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A Regional Comparison of American Jews

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Abstract

If we assume that there are few remaining external barriers to religious assimilation for Jews in the United States, a fundamental question arises: Why do some Jews exit Judaism, while others choose to stay with the religion? One of the major themes in the literature about American Judaism is that the reformulation of Jewish theology and practice instigated by some Jewish leaders in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was necessary to strengthen the religion. They believed that if Jews were required to continue in their traditional ways, they would only become disillusioned and leave the faith. Some researchers agree that a traditional and exclusive Jewish religion with its focus on strict ritual observance, the coming of a Messiah, and a book of law dictated by God to Moses will not retain members. They argue that religious adherents will be most effectively retained by groups that are more socially appealing. In contrast, others assert that only commitment to a unique religious culture that socially encapsulates members will retain them. In this article, I investigate whether traditional Jewish observance has a different impact on Jewish retention rates than does adhering to a less costly, socially oriented form of the religion. Specifically, potential causes of the variable retention rates observed between Jews living in the East and West Coast regions are considered. I conclude that the evidence indicates that a retention strategy that promotes unique religious practice provides a stronger basis for religious group persistence.

Judaism has proved to be one of the world's most enduring religions. Until recently, it was a rare historical event for Jews to live in a context free of widespread persecution and discrimination. However, during the past 150 years, almost half of the world's Jews immigrated to the United States. While it is true that American Jews have been subjected to prejudice and intolerance, it seems clear that compared to previous circumstances, the religious freedom and ethnic diversity found in America have provided Jews with the fewest obstacles to cultural integration. Assuming that there are few remaining external barriers to religious assimilation for Jews in the United States, a fundamental question arises: Why do some Jews exit Judaism, while others choose to stay with the religion?

One of the major themes in the literature about American Judaism is that the reformulation of Jewish theology and practice instigated by some Jewish leaders in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was necessary to strengthen the religion (Barkai 1994; Feingold 1999; Glazer 1972; Gold 1999; Goldscheider 1995; Silverstein 1994). The traditional inward-looking and exclusive Jewish religion with its constant focus on strict ritual observance, the coming of a Messiah, and a book of law dictated by God to Moses was assumed to be incompatible with American political and cultural pluralism and modern thought in general. Reformers believed that if Jews were required to continue in their traditional ways, they would only become disillusioned and leave the faith.

The effort to reevaluate American Judaism was instigated largely by German immigrants who came to the United States in the 1840s and 1850s. They brought with them Reform Judaism and the belief that to survive in modern times, Jews must continually adapt. Around the turn of the century, as large numbers of Eastern European Jews arrived in the United States, German Jews actively urged them to adopt a new form of Judaism (Glazer 1972; Gold 1999).

Initially, the reforms promoted by German Jews were limited to basic changes that made synagogues seem more like Protestant churches. These adjustments included new rules of synagogue etiquette and decorum, "aesthetic improvements" to the synagogue, the use of English during synagogue services, and regular Protestant-like sermons—changes that Sarna (1995: 222) argues "could be justified on the basis of Jewish law." Indeed, many Jewish houses of worship came to closely resemble Protestant churches with "stained-glass windows, organs, and Sunday worship—features not part of the Jewish tradition" (Glazer 1972; Gold 1999: 14).

For many reformers, these cosmetic adjustments were not enough. Glazer describes that "the thoroughgoing rationalism of the Reform leaders put them in opposition to the complex structure of Jewish ritual practice." Thus it is no surprise that they also "attacked and eliminated every ceremony, every ritual, [and] every prayer that did not immediately and in a rather simple-minded way conform to their view of the truth (as defined by 19th century scholarship) and so

serve for spiritual and ethical uplift.” Ultimately, traditional rituals and customs were “denounced as superstition,” and “any prayer that could not be believed literally was branded a lie no self-respecting man should be asked to repeat” (Glazer 1972: 50).

As a consequence of the efforts of Jewish reformers, a division emerged that resulted in two very different ways of adhering to Judaism. This division goes beyond a simple separation of Jews into Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox categories. Indeed, some Orthodox Jews are more observant than others, just as some self-identified Reform Jews adhere to fairly orthodox practices (Heilman and Cohen 1989). Therefore, it is more useful to consider adherents to Judaism as existing along a continuum. At one end of the spectrum are Jews who adopt a traditional form of faith. To these Jews, concentrating on learning and adhering to religious doctrines and performing sacred rituals as commanded by God are of utmost importance and will bring them spiritual blessings. The other end of the spectrum consists of Jews who tend to leave the old traditions behind and embrace a form of Judaism that is less doctrinaire and less exclusive. Jews who adhere to this way of being Jewish are less likely to participate in costly religious rituals and practices and often deny the divine origins of traditional Jewish doctrines.

While many researchers have examined the persistence of Judaism in the United States, very little empirical work has been done to uncover whether or not a retention strategy based on offering a less restrictive version of Judaism is more effective than a strategy that promotes the traditional, spiritual and ritual-oriented form of adherence. Do individuals remain devoted to religious groups that are more socially open, or do intense rituals and other exclusive practices result in member retention?

In this article, I evaluate hypotheses based on competing explanations about religious retention to investigate whether observance of traditional Jewish practices has a different impact on Jewish retention rates than does the acceptance of a less costly, socially oriented Judaism. Specifically, I examine the variable retention rates observed between Jews living on the U.S. East and West Coasts and conclude that the data provide evidence that a retention strategy that promotes adherence to traditional Jewish practices provides a stronger basis for religious group persistence.

THEORIES

The debate about whether a more socially open form of Judaism can retain adherents better than a Judaism that requires strict observance of traditional religious practices resembles a more general theoretical discussion about what is necessary for religious group persistence. As with most groups, one of the central

objectives of any religious group is to survive. In broad terms, the ability of a religious group to persist relates to how effectively it can maintain an identifiable membership base over time.

For religious groups, there are three primary ways to maintain an identifiable membership base. First, religious groups can simply retain their current members. While this will allow the group to persist for several decades (depending on the ages and life spans of its members), in the long term, a group that only retains its current members without adding new ones is doomed to die. The second way to maintain an identifiable membership base is for current members to effectively pass their religion on to their children. If parents can raise each new generation of children to be strongly committed members of their religious group, then it will persist as long as its members are having children. Recruiting new members is the third way for a religion to maintain an identifiable membership base, provided that the group can keep doing it successfully.

Each mode or combination of modes of religious group persistence has different implications for the nature and fate of the religious group. I will not examine all of these implications here, but it is important to consider the modes of persistence that are most relevant to the case at hand. Typically, Judaism has not actively sought to recruit new members. This being the case, the persistence of American Judaism depends primarily on its ability to foster commitment to the religion among its current membership and on Jewish parents' ability to pass commitment to Judaism on to the next generation. While it is true that children tend to adhere to the faith of their parents (Kluegel 1980; Sherkat and Wilson 1995; Stark and Finke 2000; Stark and Glock 1968), the rate of adherence is variable and must be explained. So what is the most effective way for religions to promote long-lasting, intergenerational commitment?

The question about why some religious adherents are more committed than others can be answered by examining the nature and strength of their dependence on the group (Hechter 1987). People depend on religious groups to gain access to a variety of goods and services. Religions provide explanations about the supernatural and human existence and purpose. Some offer rain, fertility, or a good harvest. A few supply temporal assistance in the form of food, clothing, and money. All provide the sociality benefits that come from being part of a group.

Some researchers assert that the most effective retention strategy for religious groups involves offering compelling secular benefits. Secular benefits are those that can be obtained without resorting to supernatural resources. This view contends that people will continue to participate in religious groups whether or not any substantial otherworldly benefits are offered (Bruce 2002; Buchanan 1979; McCarthy and Zald 1977; Sherkat 1997; Wallis 1991). In fact, to retain members, religious groups must provide support in the form of social ties, educational opportunities, access to mating markets, day care, and the like

(Sherkat and Ellison 1999). From this perspective, groups that can effectively promote social involvement and provide secular benefits to their members should experience higher retention rates. Religions that expect commitment and participation that hinders social or economic advancement or that require members to invest too heavily in the group will alienate their members and eventually lose them.

Historically, many Jewish reformers have accepted the validity of these ideas. In an effort to make Judaism more appealing, numerous Jewish synagogues adopted a strategy of offering greater social incentives for participation. They created youth groups, Sisterhoods, and Brotherhoods; held dances; sponsored sports activities; held funding-raising drives; and generally expanded the goals of synagogues “in order to incorporate the very secular activities” (Silverstein 1994: 207; see also Levine 1992; Sklare 1971). Jewish country clubs were even established to provide a place for middle- and upper-class Jews to enjoy their high status (Waxman 1999).

In addition to providing social incentives for participation, proponents of reform tried to reduce the costs of Judaism so that it would not impede full participation in American life. They feared that traditional Jewish practices might stir a negative reaction from their Protestant neighbors and combated this by giving up many distinctively Jewish customs (Glazer 1972; Gold 1999). Indeed, a negative view of traditional Jewish ritual and prayer was officially promoted during an 1885 conference of rabbis at which it was concluded that “observance in our days is apt rather to obstruct than to further modern spiritual elevation” (Mendes-Flohr and Reinhartz 1995: 469).

Jews who embraced this stance against traditional Jewish ways could actively participate in Judaism without having it interfere with other aspects of their lives. After all, practicing Jewish rituals and otherwise living the Law of God require much time, effort, and social sacrifice, thereby making it very inconvenient, especially in a modern society. Fasting can be physically uncomfortable. Learning Hebrew takes many years of study and dedication, and reciting Hebrew prayers can take hours. Furthermore, observing strict dietary laws makes it much harder for Jews to intermingle with other Americans, whether for business or social purposes.

While there can be no doubt these kinds of changes promoted social involvement and increased the social incentives for religious participation, another line of theoretical thinking suggests that the end result of such a retention strategy should be a less persistent Judaism. The concept of religious capital has evolved from discussions of human, social, and cultural capital (Becker 1976; Bourdieu 1984; Coleman 1988; Iannaccone and Klick 2003; Sobel 2002). *Religious capital* can be defined as the familiarity, knowledge, and skills associated with the explanations and practices of a particular religious culture.

Iannaccone (1990) initially defined this concept in terms of both the religious culture that is obtained and the social networks that develop in a religious context. However, Stark and Finke (2000) later revised his definition by removing the concept of social attachment and placing it exclusively in the realm of social capital, thus keeping the social aspect of religion separate from its manifestly religious features. They reasoned that this was an important distinction to make, since friendships can be developed in all groups, not just religious ones (Finke 2003).

The religious capital approach has been used to explain a number of phenomena, including but not limited to religious conversion, religious intermarriage, denominational mobility, the stability of religious demand, and religious participation (Finke 2003; Froese and Pfaff 2005; Iannaccone 1990; Sherkat 1997, 2001; Sherkat and Wilson 1995; Stark and Finke 2000). Iannaccone (2003: 6) developed the concept as a way to “explain patterns of religious beliefs and behavior, over the life-cycle, between generations, and among family and friends.” He argued that as individuals increase their level of input to the production of a particular religious culture, their satisfaction with it increases, as does the cost of switching to another tradition (Iannaccone 1990).

However, the cultures of many religious groups overlap considerably, and therefore, many kinds of religious capital are quite easy to conserve even if one decides to leave one’s religious group. Indeed, the transferability of religious capital can vary greatly. For example, someone who has invested in learning a common form of Christian prayer or is a firm believer that Christ is the Savior of the world can quite easily find hundreds of groups that perform prayer in a similar fashion and hold to similar convictions. Consequently, in this case, switching groups is possible without sacrificing religious capital.

In contrast, a religion that emphasizes unique beliefs and practices such as a focus on an obscure text or a distinctive form of ritual or meditation would have members who would find it very difficult, if not impossible, to conserve the capital associated with such practices if they left the group. Therefore, as explained by Finke (2004, 21), “to the extent that the core teachings [of a religious group] provide individuals with religious capital that is inimitable, it will serve to retain members.” Religious capital is inimitable to the extent that it is absent from and would be rejected by other religious groups.

In essence, any time or effort spent participating in rituals or practices that would become less relevant or meaningful if an individual exited the group will inevitably become a sunk cost (Bourdieu, 1984). Most social capital and transferable religious capital, on the other hand, will not necessarily be lost. Thus, *retention strategies that require members to participate in culturally unique traditions and practices should be most successful.*

In addition to this, doctrines that promote adherence to distinctive religious practices can facilitate the social encapsulation of the group, which further promotes religious group survival (Stark 2001). Social encapsulation occurs to the extent that group members “are *impeded* from having normal associations with outsiders” (Stark 2001: 184–185). It goes without saying that some religious beliefs and behaviors are more encapsulating than others. Thus, groups can increase the effectiveness of social encapsulation by introducing religious explanations that require the adoption of rules and visible cultural markers that separate and distinguish their members from the majority. Jews who maintain a kosher diet, for example, cannot just go anywhere to eat with friends and cannot dine in Gentile homes. Thus, religions that effectively promote customs and practices that socially encapsulate their members should experience higher retention rates.

This theoretical approach supports the retention strategy that includes adherence to the traditional doctrines and practices of Judaism. Indeed, from this point of view, the very means applied to make Judaism more socially appealing resulted in a Judaism that is considerably less resistant to religious assimilation. Without traditional observance, there is little to distinguish Jews and their heritage from others. In the absence of these distinctions, American Judaism is weakened and loses its ability to retain adherents (Danzger 1989; DellaPergola 1999; Goldberg 1995; Heilman 1995; Hyman 1999; Liebman 1995a).

DATA AND METHODS

In 1990, Barry Kosmin and his colleagues conducted an important national survey of American Jews (Kosmin et al. 1991). Rather than drawing respondents from synagogue or Jewish community organization membership lists, as was common practice, the National Jewish Population Survey used random-digit dialing to construct a national sample of individuals with recent Jewish backgrounds. A respondent was considered to have a Jewish background if any of the following conditions were met: (1) The respondent’s religious preference was Jewish, (2) the respondent was raised Jewish, or (3) the respondent had a parent who was Jewish. All respondents reporting a Jewish background were interviewed at length.

These data are unique in that they allow us to account for people of recent Jewish origins who no longer affiliate with Judaism. This provides us with an effective way of estimating the retention rate of Judaism in the United States. Indicative of a general trend toward religious assimilation, only 64.8 percent of American Jews who claim to be of recent Jewish origins gave their current religious identification as Jewish. A quarter of Jews (24.3 percent) have become Christian, and one in ten claims to have no religious affiliation (see Table 1).

Table 1: Current Religious Preference of American Jews

	East Coast*	West Coast†	National
Jewish	74.2%	54.8%	64.8%
Christian	17.2%	26.5%	24.3%
No Religion	8.6%	18.7%	10.9%
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
<i>n</i> =	(803)	(343)	(2,214)

Significant at the .01 level.

*Persons residing in the Middle Atlantic region (NY, NJ, PA).

†Persons residing in the Pacific region (CA, OR, WA).

While over one third of American Jews live on the East Coast, most of them in the greater New York City area, another major concentration of Jews is on the West Coast (16 percent), especially in Southern California. Many qualitative judgments have been made about the variable assimilation rates between Jews on the two coasts (Heilman and Cohen 1989; Horowitz 1999; Liebman 1995b). If the retention rates of Judaism on the two coasts are indeed different, this presents us with an unusually apt opportunity to assess the basis of religious retention by doing a regional comparison using quantitative methods on a good sample.

As was expected, the data show that about three fourths of East Coast Jews (74.2 percent) identify themselves as Jewish by religion, while on the West Coast, a bare majority of individuals of Jewish backgrounds (54.8 percent) have retained their affiliation with Judaism (see Table 1). To control for geographic mobility and religious upbringing, I examined the assimilation trends among those who were raised Jewish by religion and who were born and are currently living on the same coast (Sherkat and Wilson 1995; Stark and Finke 2000). The differences are just as pronounced. Over 80 percent of respondents who were raised Jewish by religion and who were born and are living on the East Coast currently regard themselves as adherents to Judaism. Of those who were raised as religious Jews on the West Coast, only about 60 percent replied that their current religious preference is Jewish ($P < .01$). By almost any measure, Jews on the East Coast have been retained by Judaism much more successfully than Jews on the West Coast. Is it possible to distinguish Jewish life in these two areas so as account for the higher retention rates in the East?

One possibility is that the lower rates of affiliation with Judaism in the West reflect some underlying demographic differences. From this point of view, the reason that individuals with Jewish backgrounds on the West Coast are less likely to affiliate with Judaism might relate to the fact that they are at different stages of their lives with different kinds of obligations. It has been shown, for example, that religious preferences can be shaped by wealth and status attainment (Sherkat and

Wilson 1995; Stark and Finke 2000; Stark and Glock 1968). Consequently, differing amounts of education and wealth possessed by Jews on the two coasts might help account for the variable retention rates. However, as is shown on Table 2, household income does not distinguish Jews on the two coasts, and respondents in the two regions were equally likely to have completed four years of college.

Table 2: Demographic Characteristics of Jews

	East Coast	West Coast
Married	57.9%	60.0%
Single	22.7%	21.8%
Male	47.1%	46.9%
4 years of college or more	55.0%	51.1%
Average household income	\$61,000	\$57,000
Average age	46 years	44 years*
Have children	69.3%	70.6%
<i>n</i> =	(885)	(386)

*Significant at the .05 level.

Another possible reason for the disparity between the two coasts relates to the age and stability of respondents. It is often argued that religious mobility should be more prevalent among younger and unattached individuals because they are more likely to experience shifts in their social ties (Stark and Finke 2000). Accordingly, we might expect the average West Coast Jew to be much younger and less attached than the typical Jew on the East Coast. However, East Coast Jews are no more likely to be married or single than Jews in the west, and while East Coast Jews are a bit older statistically, the difference between 44 and 46 years old in real terms is negligible and probably has little to do with the disparity between the two coasts (see Table 2).

Finally, it has been recognized that parenthood and gender can affect religious choices. Sherkat and Wilson (1995) propose that women will be less likely to change their religious affiliation because they are more socialized into their religious roles than men are. Additionally, parents often remain with a religion for the sake of their children (Hoge and Carroll 1978; Sandomirsky and Wilson 1990; Sherkat and Wilson 1995). Given these assertions, we might expect to find a disproportionate number of Jewish women and of families with children on the East Coast. This is simply not the case (see Table 2).

The current demography of East and West Coast Jews seems to give us little insight into why West Coast Jews are less likely to be affiliated with Judaism. Therefore, we must seek an explanation that goes beyond demographic differences. Unfortunately, I know of no longitudinal panel studies of American

Jews that would allow a precise study of the prior behaviors and circumstances in their lives that might be producing the current retention rates. However, given that we have some good cross-sectional data, I believe that an approximation of the past characteristics of Jews on the two coasts can be obtained by assuming that the attributes of Jews currently living in those areas are similar to those that might have contributed to the regional disparity.

Of course, because of the presence of so many more Christian and non-religious Jews in the West, it makes little sense to compare the behavior of *all* people with Jewish backgrounds in the two regions. Obviously, those who no longer affiliate with the Jewish religion would be much less likely to adhere to any uniquely Jewish religious practices. Thus, including them in the comparison would result in an obvious bias in favor of the religious capital and social encapsulation explanation. If I limit the analysis to people who still claim to be affiliated with the Jewish religion, however, that bias is removed. If anything, this approach should predispose the results *against* showing any differences in the religious activities of Jews on the two coasts.

In short, I am assuming that Jews on the two coasts *who still affiliate with Judaism* will to some extent exhibit the differences that resulted in the greater or lesser resistance to religious assimilation in those regions. While the scope of this analysis is limited, I believe that it is a valuable start and can begin to provide us with an understanding of what makes some Jews more resistant than others to assimilation pressures.

On the basis of the theories presented, several hypotheses can be deduced concerning the retention rates of American Jews in the two regions. If making Judaism more socially appealing results in higher retention rates, then the following two hypotheses should hold true:

Hypothesis 1: Religious Jews on the West Coast will be less likely than those on the East Coast to be receiving *secular Jewish benefits*.

Hypothesis 2: Religious Jews on the West Coast will be less likely than those on the East Coast to be *socially involved with Jewish culture*.

If inimitable religious capital investment and social encapsulation are primarily responsible for the variable retention rates, however, then support should be found for the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 3: Religious Jews on the West Coast will be less likely than those on the East Coast to be participating in behaviors that are *socially encapsulating*.

Hypothesis 4: Religious Jews on the West Coast will be less likely than those on the East Coast to be practicing *unique Jewish traditions*.

MEASURES

Many important *secular benefits* are available to American Jews. The data allow me to consider three of them. Friendship is perhaps the most important. Respondents were asked how many of their “closest” friends are Jewish. To account for any subtle variations between the two coasts, I separately examine the proportion of respondents who claim to have all, mostly, or some Jewish friends. This gives us a sense of the level of day-to-day interaction an individual has with other Jews. To capture the psychological benefit of being Jewish, I identify respondents who think being Jewish is “very” or “somewhat” important. A feeling of pride in one’s ethnic or religious heritage can be quite rewarding. Finally, a good education can serve to improve the economic and social circumstances of an individual. Thus, the last variable I will consider as an indicator of Jewish social benefits is access to Jewish schools. Specifically, respondents were asked whether or not they have received “any” Jewish education.

American Jewish culture also offers many interesting opportunities for *social involvement*. To measure this concept, I use four separate variables. Respondents were asked whether or not their household donates to Jewish charities, subscribes to Jewish periodicals, does Jewish volunteer work, or belongs to Jewish organizations. Each of these variables represents a nontraditional way for Jews to be engaged with Jewish culture and will thus be used to test hypothesis 2.

The data provide four useful indicators of *social encapsulation*. Perhaps the most compelling indicators relate to keeping kosher and refraining from handling money on the Sabbath. Jews who keep kosher typically cannot eat with non-Jews. This prevents them from visiting certain homes for dinner and going to certain restaurants. It potentially restricts them from participating in a whole range of daily activities with non-Jews. Likewise, Jews who refrain from handling money on the Sabbath exclude themselves from some aspects of American culture, such as weekend shopping. More important, however, such individuals are unable to accept certain types of employment. In this way, adhering to this principle restricts their economic opportunities as well.

Respondents who live in Jewish neighborhoods are also more socially encapsulated. This is a function of their being less likely to have non-Jewish neighbors with whom to interact. Finally, social encapsulation can be measured in terms of the level of influence Jews allow the predominant culture to have in their lives. Respondents were asked the frequency with which a Christmas tree is put up in their homes. Those who replied that they “never” put up a Christmas tree are demonstrating a commitment to maintaining a separation from the general holiday culture in the United States. This is an indication that they are unwilling to celebrate in the same way as their non-Jewish friends.

To test the fourth hypothesis, I look at participation in four *unique traditional Jewish rituals*. Passover, for example, commemorates the time when God delivered the Jews from Egyptian bondage. Jews who attend Seder eat special foods and perform special rituals to remind them of God's blessings. Households that light Hanukkah candles remember the temple flask filled with enough oil to light the menorah for one day yet that burned for eight days. Jews who fast on Yom Kippur seek to atone for their sins of the past year and appeal to God for forgiveness. Finally, by attending Purim, Jews remember the story of Esther and how she saved the Persian Jews from extermination.

RESULTS

Table 3 examines Jewish social involvement and the secular benefits offered to Jews. Jews on the West Coast are as likely as those on the East Coast to limit their friendships to Jews. Jews in the West and the East place equal emphasis on the importance of being Jewish, and Jews on both sides of the country are also equally likely to have received a Jewish education. Thus, Jews on the East and West Coasts are not distinguished by the secular benefits they receive.

Table 3: Social Involvement and Secular Benefits

	East Coast	West Coast
Has <i>only</i> Jewish friends	17.2%	16.0%
Has <i>mostly</i> Jewish friends	35.9%	30.9%
Has <i>some</i> Jewish friends	34.7%	35.1%
Thinks it is "important" to be Jewish	87.4%	89.4%
Ever received any Jewish education	78.3%	73.4%
Contributes to Jewish charities	64.6%	60.8%
Belongs to a Jewish organization	69.3%	70.6%
Subscribes to Jewish periodicals	30.1%	30.3%
Volunteers for Jewish organizations	21.9%	23.9%
<i>n</i> =	(596)	(188)

*Significant at the .05 level.

Similarly, social involvement does not differentiate Jews on the two coasts. East Coast Jews are just as likely as West Coast Jews to belong to a Jewish organization and to contribute to Jewish charities. Likewise, circulation of Jewish periodicals is proportionately as high in the West as in the East, and there is no difference between the two coasts in their contributing to Jewish organizations as volunteers. On all available indicators, social involvement and secular benefits clearly do not distinguish religious Jews on the two coasts. Thus, there is no evidence for hypotheses 1 and 2.

Table 4 examines measures of the *social encapsulation* of religious Jews and their involvement in *unique Jewish traditions*. All of the social encapsulation measures significantly distinguish the two coasts. Jews in the East are substantially more likely (57.8 percent) to observe some degree of kosher than are western Jews (28.8 percent). Likewise, while most Jews continue to handle and spend money on the Sabbath, a significantly higher proportion of Jews in the East refrains. The majority (54.9 percent) of eastern Jews live in a “Jewish neighborhood,” while out west slightly fewer than a third (30.3 percent) live in such a neighborhood. Finally, East Coast Jews are more likely (83.2 percent) than West Coast Jews (71.1 percent) to never put up a Christmas tree.

Table 4: Social Encapsulation and Unique Jewish Traditions

	East Coast	West Coast
Observes some degree of kosher	57.8%	28.8%**
Refrains from handling money on Shabbat	15.5%	9.6%*
Lives in a “Jewish neighborhood”	54.9%	30.3%**
Never puts up a Christmas tree	83.2%	71.1%**
Attends Seder “all the time”	67.2%	55.1%*
Lights candles “all the time” on Hanukkah	66.6%	54.8%*
Fasts on Yom Kippur	64.4%	46.3%**
Attends Purim celebration	30.1%	21.9%*
<i>n</i> =	(596)	(188)

*Significant at the .05 level.

**Significant at the .01 level.

A very similar contrast exists in terms of observance of unique Jewish traditions. 67.2 percent of Jews in the East attend Seder all the time, while in the West, only 55.1 percent do so. Jews on both coasts light candles on Hanukkah, but a significantly smaller percentage do so in the West. Only 46.3 percent of West Coast Jews fast on Yom Kippur, while 64.4 percent of Jews in the East observe the fast. Finally, on the East Coast, a greater proportion of Jews (30.1 percent) attend the Purim celebration than in the West (21.9 percent). Thus, the data in Table 4 strongly support hypotheses 3 and 4.

DISCUSSION

As is evident from the data, efforts to downplay traditional Judaism in the United States have been largely successful. The focus of much contemporary American Jewish life is social rather than religious (Gold and Phillips 1996). Glazer (1972: 126) notes that by the mid-1900s in many synagogues, “religious services often seemed the least vital of the many ‘services’ supplied”. For some

Jews, synagogues became “the chief way in which Jews came in touch with Jewish social circles” (Glazer 1972: 156). Silverstein (1994: 207) describes that “commitment to temple life became an ethnic loyalty, often an expression of Jewish identity rather than a statement of faith or of religious practice.”

Among Jews in the United States, there is also a clear movement away from Judaism. More and more Jews are becoming Christians or are leaving organized religion altogether. This deterioration is especially profound on the West Coast, where the form of devotion demonstrated among religious Jews is significantly less traditional than what is found in the East. Therefore, the data provide support for the idea that promoting commitment to traditional Jewish ritual and practice is a more sound retention strategy than endorsing a less socially costly and more socially open form of the faith.

By reforming its traditional doctrines and practices, Jewish leaders had hoped to make Judaism more socially appealing, thus ensuring its persistence. Indeed, their expectation that a less traditional Judaism would produce a more persistent one was entirely reasonable. As a result of their reforms, the tension between Judaism and American society has been eased. Social outings with non-Jews are much simpler without dietary restrictions. Jews who reject traditional Judaism can freely do business on the Sabbath and thus make greater profits without feeling as though they are going against their religion. In addition to this, being freed from the obligation of regularly performing Jewish rituals and prayers, as traditionally expected, Jews do not have to feel as inconvenienced by their faith. If social appeal is the key to high retention rates, then it is difficult to imagine how a less traditional Judaism could have resulted in anything but a more successful Jewish religion.

Unfortunately, in their efforts to strengthen Judaism, Jewish leaders sacrificed its ability to sustain a high degree of social encapsulation and in this way unintentionally undermined its ability to persist. Traditional dietary laws had “precluded fraternization and intermingling,” and “observing the Sabbath on Saturdays separated Jews from those who observed it on Sundays” (Heilman and Cohen 1989: 10). As Jews continue to freely associate with non-Jews, they are more susceptible to intermarriage and other interactions that tend to lead to even greater reductions in commitment to religious tradition. This may eventually result in substantially more religious switching (Waxman 2001).

Perhaps more important, the result of denying traditional Judaism might be a religion that is not capable of retaining future generations (Heilman and Cohen 1989). If social encapsulation is a primary mechanism by which assimilation is averted, then less traditional western households are also more likely to be having children who are not encapsulated. If Jewish children feel free to engage in any interaction they deem worthwhile, their connections to Judaism will be weakened

as they come to have more non-Jewish friends and participate in fewer exclusively Jewish activities.

Furthermore, by eliminating the need for participation in traditional rituals and customs, important mechanisms for the transfer of religious capital were removed. Learning about and participating in rituals that are “distinctively Jewish” is vital for Jewish children because doing so “signifies commitment with content” (Heilman 1995: 120). Scholars of Judaism have emphasized that “the most central aspects of religious practice occur in the home” and that home practice has “facilitated the transmission of Judaism” to the next generation (Danzger 1989: 28; Wistrich 1995). If, as the inimitable religious capital approach suggests, taking time to help children learn and adhere to unique religious customs is necessary for retaining them, the lower rates of ritual observance in the West should continue to produce Jews who are less attached to Judaism.

Children tend to replicate the ritual practices of their parents, and as parents have diminished their investment in traditional ways, so too have their children. Heilman (1995: 120) claims that this is “perhaps the single most consistent fact about Jewish generational reality”. He also notes that what often occurs among contemporary Jews is that parents who are not very actively Jewish make minimal efforts to introduce their children to traditional Judaism, expecting their children to somehow maintain some piece of Jewish identity, only to find that their children drift even farther away from their heritage. Meanwhile, the children of Jews who observe the traditional practices of Judaism tend to be even more attached and observant than their parents are (Heilman and Cohen 1989).

Inimitable religious capital, because it is distinctive and attached to a specific culture, has the capacity to stick through the generations. However, any attachment Jewish parents have to their friends and any social benefits they receive from their participation in Judaism are often not transferable to their children. Accordingly, Jews who choose to be involved with Judaism only socially and affiliate with the faith to obtain social rewards will have a difficult time convincing their children to remain committed for the same reasons.

On the other hand, parents who openly communicate religious convictions and help their children invest in religious capital by observing religious teachings and consistently practicing traditional rituals and customs in the home should be more likely to have children with strong and enduring confidence in the religious culture. This essentially makes them more dependent on the group and increases their need to remain with it.

By trying to minimize the scope of the sacred to fit it within the frame of the secular, Jewish reformers were essentially eliminating the distinctions between Jews and other Americans. Furthermore, their approach to Judaism eradicated mechanisms for passing the religion to the next generation without providing effective new ones. If my analysis is correct, the result is that Judaism has been

weakened. If this is true, then Jewish leaders who promoted changing Judaism in ways that minimized the importance of traditional rituals and practices were mistaken to think that their way was a more effective retention strategy.

However, there is at least one other possible explanation for the regional patterns shown above that I have not yet considered. In their groundbreaking work on crosscutting social circles, Blau and Schwarz (1984) argued that social structure, particularly in the form of the population distribution, can have a significant impact on social change and group solidarity. Accordingly, it may be that East Coast Jews are retained by Judaism in greater numbers simply because the population density of Jews on that coast is greater and thus provides them with more opportunities to interact with each other. Additionally, eastern Jews have greater access to synagogues, Jewish shops, and other resources that make being faithful easier. Indeed, this train of thought is supported by the fact that West Coast Jews are much less likely than East Coast Jews to live in a Jewish neighborhood (see Table 4).

While I cannot entirely exclude this possibility, it is just as likely that the settlement patterns of Jews are the effect of religious choice. Many Jews believe that to properly live the law of God, they must walk to synagogue, for example. Jews with this kind of commitment are essentially required to live in a Jewish neighborhood because they want to observe Shabbat, keep kosher, and otherwise live according to God's will. In other words, it may be that because they are more attached to the traditional doctrines and practices of Judaism, East Coast Jews elect to increase their own social encapsulation, which ultimately strengthens Judaism in that region. This further supports my argument.

This self-selection process is acknowledged by Blau and Schwarz. They maintain that individuals sometimes look to consolidate their social ties by moving to neighborhoods filled with like individuals. In contrast, they also contend that social mobility "is often stimulated by an interest in escaping one's old surroundings" and "often entails deliberate efforts to change one's old group" (Blau and Schwarz 1984: 101). If this is true, it may be that the very fact that some Jews stay away from Jewish neighborhoods is a reaffirmation of their weaker ties to Judaism and the Jewish tradition.

CONCLUSION

Although there can be no doubt that many of the changes made to Jewish theology and practice increased the social appeal of participating in Jewish religious life, I have argued that in the absence of mechanisms for social encapsulation and intergenerational religious transfer, such changes might not be able to sustain Judaism effectively in the long term.

I have provided a preliminary analysis of the impact of two distinctive retention strategies on religious assimilation among American Jews on the East and West Coasts. I hope that, in the future, longitudinal studies will be conducted that more precisely examine the extent of traditional observance in Jewish homes and the impact this has on the religious socialization of Jewish children and, ultimately, their willingness to remain faithful to Judaism.

Currently, the vast majority of Jews in the United States, particularly Jews on the West Coast, have, at least to some degree, accepted a less traditional version of Jewish theology and practice. Indeed, many contemporary Jews have entirely rejected traditional Judaism (Stark and Finke 2000; Waxman 2001). Some scholars involved with Jewish studies believe that the traditional Jewish religion is the most persistent form of Jewishness. DellaPergola (1999: 67), for example, writes that “identification according to religion, involving exclusively Jewish individual practice . . . appears to be a stronger mode of Jewishness than ethnicity.” Hyman (1999: 120) concluded from her study of Western Diaspora societies that “an ethnic Jewish identity divorced from religious concerns has shown no basis for survival beyond the immigrant generation in any of the Western Diaspora societies.”

If this is true, then the current trends of decreasing levels of traditional religious observance among Jews with the accompanying decline in affiliation with Judaism might have even stronger implications than those that I have discussed here. However, the real test for Judaism will come in the future. I suspect that the retention rates of Judaism in the United States will continue to fall, particularly in the West, unless Jewish leaders find ways of returning distinctiveness to and promoting investment in Jewish religious life. Interestingly, there has been a recent trend among Reform synagogues to move away from Protestant influences and embrace more traditional ways. Likewise, Conservative synagogues are turning more toward orthodoxy. If these trends continue and are disseminated to the general Jewish population, I expect that Judaism will experience revitalization. Ultimately, there is no reason why Judaism should not last another 5,000 years.

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