Introduction

> One can say with confidence that there is no people that talks as much about itself and knows so little about itself as the Jews.... Yet...we find among Jews no serious interest in Jewish culture, no attention paid to their preservation and further development and not the slightest conscious striving for studying the national weltanschauung and national characteristics of the Jewish nation.[1]

When empires or states break up and territorial configurations and political jurisdictions change, people must adjust their formal citizenship, their political allegiances, and, very often, their cultures. They adapt to new circumstances with varying degrees of enthusiasm. Some welcome a break from the past, others cling to past loyalties, and still others merely go along with the new realities.

During the twentieth century, people in the former Russian Empire, East Central, and Southeastern Europe lived through frequent changes in their states and official cultures. For example, a resident of Lemberg in 1918 was a citizen of the Hapsburg or Austro-Hungarian Empire, but by 1920 had become a Polish citizen living in the same city, which was then called Lwow. Nineteen years later, he or she became a Soviet citizen living in Lvov, only to come under Nazi German occupation in 1941, return to Soviet jurisdiction in 1944, and become a citizen of independent Ukraine in 1991, in a city now called Lviv. Similarly, a person living in Austro-Hungarian Czernowitz in 1918 became a Romanian citizen in Cernauti, a Soviet citizen in Chernovtsy, a subject of the Nazis (1941), a Soviet citizen again, and a citizen of independent Ukraine, resident in Chernivtsi. People in Lithuania, Poland, Hungary, Romania,

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[1] S. Rappoport [An-sky], "Evreiskoe narodnoe tvorchestvo," *Perezhitoe* (St. Petersburg: Brokgauz-Efron, 1908), Vol. 1, 1. Gabriella Safran kindly alerted me to this opening statement by the famous ethnographer and dramatist.

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Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia (the latter two states created after World War I) had similar experiences.

The disintegration of the Soviet Union and other socialist states resulted in similar kinds of dislocations. Fifteen newly independent states emerged from the shards of the USSR, Czechoslovakia became two states, and Yugoslavia fractured into six warring states.

Like other citizens, Jews had to shift their political and cultural allegiances as states and regimes changed. However, although others continued to live in territories they could call their own, Jews remained an ethno-cultural minority everywhere. This status posed special challenges because most had some sort of Jewish identity that had to be reconciled with the shifting allegiances and identities brought about by political and cultural changes.[2]

The collapse of the USSR gave peoples a chance to redefine themselves as they wished. Before then, the state had prescribed what is a nation, who qualified for national status, and who would be relegated to such lower classifications as *natsional'nost'* (ethnic group), tribe, or clan. Soon after the Bolshevik seizure of power in 1917, the authorities decided that Jews were a "nationality" or ethnic group, ignoring the age-old religious character of the Jewish entity. In the 1930s and thereafter, the Soviets discouraged and made very difficult the acquisition and transmission of any kind of Jewish cultural, not to speak of religious, content. However, in the decade following the fall of the Soviet system – the 1990s – Jews, as well as all other peoples of the USSR, could redefine themselves, their religious commitments and civic or political attachments. Nearly two of every five Soviet Jews chose to leave their country, creating the largest Jewish immigration in Israel's history and the largest Jewish immigration to the United States in a century, and increasing the Jewish population of post-1945 Germany approximately tenfold. Those who remained could assert, deny, or remain indifferent to their "Jewishness," meaning a sense of belonging to an entity called the Jews and identification by others as belonging to it. Thus, the years between 1992 and the beginning of the twenty-first century were ones of dramatic opportunities and demographic, social, and psychological change. This book is a study of those changes, their long-term consequences, and what we can learn from the experiences of Jews in the two largest postcommunist states about ethnicity and ethnic identity more generally.

In recent decades, identity has been much discussed among social scientists and humanists. After all, who people think they are influences how they think and act, which in turn affects the thinking and behavior of others. Many categories can be used to answer the questions, "Who am I and who are you?" One can mention a name, a vocation, a geographical designation, or an

[2] Marsha Rozenblit, *Reconstructing a National Identity: The Jews of Habsburg Austria during World War I* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). See also Hillel Kieval, "Negotiating Czechoslovakia: The Challenges of Jewish Citizenship in a Multiethnic Nation-state," in Richard Cohen, Jonathan Frankel, and Stefani Hoffman, eds., *Insiders and Outsiders: Dilemmas of East European Jewry* (Oxford: Littman Library, 2010).

affiliation such as religion, race, ethnic group, club, or the like. Most people identify with many groups. The social scientist then asks which identity is most important to the person. The usual answer is that it depends on the circumstances.

In the Middle East, in the nineteenth and much of the twentieth centuries, the first answer given to the "who are you?" question might likely have been a religion – Muslim, Christian, Jew. In Europe it was just as likely to have been an ethnic group or nation – English, French, Russian. Many expected these two categories, religion and ethnicity, to fade in importance as modernization proceeded, because they assumed that industrialization, education, and urbanization would produce secularization and that class consciousness would replace ethnic or national affiliation. One would have expected these broad social changes to have occurred most rapidly and thoroughly in the Soviet Union, a state dedicated to industrial-style modernization, the eradication of religion and its replacement by "scientific" thinking, and the amalgamation of ethnic groups and nations into a human whole differentiated only by class – and that only temporarily.

Within Soviet society, the Jewish minority should have been in the forefront of these linear trends, according to Marxist thinkers, including Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, founder of the Soviet state. At the time of the Bolshevik Revolution, Jews were more urbanized than almost every other people of the collapsing Russian Empire; they also had higher rates of literacy and a strong socialist secular movement (the Bund), although the Jewish nationalist movement, Zionism, was quite powerful. Most Jews were still nominally religious – and Orthodox to boot – but there were clear signs of secularization. Secular Hebrew and Yiddish literatures had developed rapidly from the mid-nineteenth century on, and Jews belonged to political and cultural movements that were secular in intent or practice.

The Bolshevik Revolution accelerated these trends, putting the full force of a strong state behind them. For more than seven decades, from 1918 to 1992, Jews and others experienced state-directed economic and educational modernization, campaigns against religion, and a nominal commitment to "friendship of the peoples" – the elimination of prejudice and ethnic competition – as a prelude to a society without ethnic divisions and even ethnic groups. The Soviet experiment in social engineering that ended in 1991 yielded mixed results. It transformed the economy, which was overwhelmingly agricultural in 1917, into a mighty but flawed industrial one; spread literacy from about 20 percent of the population to just about all of it, but restricted access to reading materials; and achieved much in science, technology, and the arts, but lagged behind other countries. Income differentials were far lower than in capitalist societies, but the general standard of living was low. Only old people went to church, mosque, or synagogue, but fewer and fewer believed in Marxist-Leninist doctrine. People of different ethnic groups were marrying each other and seemed to identify above all as Soviet citizens, not as members of particular ethnic groups, but in the late 1980s ethnic riots broke out in Kazakhstan, the

Caucasus, and elsewhere, and in 1991 the USSR fractionated along ethnic fault lines.

By the 1980s the cracks in the façade of Soviet success had become obvious even to its most dedicated supporters. One of them, Mikhail Gorbachev, courageously allowed them to be exposed and tried to patch them up. What began as a reconstruction (perestroika) effort ended with the collapse of the entire structure, its foundations so deeply rotten that it could not stand firm as renovation proceeded.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, its successor states and societies had to decide how to deal with ethnicity. Should it be resuscitated and encouraged, repressed, or merely tolerated? What did the ex-Soviet nationalities (ethnic groups) want to do? Should states help, discourage, or ignore them? The breakup of the Soviet Union and the shattering of a common political ideology and system forced people to look for other bases of connection, protection, and solidarity. Religion is one obvious alternative. In times of crisis the family is another. If the ethnic group is viewed as an extension of the family, as another ring in the concentric circles of social connection surrounding an individual, then the ethnic group too should be an anchor or haven. One observer of a small ethnic group in the Caucasus remarked that the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the collapse of such values as "the Soviet people" and the collective (she did not mention socialism) made the family and the ethnic group all the more important as sources of stability and identity: "In unstable conditions, a person strives to identify with a group that defends him/her from the difficulties of the new economic times, and helps the person restore integrity and good order [*uporiadochenost'*]."[3]

This study of the reconstitution of post-Soviet Jews focuses on the group that seemed most likely to be postethnic and postreligious. It is based on interviews conducted with 6,664 Jews in Russia and Ukraine over the first post-Soviet decade, the 1990s, as part of the largest empirical study of Jews in the Former Soviet Union. Perestroika and glasnost [openness] made it possible for two Soviet researchers, Professor Vladimir Shapiro and Dr. Valeriy Chervyakov, to meet with me, an American academic, in 1989–90 and plan a study that could not have been carried out while the USSR existed. We were able to implement it several years later in the USSR's two largest European successor states, Russia and Ukraine. When we met in 1989 in Moscow at the founding congress of the Va'ad, the organization formed as an umbrella group for all the nascent Soviet Jewish organizations, we agreed to seize the opportunity to find out what Soviet Jews really thought about themselves. We had many questions. How did they conceive their Jewishness, and how did they come to their understandings of this ancient but elusive identity? What, if anything, were they prepared to do about their Jewishness? Would they be most influenced by Jews elsewhere or by other ethnic groups in their own country? It was far from

3   L. [iudmila] A. [lievna] Delova, *Mezhetnicheskaia sem'ia v polikul'turnom sotsiume* (Maikop: OAO "Poligraf-iug," 2009), 64.

clear whether Jews would be willing to talk to researchers about what had been a touchy, sometimes even dangerous, subject. Even if they were, how would we find them and construct a reasonably representative sample from which we could generalize? Would they give truthful answers or assume we represented a government – theirs or another – or an organization with its own agenda?

Using their experience in Soviet fieldwork and Shapiro's connections with Jewish cultural and academic activists, my colleagues devised a plan to do the research in eight cities, three in Russia and five in Ukraine, that encompass the diversity of the Jewish population of what had just become the *Former* Soviet Union. We hammered out a questionnaire, mostly in the kitchen of Valeriy and Irina Chervyakov in the Ostankino neighborhood in Moscow, pretested it, revised it, and went into the field in 1992/93. Appendix A describes our methods and sample.

We were pleasantly surprised that almost everyone we approached agreed to be interviewed and treated our interviewers warmly and respectfully. The interviewers, mostly middle-aged women with some Jewish background and middle-level education, were trained intensively by Shapiro and Chervyakov. In the Russian and Jewish traditions, the respondents often invited them to share cups of tea and other refreshments. Most interviews lasted about an hour and a half, but some went on for three hours or longer. Respondents took our questions seriously, pondered, and answered in what seemed to us an honest, thoughtful way.

Realizing that this might be a unique opportunity, we touched on every subject we thought relevant to our exploration of what it means to be Jewish. Because our respondents had rarely if ever been asked their opinions by market researchers or social scientists, and they had most certainly never been queried about Jewish matters, they did not suffer from interview fatigue. In fact, when, we routinely promised them anonymity, some were disgruntled because they wanted "the world to know" what they thought.

Because the interviews were anonymous, and also because so many had emigrated or passed away, when we returned to the field five years later in 1997/98, to see what changes had taken place, we were not able to interview the same people with whom we had spoken earlier. However, we constructed our sample in the same way and repeated most of the questions although we did add and drop some questions. We also decided to go beyond the quantitative data and conducted sixty-four extended conversations, eight in each city. Those who were chosen to participate in these interviews represented different types in the sample – men and women, young and old, people involved in Jewish activity and those who were not, and more and less educated. We did not try to structure our samples by "class" or income because by the 1990s, Soviet Jews were about 98 percent urban and at least half had some form of higher education. Moreover, income differentials were small and consumption styles in the USSR could vary only in a narrow range.

To our surprise, when we analyzed the data we found that gender explained almost none of the variation in our findings. There are clear differences among

respondents from Russia and those from Ukraine, although city of residence did not consistently account for them. The single most powerful explanatory variable is age. The various age groups display quite different outlooks and behaviors and for good historical reasons.

We did not rely on the surveys alone to make our analyses and draw our conclusions. Shapiro and Chervyakov had lived their whole lives in the Former Soviet Union (FSU) and brought a Jewish and a non-Jewish perspective and life experience to the project. I am an American Jew, who received an extensive Jewish education and has been studying Russian Jews for more than forty years. We have drawn on the Russian and Western literatures on ethnicity, politics, and sociology and placed our case in the broader context of collective ethnic identities and how they are affected by rapid social change.

What Did Not Happen and Why

In recent decades there has been a resurgence of religions and ethnic affirmation worldwide, including in the most developed countries. How should one explain the fact that the overwhelming majority of Americans claim to believe in God? If religion is passé, why do nearly half of Americans claim to attend religious services regularly,[4] especially when other parts of the Western world have become increasingly secularized? In 2004, a study of Britons found that one-third of the young people surveyed described themselves as agnostics or atheists and only 44 percent of Britons said they believed in God, in contrast to the 77 percent who asserted such belief in 1968. Fully 81 percent said that Britain was becoming more secular.[5] Few people in Scandinavia and other European countries claim to attend religious services regularly, and even in traditionally Catholic societies such as Italy and Spain, church doctrines are regularly flouted and people behave as they wish. If being Jewish means adhering to Judaism, the tribal religion of the Jews, what possible meaning could that have for presumably secularized Jews in a militantly atheist state, the USSR?

Ethnicity was also predicted to fade with time. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the heyday of nationalist ideologies and movements, nationalists argued that the nation was the most important social unit and individuals should subjugate themselves to it. Many thought or hoped that the emergence of nations from under imperial dominance would promote democracy by strengthening group and individual rights. At the same time, other theorists, policy makers, and ordinary people looked forward to the day when nations, ethnic groups, and religions would disappear. They saw nationalism as leading to violence and repression. Just when nationalism was all the rage, Karl Marx and others envisioned a world without nations. Indeed, the repression of ethnic and religious minorities by emergent national majorities and the militaristic

[4] See Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
[5] *The Star* (Johannesburg), December 28, 2004.

nationalism of the Axis powers in World War II demonstrated that nationalism was a two-edged sword.

In theory, the Soviet Union aimed for its own dissolution and the disappearance of nations, religions, and ethnicity. Dedicated to the implementation of the theories of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, who looked forward to classless societies and a world without nations, the early Bolsheviks envisioned a worldwide class revolution that would render nationalism irrelevant. Yet Lenin, ever the political pragmatist, realized that ethnicity would persist longer than most Marxists expected. He propounded a dialectical theory whereby nations, especially those that had been oppressed, would have to be liberated and allowed to develop their cultures as a prelude to their eventual decline and disappearance. Thus, the Soviet state encouraged the development of national consciousness, reformed and promoted national cultures, and created political boundaries based on ethnic criteria, all the while paying lip service to the goal of eventual mutual assimilation. At the same time, the USSR selectively repressed ethnic groups and denied them opportunities for cultural and political development that were given to others. At the end of its seventy-four-year run, the Soviet system's record was mixed: it had raised national consciousness to the extent that in 1991 several nations, which had not existed before the 1917 Revolution, became independent states (five Central Asian states and Moldova), and others seized the opportunity to act on pre-Soviet national urges and declared political independence (the Baltic states, Armenia, Georgia, and Ukraine).[6] Yet, under the Soviet system other peoples had lost their traditional homelands, the use of their national languages, and their particular religious character. Their national consciousness and national cultures had been weakened, in some cases to the point where they no longer constituted a distinct ethnic group (Karaites, some peoples of the Caucasus).

Some "nationalities" (in Soviet nomenclature, but more like the Western term "ethnic groups") had no territories in the USSR they could call their own, but had historical, cultural, and religious links to co-ethnics and co-religionists abroad: for instance, Jews, Poles, Koreans, Germans, and Greeks. Because they would not construct states of their own and were by the late twentieth century culturally distant from their co-ethnics, how would these groups fit into the new post-Soviet states? Some wanted to become part of these states, but others were indifferent to the prospect. This freedom to choose affords the external observer the opportunity to observe how ethnicity is reconstituted, by whom, and in what ways. Such observations can tell us much about the nature of ethnicity and the processes of rethinking ethnic affiliation and reconstituting ethnicity.

Jewishness: Ethnicity, Religion, Culture, or Community?

This study of ethnic and religious reconstruction among Jews in the Russian Federation and Ukraine examines the public, collective, and institutional

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[6] Belarusians, who never had a viable independent state, appeared to be divided between those who wanted to separate themselves from the Russians and those who felt no need to do so.

dimensions of the reconstitution of Jewishness, but focuses on the reformu-
lation of individuals' conceptions of what it means to be a Jew. We aim to
cast new light on the meanings of ethnicity in general and on Jewish ethnic-
ity in particular, as well as on the interaction between ethnic groups and the
historical, cultural, social, and political environments they inhabit.

Identity is a person's sense of self in relation to others. A conscious identity
places a person in a group that has a set of views of the world, values, beliefs,
and practices that set it apart from other groups. The group influences how
its members perceive the world and think and act in it. Yet if the group loses
its religion, culture, institutions, and other ethnic markers, how does this loss
affect its members? Ethnic groups are not immutable forces of nature – they
can be created and destroyed, emerge and disappear. In the past few centuries,
Ukrainians, Palestinians, and Bosnians, for example, have emerged as nations
from previously inchoate groups, whereas Sorbs, Transylvanian Germans, and
Karaites have nearly faded into the pages of history. Soviet Jews seemed des-
tined to be in the vanguard of the assimilated, as Lenin had remarked approv-
ingly. By the 1950s they had lost much of their cultural distinctiveness, and
many nominal Jews preferred to be classified as members of some other nation-
ality. Ironically it was the Soviet state's insistence on classifying all its citizens
by nationality, as well as people's perceptions that Jews were "different" and
not Russians or Ukrainians, that kept the Jews from assimilating.

What kind of Jewishness resulted from the simultaneous stripping away of
culture and religion and the state's insistence that Jews remain Jews? It is an
identity without much cultural content, a label as much imposed from outside
the group as it is the name of a group that interacts intensively. Nevertheless, a
sense of belonging to "the Jews" that most people find very hard to articulate
persists even in the absence of any concrete Jewish content. As one young
person expressed it,

> I knew we were Jews, and could not understand what it meant, because nobody
> could explain it to me. . . . We spoke Russian, ate the same food, wore the same
> clothes, dad was an officer – everything is the same. I only knew it was something
> different, not good. . . . It was a secret of my childhood . . . something mystical
> around them [Jews]. There are many of them, they are visible, they are in Moscow,
> they are in Leningrad, they are everywhere. They are humanitarians [humanists?],
> they are technicians, they are great scientists and they are illegal. . . . This was a
> secret and I had to guess it.[7]

Some residents of Russia and Ukraine who speak Russian, never visit a syn-
agogue or observe a Jewish ritual, know not one word in any Jewish language,
are married to non-Jews, and have never been to Israel and are not interested in
going there nevertheless "feel" they are Jewish. Why? Is it only because others

[7] "Informant 3" (a person refused permission to emigrate in the 1970s, now living in the United
States), quoted in Olesya Shayduk-Immerman, "Where Did the Soviet Jewish Movement Move:
Research Methodology," paper delivered at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study
of Nationalities, Columbia University, April 8–9, 2009.

insist that they are Jews or that they may have suffered because of their Jewish identity? Is the simple – and in most people's view – unfortunate accident of birth to a Jewish parent or parents sufficient to make them Jewish, however others may categorize them? Or does Jewishness, like other ethnicities, have staying power that cannot be accounted for easily by the categories of social analysis? Is attachment to ethnicity – be it positive or negative – not primarily formal and institutional but rather emotional or psychological, making it as difficult to describe in words as love or religious belief? Is a common historical experience sufficient to maintain a distinct identity, so that a group that saw as many as 55 percent of its members (2.7 million out of about 5 million) systematically murdered between 1941 and 1945 is likely to trust its members more than others?

That some Soviet citizens of different nationalities collaborated in the Nazi atrocities of the 1940s and that the Soviet government itself persecuted Jews after World War II may have been sufficient to foster a sense that even when Jews no longer share a faith, they have a common fate. As we shall see, most post-Soviet Jews to this day consider their Jewishness a burden and a disadvantage. Shared misery became for many the nexus of Jewishness. As one interviewee told us, to be Jewish was to "carry throughout your life a heavy burden of punishment for sins you never committed." Another used a Christian metaphor, "to bear your cross until your last breath." Little wonder that

> Jews were almost the main secret of the Soviet Union. Only sexual life was probably concealed more diligently. Both of these could exist only in the form of euphemisms. . . . Common sense and a sense of propriety pointed out when, where and with whom an intercourse or Jewish origin could be discussed.[8]

Over many centuries the meanings of being Jewish have changed, influenced by the environments inhabited by Jews. For hundreds of years the primary distinctive characteristic of Jews was their religion, Judaism – a tribal, not universal religion. Every person who practiced Judaism, whatever his or her race or residence, was considered a Jew by all Jews and non-Jews. Yet when the winds of nationalism and secularization swept over Jews in Europe and the Americas in the nineteenth century, some Jews shifted their defining characteristic from religion to ethnicity and nationhood. Zionists argued that, because Jews are a nation, like all other nations they should have a state of their own. Bundists[9] maintained that Jews were a diasporic people with a distinctive culture that could be wholly secular. They needed only cultural autonomy within other states, not a state of their own, to meet their ethnic needs, and their political

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[8] Piotr Vail and Alexandr Genis, "60-e: mir sovetskogo cheloveka," *Sobranie sochinenii*, tom 1 (Ekaterinburg: U-Faktoriya, 2004), 849 quoted (with slight changes) in Shayduk-Immerman, "Where Did the Soviet Jewish Movement Move," 8.

[9] The Jewish Labor Bund (General League of Jewish Workingmen in Lithuania, Poland, and Russia), was founded in 1897. It stood for social democracy, national-cultural autonomy, and the promotion of secular Yiddish culture.

and economic needs would be met by the socialist revolution in which they would participate with other peoples.

Bundists and Zionists did not deny that Judaism could be a core characteristic of Jewishness for individuals and communities, but they asserted that nonbelievers were also Jews because they were members of an ethnic group or nation. Religious Jews had maintained since biblical times that Jews were a distinctive nation – "*hen am levadad yishkon*" [they are a people who dwell apart, observes the non-Jewish prophet Bil'am; Numbers 23:9]. Religious and secular Jews, Zionists and Bundists, Hebraists and Yiddishists, Polish and Persian Jews recognized each other as members of the same group. The definition of Jewishness had not been completely uprooted and replaced, but some were now emphasizing different historic elements of the notion "Jew."

The experience of European and American Jews in the last 250 years does not, as some would have it, show that "Jewish" is an ever-changing category and has no "essential" meaning. I do not accept the premise that all categories are infinitely flexible and changeable, nor do I believe they are immutable. Rather, they are flexible within boundaries that define who is in the group and who is not. In this book I explore what those boundaries have been historically, how they changed in the Soviet Union, and how they have been rethought and redrawn not only in contemporary Russia and Ukraine but also among Jews everywhere, including those in Israel, the Jewish state.

All conceptions of Jews are hybrids of historic elements and environmental influences. For example, American Jews and Greek Jews speak different languages, listen to different Jewish music, and cook Jewish foods differently, but they have in common core, universally shared elements that define being a Jew: sacred texts and language, many historic memories, holidays, some kind of attachment to Israel, and many values. These may change, but slowly. We return to the definitive characteristics of Jewishness in Chapter 2. Secondary characteristics, such as language or dress, are more amenable to change – perhaps it is their very changeability that defines them as secondary. As we see later, post-Soviet Jews define core and secondary characteristics in various and individual ways, because, unlike other Jewish populations, they had no widely accepted authorities, texts, or communal structures to guide them, and thus no communal consensus.[10] How this anomalous situation came about is summarized in Chapter 3.

Another irony of the Soviet Jewish experience should be pointed out. In the 1920s–30s many young Russian and Ukrainian Jews abandoned their Jewish identities, just when the Soviet government was making unprecedented efforts to promote and disseminate Jewish culture, albeit a de-Judaized one that abjured Hebrew and Zionism; it was a secular, Soviet, and socialist Jewish

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[10] Of course, there are serious boundary disputes among Jews elsewhere. For example, whereas the Reform movement recognizes as Jewish a person who has only a Jewish father, the other movements do not. Yet, the differences are clear, and there are institutions that articulate and defend each position.