



The Importance of Jewish Identity in Non-Jewish Spaces

The concept of Jewish identity varies with every Jew you meet. The conversation, often dependent on personal upbringing, will include religion, culture, ancestry, ethnicity, and morality. Each Jew's identification with being Jewish is an individual experience and process.

According to Dr. Manfred Gerstenfeld, formerly of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, Jewish identity can be determined in three ways. How do Jews see themselves? How are they seen by other Jews? And how are Jews seen by the outside world? It is the interaction of the first and last of these questions that I would like to focus on for the purposes of this article.¹

In a post-Oct. 7 world, the question of Jewish identity, as viewed by the outside world, has never been closer to that of Germany in the 1940's. The Nazi determination of who was Jewish

did not follow self-identification. The identification of a Jew was based on the infamous Nuremberg Laws, by which even a *halachic* non-Jew could be considered Jewish by the Nazi regime. Similarly, there are non-Jews in the post-Oct. 7 world who would like to define the terms of being Jewish as well as the terms that affect Jews in ways that fit their own narrative.

The difference between then and now is very simple: the existence of the State of Israel and the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF).

My grandfather likes to talk about the "yarmulke boom" of the late 1960s. Following the Six Day War in 1967, many Orthodox Jews started wearing yarmulkes outside of their homes and synagogues. The sudden confidence of modern Jews to walk around New York City (and elsewhere), proud of their identity in a non-Jewish society, suddenly had the backing of a strong

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army capable of protecting the place we call home. Menachem Begin's destruction of the Jew with trembling knees was progressing.

The self-view of the Jew in a non-Jewish world changed drastically following the war in 1967 and again after the Yom Kippur War in 1973. Israel, while sustaining heavy losses, asserted military dominance in a region surrounded by enemies on all sides (and within). This evolution of Jewish confidence still exists today, despite the constant attempts by enemies to bring us back to our knees. The 21st-century Jew maintains an identity that includes valuable tenets of education and entrepreneurship along with

¹ How Jews are seen by other Jews is an age-old issue that is not specific to Judaism alone. Various religions and ethnicities have sects within them that at best have different traditions, and at worst are completely polarizing to a point of ostracism and violence. Books have been written about this subject and even if I was qualified to opine, it is too involved and complicated for this article.

goal-driven success. In all fields, Jews are shattering stereotypes with their accomplishments. While this leads to the resurfacing of ancient antisemitic tropes, it no longer discourages a population whose identity has taken on confidence as a character trait. *Reishit tzemichat geulatenu*—the formation of a Jewish state on ancient Jewish land, coupled with a strong and courageous IDF that has proven itself through the harshest tests, stands as the backing for this new adopted trait of confidence. Primarily because, well, we can always go home. A concept that did not exist in modernity until 1948.

Dr. Gerstenfeld's first question of how the Jews see themselves has certainly evolved over the last eighty years. What about the ever-changing third question regarding the outside world's view of the Jews?

Well, it depends...

From the times of Pharaoh and ancient Egypt, the world has always been intimidated by the successful Jew. Joseph had set up his family for success following their migration to Egypt during the famous biblical famine. Eventually, Pharaoh became anxious about the Jewish community's growth, which led him to turn against his previous allies and force them into years of slavery and torture, even going so far as to decree the murder of newborn males to help reduce the population. History has since repeated itself many times, albeit with different perpetrators and different methods.

We find ourselves once again in a period of Jewish confidence and strength. Not surprisingly, we simultaneously find ourselves in a period of increasing antisemitism and violence against Jews. While the anti-Israel and anti-Jewish sentiment seems loud, it is still

the minority for now. More than ever, Jewish identity is supremely important in non-Jewish spaces to keep it that way and change the momentum. Less important than how individual Jews identify their own relationship with Judaism is how they outwardly portray that identification in the space they exist. As mentioned above, religion, culture, ancestry, and morality are various identification factors that Jews will point to when describing their association with their ethnic background. All are acceptable and important, so long as they are portrayed with strength and confidence, and communicated with respect. Our goal should be — to use the words of the Rambam (*Yesodei Hatorah* 5:11) in describing the mitzvah of Kiddush Hashem — that through our actions others praise us, love us, and desire to follow our ways.

As a partner in a law firm owned by only two Jewish partners with employees of various faiths, decisions must be made regarding the Jewish holidays. Does the firm look for a halachic workaround to stay open and allow its non-Jewish employees to work? Or does it close, thus forfeiting financial gain to maintain the Jewish religious identity in its highest form? The decision (which should be discussed with a rabbi) is not quite as important as the communication surrounding it. Corresponding with outside parties, both clients and adversaries, expecting responses and progress on various legal matters, as well as internal communication with employees, always raises the potential for conflict between Dr. Gerstenfeld's first and third questions. How Jews communicate their view of self-identity in a non-Jewish space will inevitably factor into how the outside world sees and identifies the Jew.

Personally, when my firm closes for Jewish holidays, we communicate that proudly. At the same time, we make sure our clients and adversaries are aware in advance and that time-sensitive issues are dealt with so that nobody feels the burden and stress of our decision besides us. This approach has been successful over the years, and we have never experienced any issues from any third parties with respect to religious observance by our law firm.

Over the last few years my firm has hosted a holiday party in December. It is our opportunity to thank our clients and colleagues for their loyalty, business and cooperation. Following the events of Oct. 7, my partner and I made the decision not to go forward with the annual event. We sent an email to each invitee letting them know that in light of the situation in Israel, the ongoing war being fought by our brothers and sisters, we did not feel it was appropriate to host a celebratory event. We put forth our Jewish identity with confidence and a full understanding that it might not be accepted the same way by all. While it is important to communicate with respect, it is also important to do so with confidence, regardless of whether the information being disseminated will be considered controversial by some. Because, as much as there is importance in how the outside world sees the Jew, the eternal survival of the Jewish identity resides in how the Jews see themselves.

As the head men's basketball coach at Yeshiva University, when dealing with collegiate athletics or sports generally, it is a different dynamic than the business world. We are in a primarily non-Jewish space with very few Jewish participants. There is a lack of basic understanding of the religious aspect of Judaism and, at best, a vague familiarity with Jewish culture.

Sports, stereotypically, have not been a space where Jews have been known for their triumphs. That too has changed in recent decades. The often referenced, but slowly becoming irrelevant, scene from the movie *Airplane* depicts a flight attendant responding to a passenger's request for light reading with a leaflet called "Famous Jewish Sports Legends." Since then, the world has seen Jewish Olympic gold medalists, Euro-League champions, Orthodox Jews drafted to professional leagues in various sports, and of course a 50-game win streak by our Yeshiva University Maccabees, which included a trip to the Sweet 16 (before Covid interrupted) and a #1 overall national ranking. The landscape has changed. The self-view as well as the world's view of the Jewish athlete has evolved.

It is not without challenges. The lack of understanding of the religious schedule or cultural and ethical obligations causes friction in the non-Jewish space. With antisemitism on the rise globally, the high-profile nature of athletics creates an easy target for those looking to throw their hate around. Our team social media as well as my personal social media have been hit with hateful comments as a result of a post-Oct. 7 world of uneducated college students consuming information from Tik Tok and other propaganda sources.

The responsibility of Jewish athletes and coaches to preserve their identity with confidence is as imperative as the obligation to be educated about Jewish culture, religion, ancestry, and morality. Unbiased people who don't know will ask questions. They will formulate opinions based on the answers. Athletes and coaches in the sports space have a

platform to provide answers. Therefore, the identity of the Jewish athlete and coach in the non-Jewish space of sports is critical in properly managing the relationship between Dr. Gerstenfeld's concepts of the Jews' view of self and the outside world's view of the Jews.

I am privileged to have a front-row seat as I watch the professional development of a former YU player, Ryan Turrell, currently of the Motor City Cruise,² and my son, Jacob Steinmetz, a pitcher for the Arizona Diamondbacks. Both of their Jewish identities will be on display to their teammates and organizations, as well as to increasing numbers of sports fans, as they continue to rise through their respective organizations. From a purely cultural and social perspective, their decisions on how to handle their Jewish identities will directly impact many in the outside world's view of Jews. They have not only been accepted by their colleagues, often receiving text messages on Jewish holidays from teammates and coaches, but by the front offices as well. The Diamondbacks have gone above and beyond to make Jacob feel welcome, as was summarized in a recent Washington Post article by Zach Buchanan.³ From speaking with Ryan, the Pistons have done the same for him, making sure he has proper hotel and food accommodations both at home and on the road. The willingness of these organizations to pioneer the handling of the self-identifying Orthodox-Jewish athlete will be significant in laying the groundwork for these athletes' success and their ability to impact the global view of Jews in the space of professional sports.

In both the legal and business worlds, as well as sports, the ability to communicate

with respect and understanding is vital to success, tolerance, and acceptance. We as Jews are unique. We make up less than half of one percent of the world population. We have unique practices and a different upbringing than over 99.5% of the world. The outside world does not always understand Jewish culture and practices. Ignorance very often leads to hate, or at least to intolerance. The importance of Jewish identity in the non-Jewish space is crucial to fighting intolerance and antisemitism. The more confident and educated Jews are with their self-identification, the greater their ability to have a positive effect on the outsider's view of the strong, confident, successful Jew.

The role of the career-driven professional, as well as the athlete and coach is essential. Our ability to deal ethically in business while communicating with clients, partners, and adversaries on a daily basis provides many opportunities to not just strengthen our own Jewish identity but to positively impact the non-Jewish view of Jewish culture and religious practice. The athlete or coach as a role model has a built-in platform to express their identity both publicly and positively. The Jewish athlete and coach are in a unique position to embrace their Jewish identity in a public forum that will undoubtedly impact the outside world's view of the Jewish people. This complicated, but achievable, bridging of the self-view and outsider's view of the post-1967 Jewish identity may very well be an important factor in combatting the rise in antisemitism globally.

² The Motor City Cruise is the National Basketball Association G League affiliate of the Detroit Pistons.

³ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/2023/08/31/jacob-steinmetz-orthodox-jewish-diamondbacks/>.