IN THE NAME OF A NARRATIVE EDUCATION: HERMANN COHEN AND HISTORICISM RECONSIDERED*

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Introduction

A number of recent studies of American Jewry reveal striking divisions. According to a 2001 study, for instance, American Jews were split almost down the middle about whether they identified as secular or religious. This study also turned up multiple and, indeed, incompatible ways of belonging to the Jewish community, with respondents clearly divided across national, cultural, religious and ethnic conceptions of Jewish life. A 2000 study of New York Jews found seven different patterns of Jewish living, and observed widely differing perceptions of the importance of being Jewish. In the New York study, the degree of interest and level of participation in community institutions, cultural affairs, and religious life varied dramatically across a number of identifiable cohorts. As one of the lead researchers in the 2001 study concluded, ideological debates may no longer rage as furiously as they once did, but the American Jewish community we find today, nevertheless, clearly bears their mark. In America, membership in the community persists in a context of conflicting values and frameworks, making sociological description complex and initiation into the community confusing. Into which community should

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one initiate one’s self or one’s children? The options are plural, their rationales are difficult to compare, and none appears the clear victor. As one of the authors of the 2001 study concluded, in the context of such pluralism, “contemporary [American] Jewish identification [is itself] ... problematic.”

Value-pluralism of this sort is a particularly difficult challenge for the much-celebrated contemporary Jewish renaissance, an object of considerable human interest, energy, and financial capital. The difficulty is due in part to the character of some of the key institutions driving this renaissance. They are, in a (hyphenated) word, trans-, or post-denominational. As Steven M. Cohen has recently remarked, these are some of the most vital and creative institutions in Jewish life today. But, given what they are dedicated to, they are also arguably among the most afflicted by the context this research points out. Renaissance promises growth, development; a flowering of a closed, even withered, flower. But, towards just what light should these institutions grow in the face of this prevailing confusion?

The Steinhardt Foundation, which, incidentally, is an advocate of post-denominational Jewish renaissance, and publisher of Steven Cohen’s remarks, recently went so far as to offer up to ten thousand dollars to the writer who could point a way beyond this tohu-v-vohu, and help return Jews to some common ground. As the Director of the Foundation, Rabbi Irving Greenberg, wrote in a letter disseminated internationally to scholars and Rabbis: “...[We] assert the vital importance of a common narrative—of ideas, values, and root metaphors—that can bridge and link together our various Judaisms... Without a relevant and compelling common narrative, we risk further the dissolution of Jewish unity, the mitigation of mutual responsibility and the loss of community.”


3 Rabbi Irving Greenberg, President, Jewish Life Network/Steinhardt Foundation in the course of official correspondence to this author, May 16, 2005. tohu-v-vohu is a Hebrew expression for chaos.