Jewish Identity

- Various Interpretations

Name: Sibo Liu
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Professor: Yore Kedem
Class: GLBL298
Abstract

Israel society is quite diverse and comprised of groups of people with various backgrounds, which develop its cultures, unique spirits and identity. The Jewish people is the majority in Israel, but a minority in the Middle East. Studying Jewish identity is significant to reveal Israeli cultures and understand the complex issues among multiple conflicts. As an international student from the Korean minority in China, I will introduce my family background first so that you may have a better understanding about my viewpoints. Then I will demonstrate Jewish identity from five different perspectives – changeability, identity development, imperfect culture, learning attitude, and history accumulation. This paper throughout includes my interviews, local observations, and real personal experience. At the end of each section, I will also describe the meaningful things I learned from the Jewish identity and reflection of this two-week’s short journey.
Throughout the history of humankind, the Jews have one of the oldest and richest civilizations. In addition, the Jewish people are the first society to introduce monotheism and believe that God is the only creator of the world. When I first came to the US, I participated in a student organization – Deeper Roots in Christ. In this organization, I met many Korean Americans and began to study Bible. There are so many stories about Jews in the Bible. It made me become more and more interested in the Jewish history and the relationship between the Jewish people and their God.

**Family Background**

My family is quite diverse about religious belief and faith. I am Chinese, but my heritage is pure Korean. My grandparents, both my mother’s and my father’s sides, moved from the North Korea to the Northern China because of the Korean War. Both my parents were born in China. My mother believes in Buddhism. She does not refuse meat products, but she recommends every family member to have as little as possible. My father became a party member after he began his university education. Thus, he basically has no major religious belief. But if you say he must believe in something, that will be Chinese ancient philosophies, and possibly the Chinese Communist Party too. My fraternal grandfather is also a member of the Chinese Communist Party. But unfortunately, he died before I was born. The only thing that I know about him is that he was an outstanding and well-known bridge architect. My fraternal grandmother believes in destiny and fortune telling. In her spare time, she studies The Book of Changes (*Yijing* in Chinese, or *I Ching*), which was honored as the top of the five Confucian Classics. This Classic is very impenetrable and mainly demonstrates the philosophical ideas about the inevitability of changes, the attitudes towards event evolution and the dynamic balance of opposites. When I was little, she told me many real miracle stories happened around us and
tried to convince me that there was a specific pattern of everyone’s life. In short, she believes that to a great extent, important events can be predictable and by using appropriate methods, terrible events may even be controlled. My maternal grandfather is a Christian and just returned to China from South Korea several years ago. He cannot speak Chinese very fluently. We actually have communication problems. My maternal grandmother suffered from pneumonopathy since her departure from the North Korea to China. Sadly, she died after my mother got married. She believed in the circular flow of cause and effect, which is part of Chinese Buddhism thinking. For the rest of my family, one uncle and one aunt are Christians, another one uncle and two aunts are Buddhists, and the rest of my relatives are either unclear or believe in various Chinese philosophies.

One interesting thing needs to mention, my fraternal granduncle, who is the only non-Korean Chinese in my big family, frequently changed his religion beliefs and faith among Christianity, Buddhism, Chinese Communist Party and Chinese philosophies. He developed a weird temper probably because he suffered too much in the Cultural Revolution. Unfortunately, since his mid-thirties (during the Cultural Revolution), he began suffering from hepatitis. At that time, his health condition was not too bad because he was in an important position in Province Bureau. Someone from the countryside regularly brought him crows, ants and pig galls. He ate several galls everyday, with crow meat and ants. This folk prescription did effectively control his disease. But after thirty years for some reason, my granduncle’s health deteriorated and he could not bear the life of having galls everyday. The galls were extreme bitter and eventhough he had them with honey, the taste was still very bitter. He said he would rather die than live like this. He added, “If heaven has eyes, I would live for more years. If I passed away within several years, my ancestors would pray for me.” Although by the strong request from his family, he received
some modern remedy afterwards and lived for another ten more years, his health condition suddenly got worse in 2011 and he lost his live functions completely and even the ability to speak. My family felt very sorrowful about this, especially my father. After my fraternal grandfather died, my granduncle regarded my father as his own son and assisted my father in finding a decent job after graduation. My father really appreciated everything my granduncle did for him. In the past summer, my granduncle died. His family scattered his ashes in the Songhua River. We all believe that the soul is immortal and through the natural circulation of water, his soul can reach anywhere he wants to go - in the sky, on the clouds, over the forests, on the grass or even back home. My granduncle is actually a principal part of my motivation to learn more about religions and the right attitudes towards life and death.

Because of the diverse family backgrounds, I am open to different ideas and interested in learning various kinds of knowledge. In the western culture, to some extent, the Bible directs the way of people’s thinking and their moral standards. In my over two years’ study in the United States, I can feel my American peers’ logic patterns and the influence that the Bible brings to their lifestyle. I can also feel their positive attitudes and the passion to make contributions to society. I think that is the power of religion and faith. In order to develop a deeper understanding of the Bible and the western world, I decided to learn more about Jewish culture and their lifestyle, which are the foundation of their unique identity.

**Identity One - Changeability**

It is difficult to use only one or two sentences to make a clear definition of Jewish identity. Based on my interviews and other experience in Israel, I found that the Jews with different backgrounds have different opinions about what defines the real Jewish people. Most
local Jews believe that the real Jews are owing to their Jewish heritage. People from other ethnic backgrounds have no chance to become a real Jew and to be converted into Judaism is also very hard. For most Jewish immigrants, they have many years’ overseas living experience. Their Jewish identity is determined and shaped by the individual choice of their living style and the firm belief in God. As a minority immigrant group in other countries, these Jews have ever encountered identity controversy and were struggling to protect their heritage against assimilation. The main reason why they gave up their easy and comfortable life overseas is because they believe that Israel is a holy land and a spiritual nation. It is easier for them to be Jewish in Israel compared with other places in the world. During my interview with a Jewish lady immigrated from Germany, I can feel her satisfaction of her current life. She opened a small jewelry store in the Central Jerusalem. She feels proud that she can help to rebuild this nation and make a contribution to her community.

In contemporary society, Jewish identity has become increasingly changeable and associated with personally important life contexts. Most Jews living abroad are suspicious of cultural or religious experts and seldom consult institutional authorities in deciding how to be a better Jew. Just as one of my interviewees said, “I have encountered a lot pressures from my neighborhood, but I still resist to affiliate with Jewish institutions.” This Jewish girl just came back to Israel last year after completing her degree in the United States. Later she added, “If someone chooses to affiliate with a specific religious organization, generally it is not only because of his or her duty bound, but also because doing so will meet their needs.”

In my hometown Harbin, there are many Jewish people. They moved here from Europe because during the Holocaust after the Second World War, an official in the Chinese Embassy issued visas to Jewish people and assisted them in leaving Europe. Local Chinese maintain a
very good friendship with the Jewish people in Harbin. One of my English instructors is a Jew. He actually has a second job in the business area. He was almost retiring from that job after being a teacher in an English education institution. From him and some of my Jewish friends in the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), I learned that Jewish identity is made up of various personal choices. Many overseas Jewish people find that after their retirement, Jewish spirituality animates their life. Or for some Jews, after they have children, they become more interested in Jewish culture because their children may ask them relevant questions. For the majority overseas Jews, keeping an open mind to important life changes is more highly valued than faithfulness to traditional practice. Nevertheless, for those like Orthodox Jews who have already chosen more traditional behaviors, such as going to synagogue and keeping kosher, slight lifestyle shifting may seem inauthentic.

(Jerusalem – observations and interviews)
Identity Two - Development

Jewish identity will develop as the society develops further. No matter what our particular thoughts about how people would like to see the development of Jewish identity, it is important for us to consider and accept the cultural and social realities of forming Jewish identity within different geographical backgrounds. According to the director of organizational development at CLAL (The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership), Rabbi Tsvi Blanchard, people should ‘spend less time creating standards for our existing categories’ like Jewish politics, music and religious practice, and ‘more time increasing the range of expressions in any given category that we regard as Jewish.’¹ In a culture of choice, people will remain committed to the Jewish world only if it is magnanimous enough to embrace their most significant values. Nowadays, the young Jewish people create their own identities. The elder generations have their own proclivities and expectations, and thus, they may have gap with the younger generation or even have some unusual and different values. It is necessary for them to make suggestions for young people, but not to the point of intervention or obstruction of letting
the youth to make their own decisions. However, it is also important for the young Jewish people to make their identities thoughtfully.

From my interaction with several high school Jewish boys, I can feel that they have strong opinions and a high awareness of international politics. They did not frequently use religion to express and explain their ideas. In addition to their religious belief, they have their own understandings about life and the past experiences. For Jewish culture, the young generations are proactively connecting Jewish identity with other turning points in their life. These turning points can be significant events in life, such as wedding and completing college education, which may create new meanings or deeper understanding of life. This new way to enrich Jewish identity has constructive meanings and will reinvigorate Jewish culture for the future decades.

Identity Three - Imperfection

As the old saying goes, everything has two sides - the outside that is ridiculous, and the inside that is solemn (by Olive Schreiner). The Jewry is also not an exception. Just like any other ethnic group in the world, you can always find some people who are not that amicable as the majority in the same community. When I walked on the Ben Yehuda Street, surprisingly I noticed several Jewish people, with Jewish kippah, accosting passers for money. In Jewish culture, begging is regarded as a very shamed behavior. I interviewed a Jewish elder sitting on a long chair and drinking a cup of hot mint tea. He could not speak English very well and extremely valued Jewish culture. He was somewhat proud and emphasized that “the Jews are the only people chosen by God.” Then he added, “The pure Jewish blood is very significant. Get married with any other ethnic people will defile the sanctity of Jewish heritage and their belief.”
It sounds like all other ethnic groups have already been abandoned by God and the God is Jewish God, not others’. He also claimed, “there is only one God in the universe and the God has promised the holy land for Jews. Israel is the center of the world. Wherever the Jewish people live, that is the land of Israel, home of Jews.” At the beginning, I was surprised that some Jews can have such an understanding about the Bible and doubted some of my previous viewpoints about Jewish culture and faithfulness. Afterwards, I felt a little bit offended because he asked me how old I was and whether or not I was married already. He did not indicate any Jewish identity like being respectful and friendly. Although his heritage is Jewish, probably to some extent he is also not a Jew. This interview increased my comprehension about Jewish identity.

In any culture, it is impossible for anyone to totally avoid biased opinions. Just like the Jewish beggars and the elder, considering about their current living conditions, education background and past experiences, you may feel easier to understand their choices and ideas. Take my parents as another example. My grandparents did not allow my parents to marry local Chinese because they believe that Han Chinese were dirty and ignorant. I don’t know what they experienced in China and how they formed these viewpoints. However, right after the establishment of new China, many things in the country were waiting to be done. It was an extreme period for full-scale reconstruction and a difficult time for anyone in China. Someone might perceive extreme ideas and behave in an inappropriate manner to minorities. But anyway, my parents’ marriage was somehow restricted by the biased ideas.

Identity Four - Learning

In addition to the characteristics described above, another important characteristic of Jewish identity are the spirit of assiduous study and the passion of learning. As we can see from
the number of Jewish Nobel-prize winners, Jewish people have dedicated a lot to the advancement of natural sciences and technologies. They are universally recognized for their contributions to the betterment and prosperity of human beings. When I visited my professor Kedem’s home, I was surprised by the amount of book collections in the living room. It looked like a small library, which contained various types of books, from music to philosophy, from science to art appreciation, from world history to British literature. This confirmed my original impression of Jewish education from Talmud. The Jewish people do establish a very pleasant academic learning atmosphere for their children. The children may already learn a lot knowledge at home, even without going to school.

After visiting the Triangle Research & Development Regional Center and the Weizmann Institute of Science, I was impressed by the strictly selective standard of participating candidates and the high criteria for accomplishing each scientific project. Although the outside look of these Science buildings was not very excellent, the inside facilities were very advanced and outstanding. Professor Kedem’s father, Oved Kedem, is working in the Davidson Institute of Science Education. His main focus is on Science education. He demonstrated his unique viewpoints about the right methods of teaching sciences and how to attract young kids’ interests about Science learning. I asked him about the biggest challenge for China in the near future. He said that he was very concerned about Chinese education, both inside and outside school. He added, “Chinese people are very goal-oriented and emphasize the overall influence of a group instead of individuals.” He learned Chinese histories before and firmly believed in the power of individuals and their potentials. I thought about his words on the way back hotel and agreed his opinion about the potential risks of goal-oriented thinking. Because of the Only-One-Child policy, most Chinese family has only one child, except for Chinese minorities. Parents pay so
much attention on their child and have very high expectations of his or her future. Throughout the education in China from the kindergarten to college education, professors, advisors and almost everyone around you emphasize the importance of learning and the relationship between knowledge accumulation and possible great life paths. We began to focus only on the thing that is seemingly meaningful for us and consider personal achievements as almost the only way to make those people we love happy. Although the original intention means good, we have moved too far from it. After the conversation with Dr. Kedem, my attitudes about science and education somewhat changed. There are millions of ways to view this world and personal success. The most important standard is to be the true self, not follow someone great in history. Being unique and true self is the foundation of bringing happiness and making great contributions to this world. The Jewish identity and culture enlightened me the real meaning of learning and enriching myself. Acquiring a wide range of knowledge will help me find my real passion, real happiness, and the best way to define myself.

Identity Five - Accumulation

Much of Jewish thousands years’ history has been marred by persecution by other communities, from ancient Egypt and Babylon to the Holocaust in World War II. Anti-Semitism is one of the most vicious forms of prejudice in human history. Visiting Yad Vashem Museum is a very humbling experience for me and makes me gain a deeper insight into the Jewish psyche. This museum serves as a place for memory and also recognizes a number of non-Jewish people who helped and saved Jews during that extreme period. These heroes are referred to as ‘The Righteous Among The Nations.’ This official memorial to the Jewish victims of the Holocaust contains millions of descriptions and relevant materials about the painful history. The stories of
Jewish men’s and women’s courage that fought against the Nazi regime and the sorrow for the lives lost gave me a mixed emotion and a very powerful journey.

Over six million Jewish people lost their lives in the Holocaust. When we look deeply into human’s nature, it is not hard to understand the reasons behind this catastrophe. Unbalanced distribution of property, financial strength, differences and misunderstandings among various ethnic groups are almost always the reasons why conflicts arise and wars start. Unfortunately, human natures are inherent. There is still a possibility that holocaust may happen again sometime in the future and sadly, we have no way to completely prevent such disasters. The only way that we can minimize the possibility of holocaust is keeping an open mind and respect different cultures. We should also learn how to express our opinions appropriately and how to consider others’ standpoints from a different perspective.
This experience also makes me double think about Chinese history. Throughout Chinese over five thousands’ history, countless wars happened and billions of people died because of those conflicts. On the list of the top ten massacres in the human history, five events belong to China. Among the five, four of them are the world’s top four carnages. The largest one is the Empire of Mongolia massacre, which was recorded in the Guinness World Records. Within decades, more than 200 million people were killed, including the people from Eastern Europe. It also makes me think about the relationship between China and Japan. Undoubtedly, we should remember our history. But should we also keep the hostility towards Japanese all the time? As the old Chinese saying goes, the greatest virtue of humankind is forgiveness. The most important thing is to analyze and reflect ourselves from the history, and learn and develop our nation gradually. Maintaining hostility and raising more conflicts are not a wise decision.

**Personal Identity and Reflection**

Because of the diversity in my family, I have many different understandings about this world. I agreed part of my maternal grandmother’s opinion. There is something invisible, like unseen power, in the outside universe or even surrounding us. There might be some patterns of event evolutions that science has not discovered yet and by exploring them, we may predict the consequence of an event and the future may become more controllable. I like Chinese ancient philosophies and they are a very good guidance for moral standards. However, they are outdated now and some of the ideas are not applicable any more. For Chinese Communist Party, to a great extent, I trust the government. But as the only Party in China, there is no effective supervision to it and the political decisions are not very transparent to the public. However, I believe that its
merits outweigh those mistakes. I also appreciate the ideas of the circular flow of cause and effect and the eternality of soul. Nothing can happen without any reason.

My conversation with Dr. Kedem let me see a more clear and positive attitudes towards religions. He said, “A good discussion will always make you believe in both sides more deeply.” We can never totally ignore one side and extremely emphasize the other side. Science, philosophy and religions are not in the same category. They are related, but not in the same attributes. We have many different ways and angles to view this world. Arts, science, religions, music and literature are just different perspectives of this world. By widening our horizons, we will find the real meaning of life and the best way to define ourselves.

Over three thousand years of history has created a unique texture in Jerusalem, expressed in special styles of architecture, uncountable archeological sites, and a diverse population. Jerusalem is the center of Jewish people. It is also a source of inspiration for Christians and Muslims the world over. This holy land provides me a new perspective about the Jewish culture and identity.
Reference
