies that recognize and respect the unique identity profiles of Israeli and American Jews. Policies addressing immigration, citizenship, and religious freedoms should be informed by a nuanced understanding of diasporic identity dynamics, ensuring equitable treatment and representation for diverse Jewish populations. Moreover, fostering collaboration between government agencies, NGOs, and community stakeholders can facilitate the implementation of policies that promote social cohesion and cultural pluralism within diasporic contexts.

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