CHAPTER

Jewish Americans

There are two major Jewish cultural groups in the United States, the Ashkenazim, Jews of central and eastern European descent, and the Sephardim, Jews of Spanish descent. Before the peak of the Spanish Inquisition in 1492, Sephardism was the primary form of Jewry in the world but with that dispersion their numbers decreased. Now Sephardim represent only a small minority of the U.S. and world Jewish populations. Jewish Americans are divided among three primary levels of religiosity—Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform.

The National Jewish Population Survey of 1990 identified 4,210,000 Americans who were born Jewish and whose religion was Judaism, and an additional 185,000 who converted to Judaism, for a total U.S. Jewish population of 4,395,000. In addition, 1,120,000 were born Jews but stated they did not practice any religion (Falk, 1995). Of the core Jewish American population, which excludes people born Jewish but following another religion, 18.9% are under age 15 and 16.9% are age 65 and over. This relatively old population contains proportionately one-third more elderly people than does the U.S. population as a whole (Council of Jewish Federations, 1990). The declining birth rate will not replace the Jewish population from generation to generation (Falk, 1995).

Almost all (90.6%) of the core Jewish American population were born in the United States. Jewish Americans struggle with the reoccurring concern of whether changes in third- and fourth-generation Jews will lead to the vanishing of American Judaism. There is a clear inter-

generational pattern of assimilation and an increasing remoteness from Judaism with each generation a family is in the United States. Most converts to Judaism are women age 30 to 50 who marry a Jew. Overall, the number of converts is low, and 30% who reported they had become Jewish had not gone through a formal conversion process. The population that reported either being born or raised Jewish but currently practicing another religion is primarily offspring of intermarriages. This group is also predominantly female (Council of Jewish Federations, 1990). Including secular Jews, in 1992, 2% of the U.S. population was Jewish. This continues a decline from 2.9% in 1968, and 3.7% in 1937 (Falk, 1995).

Examining Jewish identity raises questions of whether Jews are an ethnic, cultural, or religious group. Although there is no simple answer, the definitions used in the Jewish Population Survey (Council of Jewish Federations, 1990) suggest that the common tie among Jews is religion, whether or not they are active practitioners. There are some ethnic commonalities among some groups of Jews as reflected in the Ashkenazim and Sephardim distinctions, but there is significant ethnic and cultural diversity among Jews as well. A small minority of Jews is of non-European descent. Of the core Jewish population in the United States, 2.4% are African American and 1.9% are Latino. The largest group of American Jews (47.6%) report they are of Ashkenazic origin. An additional 8.1% are Sephardic, and 44.3% do not know their ethnic heritage, or provided a variety of answers (Council of Jewish Federations, 1990).

The U.S. Jewish population has a high proportion of college graduates and a declining gender gap in education. The stronger the attachment to Judaism, the smaller the gender gap (Council of Jewish Federations, 1990). In 1990, more than 20% of Jewish men had completed an undergraduate degree (without postgraduate education), and an additional 30% had gone beyond this to achieve some postgraduate education. This compares with 13.2% and 11.3% of non-Jewish White men. Nearly 25% of Jewish women are college graduates and an additional 25% have graduate degrees compared with 11% and 6% of non-Jewish White women. Although Judaism has emphasized study as a key virtue, higher education with its scientific bent may be considered anti-religious and may ultimately contribute to increasing secularization (Falk, 1995).

Choice of marriage partners has changed significantly during the last few decades. More than half the people who were born Jews are married to non-Jews. Less than 5% of interfaith marriages involve a non-Jew converting to Judaism. This is likely to be an underestimate of interfaith relationships because it does not include marriages resulting in divorce or relationships outside marriage (Council of Jewish Federations, 1990). Traditionally, Jews are matrilineal; thus, only those born of a Jewish mother are considered Jewish. Tracing descent through the female line has persisted despite other aspects of Jewish culture being patriarchal. In recent times, matrilineal descent, combined with the high rate of intermarriage, has raised the divisive issue of who can be considered Jewish. The Reform denomination now recognizes anyone who has either a Jewish mother or a Jewish father to be Jewish (Falk, 1995).

The term *Jew* covers a broad range of people and reveals little about cultural identification or how someone practices his or her faith. The specific categories, Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform, and even more specific designations within those categories (e.g., Hasidic as a form of Orthodox) are likely to be more meaningful. In this chapter, specific terms are used when possible.

This chapter gives an overview of social work with Jewish Americans. The social work literature on this population is limited, so this chapter also draws on the broader social science literature as well as on literature on social work with Jews in Israel. The significant diversity that exists within and among Jewish Americans sets the context for discussion. The chapter presents information on knowledge, skills, and values/attitudes necessary for cultural competence and presents issues for cultural competence on micro and macro levels.

KNOWLEDGE FOR CULTURAL COMPETENCE

The knowledge needed for culturally competent social work with Jewish Americans can be divided into four broad areas: diversity, history, culture, and contemporary realities. Diversity serves as an overarching concept that informs the other areas. The history, culture, and contemporary realities of Jewish Americans vary according to factors such as ethnicity and degree of religiosity.

Diversity

There are significant distinctions among Jewish Americans along ethnic and cultural lines. Differences exist between Ashkenazim and Sephardim; within Ashkenazim between Germans and Eastern Europeans; and within Sephardim based on geographical distribution (Schwartz, 1999). These national and ethnic distinctions have implications for how culture has developed and continues to be expressed.

Sephardim are associated with Jewish Spanish high culture and retained a Castilian Spanish identity for centuries in exile. Spanish-Portuguese Sephardim dominated the religious, social, and economic life of American Jewry and Jewry throughout the Western hemisphere during the U.S. colonial and early federal periods. By the 1830s, Sephardim were overwhelmed by German-speaking Ashkenazim from central Europe, and these newer immigrants served as the foundation for the future American Jewish community (Cohen, 1993).

Sephardim translates as Iberian and refers to this population's historic association with Spain and to a lesser extent Portugal. Sephardim spoke Judeo-Spanish, Greek, or Arabic. They developed distinct religious practices, songs, and poetry. In modern times, the term *Sephardic* is also applied to Jews of non-Iberian backgrounds who have become part of Sephardic communities and in Israel to those who identify as Sephardim on cultural grounds. Of the nearly 15 million Jews world wide, only 10% are Sephardim (Cohen, 1993).

Both Sephardim and Ashkenazim observe the basic tenets of Judaism and abide by the authority of the Babylonian Talmud, but their different cultural

and historical backgrounds have shaped their rituals, liturgy, and general attitude toward Jewish law. Sephardim emphasize the joyful and sustaining aspects of following the commandments rather than their absolute observance. Sephardic music reflects Iberian and Arabic influences. "As for the *piyutim* (hymns), it has been said that the Ashkenazic ones are 'mediators between the Nation and its God,' while those of the Sephardim are 'mediators between the Soul and its Creator'" (Papo, 1993, p. 280).

Jewish Americans also exhibit significant diversity in their religiosity. Indeed, many are secular and do not practice Judaism, whereas others interpret traditional teachings more or less flexibly. Religiosity is often divided into the three categories of Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform, with the latter being the most liberal.

There is a significant split between Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews. Orthodox may see non-Orthodox as non-Jews and non-Orthodox may see Orthodox as outdated relics (Falk, 1995). Study of the Torah is the most fundamental principle of Orthodox Judaism, and this branch is more structured than Reform or Conservative traditions are (Falk, 1995). There are many differences between Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox branches of Judaism, yet all share similarities. Of the three branches, Orthodox Judaism is the most strongly grounded in tradition and has its roots in both Sephardic and Ashkenazic heritage. Reform Judaism has its roots in German Ashkenazic traditions and was a prominent movement when many Jews were emigrating from Germany to the United States, before and after the Civil War. Reform Judaism emphasized a restructuring of the liturgy to make it more accessible, eliminated many rules governing daily life so Jews were less visibly distinct from other populations, and essentially focused on modernizing the ancient faith to make it more attractive. The American Conservative movement in Judaism was created to fill the gulf between what was seen as the extremes of Orthodoxy and the overliberalization of Reform Judaism (Cowan & Cowan, 1996).

There are also clear distinctions within the three major branches. For example, among the Orthodox, the Hasidim have come to stand out as ultra-Orthodox and there are distinct types of Hasidim. All Hasidim trace their origin to the movement started by Israel ben Eliezer (1700–1760), but the different sects vary based on which rebbe or charismatic leader they follow and the customs of that group. Hasidic communities are frequently insular and actively opposed to what they see as the corrupting forces of contemporary secular society. Hasidim tend to be suspicious of outsiders. Boundaries are an important part of self-maintenance. Insulating members from a secular host community operates as protection against assimilation (Heilman, 1995; Shaffir, 1995).

History

Jews have a long history that continues to influence contemporary cultural expression in the United States. That history includes centuries in Europe, Asia, and other parts of the world before coming to the United States, early immigration to and life in the United States, and the Nazi Holocaust and its

aftermath. Understanding this history gives helping professionals a context for understanding Jewish American clients.

Development and Dispersement of European Jewish Cultures Under Muslim rule (beginning in the 8th century and dwindling between the 12th and 15th centuries), Iberian Jews were the premier Jewish community in Europe and developed many of the traits that shaped Sephardim. Iberian Jews were *dhimmi* or protected people. They were seen as inferior and subject to heavier taxes but lived in greater physical and emotional comfort than in any other Christian or Muslim country of the time. They participated in many occupations and had regular professional contact with Muslims. Significant interaction led to Muslim influences on Jewish life, dress, institutions, architecture, philosophy, governance, and culture. During this Jewish golden age, poetry, writing, and philosophy flourished (Cohen, 1993).

The Sephardim were also influenced by the Christian reconquest of Iberia (between the 12th and 15th centuries). The Sephardim continued to enjoy quasi-autonomous status under Talmudic law during Christian rule as they had with Muslims. At this time, Jewish intellectual mysticism flourished. Jews took on a prominent role in administration and diplomacy as the Christian reconquest continued. Jews were charged with organizing royal finances and collecting taxes. Their knowledge of both Christian and Muslim cultures made them ideal diplomats. Unlike in other Christian areas, the Jews of Iberia had substantial professional, social, and cultural contact with non-Jews. In spite of and in some ways because of these key roles, Jews were easy scapegoats and were seen as an impediment to non-establishment leaders seeking political change. Thus, Jews experienced growing prejudice and propaganda, including charges of host desecration, well poisoning, and ritual murder. These myths were exploited to raise popular discontent against the Jews (Cohen, 1993).

As Christians reconquered more of the Iberian Peninsula, conversion became the official policy of Spanish kingdoms like Castile and Aragon. This lasted until the Edict of Expulsion that forced all Jews out of Spain in 1492 and a comparable order that banned Jews from Portugal shortly thereafter. Expulsion was deemed necessary because it was felt that Jews who had forcefully been converted to Christianity could not be trusted and might secretly be practicing Judaism. The Inquisition sought to apprehend and punish heretics.

Many Jews who left Spain settled in the Muslim world, particularly in parts of the Ottoman Empire. These refugees encountered Jewish populations in their new homes who often felt threatened by the newcomers' skills and culture. The Ottoman Jewish community was socially isolated and politically fragmented. Sephardic heritage was consolidated through a movement for political unification of Jewish life that included systematization of the Kabbalah (mystical teachings related to God, the universe, and the Torah), focus on education to transmit sacred traditions of Judaism, channeling Jewish faith and practice through structures of traditional thought and law, and preservation of 15th century Castilian as the primary Sephardic language (also known as Espanyol, Judezmo, or Ladino) (Cohen, 1993).

In the 19th century, there was a gradual recession from centrality of Sephardic life through increased acculturation and secularization. Sephardism was also weakened by Nazi decimation of Sephardic Jews in lands once under the Ottoman Empire (Cohen, 1993). Sephardim have immigrated throughout the world for three reasons: religious zeal, economic opportunity, and fear of persecution. They have mixed with people from various continents, resulting in a very diverse population (Cohen, 1993).

Hasidism developed in Eastern Europe in the mid 18th century as an alternative to traditional rabbinical Judaism. This reform movement saw Judaism as rigid and overly scholastic and sought to change it into a faith grounded in "egalitarianism, charismatic leadership, and ecstatic devotion to God. Hasidism arose from the ashes of 18th-century Poland, where Jewish culture and society had deteriorated into political anarchy, financial impoverishment, and spiritual malaise. As such, it can best be understood as a revitalization movement" (Belcove-Shalin, 1995a, p. 4).

The founder of Hasidism, Israel ben Eliezer, taught that God was everywhere and could be praised through music, dance, and stories as well as through study and prayer. Legitimizing nonscholarly forms of communion and placing them on the same level as formal Torah study radically democratized Jewish worship (Belcove-Shalin, 1995a). Hasidic teachings later became systematized and rebbes' authority grew. As Hasidism spread in Eastern Europe, other Jews resisted and condemned the Hasidim's "insular lifestyle, contempt for the Torah, unseemly shouting, singing, and dancing during prayer, excessive feasting and merrymaking, and the 'cult of the rebbe'—as well as of the frivolous innovations in the liturgy, prayer sequence, and the method of ritual slaughter" (Belcove-Shalin, 1995a, p. 6).

Early Immigration and Life in the United States In 1654, 23 Jewish refugees arrived in New Amsterdam fleeing the Portuguese reconquest of Recife, Brazil. Governor Peter Stuyvesant attempted to deport them but desisted after being reminded of the number of Jewish stockholders in the Dutch West Indian Company. Jews came to New Amsterdam (later New York) in increasing numbers and eventually New York became the city with the largest Jewish population in the history of the Jewish people. Eventually, the Jews of the United States became the largest Jewish community in the world (Karp, 1998).

The first significant Jewish immigration to the United States was Sephardic. In this first wave of immigration, small numbers came from the Netherlands and England in the 17th century. Between 1899 and 1913, several thousand came from the Mediterranean region bringing the total Sephardic population to approximately 15,000 (Schwartz, 1999).

After 1908, large numbers of Sephardic immigrants settled on the lower east side of New York City. Social agencies were concerned about the already overburdened area and encouraged resettlement elsewhere, but most stayed. Sephardim were often rejected by Ashkenazim. Sephardim were gradually absorbed into American economic life, although many had arrived speaking

no English or Yiddish (a language common among European Jews) and worked in sweatshops (Papo, 1993).

Sephardic immigration to the United States, predominantly from the former Ottoman Empire, peaked between 1908 and 1924 when the United States severely limited Jewish immigration. By then, the United States had approximately 70,000 Sephardic immigrants with half of these living in the greater New York area. Substantial Sephardic communities also existed in Atlanta, Chicago, Cincinnati, and Los Angeles (Cohen, 1993).

The first wave of Ashkenazic immigration to the United States was 1820 to 1880. Approximately 200,000 German Jews came to the United States fleeing nationalistic and anti-Semitic laws. A second wave of immigration occurred between 1880 and 1924 and contained 2.5 million Eastern European Jews (Schwartz, 1999).

The different Jewish populations did not have contact with each other before their arrival in the United States; thus, tension and discord developed here, particularly between German and Eastern European Jews. Americanized German Jews feared their social status would decrease if they were associated with the new Eastern European arrivals. There were significant differences in practices and values of these groups. German Jews had a long history of assimilation, unlike the Orthodox, separatist Eastern Europeans. Germans were less observant and did not speak a distinct language like Yiddish. On the other hand, Sephardim tended to live a culturally separate life in their host countries centered around religion. Despite regional distinctions, Sephardim shared a common culture and language based on their history in Spain. Sephardic practices were foreign to U.S. Ashkenazim and were not well tolerated. The two groups kept separate educational, social, and religious institutions. Racism was also a factor, and Ashkenazim disparaged Sephardim for their darker skin. Likewise, Sephardim disparaged Ashkenazim, calling them Protestants or hatless Jews because of their reform practices (Schwartz, 1999).

Small Hasidic congregations began appearing in the United States in 1875. Some minor rebbes and emissaries came to the United States in the early 20th century. Another wave of leaders settled along the eastern seaboard and in the Midwest after World War I. Large masses of rebbes and their followers did not arrive until after World War II. By the 1960s, the Hasidic population of New York City was believed to be between 40,000 and 50,000. Because of a high birth rate (families typically have 5–6 children), and a growing number of new adherents, the Hasidic population has doubled in 20 years. There are an estimated 250,000 Hasidim in the world, with 200,000 of these in the United States, and 100,000 of these in New York State. The Hasidim have established particularly strong communities in the neighborhoods of Crown Heights, Williamsburg, and Boro Park, Brooklyn. The largest Hasidic communities outside metropolitan New York are in Montreal, Chicago, and Los Angeles (Belcove-Shalin, 1995a).

Although they enjoyed a certain amount of material and social success, German Jews were often barred from civic, fraternal, and social organizations;

thus, they formed their own. Other European Jews and Sephardim were more likely to form cultural organizations upon their arrival in the United States because they were more concerned with cultural maintenance (Schwartz, 1999). Sephardim established mutual aid societies that became the center of social and community life. Later, large federations were established that were open to all Jews. These federations coordinated fundraising activities and social and educational services (Papo, 1993).

In 1924, federal restrictions slowed Jewish immigration to a trickle, thus raising the issue of a potential loss of culture. Likewise, high rates of Sephardic intermarriage led to significant cultural loss and a diminishing perception of them as a distinct group (Schwartz, 1999).

The Holocaust and Its Aftermath Jews have experienced pogroms and exiles throughout their history. The most significant one in recent times is the persecution and mass killings of millions of Jews in Europe under Nazi rule during World War II. This recent memory continues to affect the lives of American Jews. Broadly defined, Holocaust survivors are European-born Jews who experienced the Holocaust either in hiding, in the underground resistance, as refugees, or in concentration or forced labor camps (Sorscher & Cohen, 1997).

Afraid of what they saw as overpowering acculturative and secularizing forces in America and the nationalistic heresy of Israel, many Hasidic leaders warned their followers not to leave their homes in Europe as Nazism gained power. Thus, many Hasidic communities were wiped out, leaving few survivors. A few surviving Hasidic leaders did establish communities in the United States. One of the primary cultural survival strategies that they employed was to emphasize customs of the past (Heilman, 1995).

The Nazi Holocaust has significantly affected the children of survivors. This transgenerational impact includes the following: (1) detrimental effects such as traumatic after-effects, phobias, depression, recurrent imagery, pessimism, and other mental health problems; and (2) adaptive effects such as creativity, altruism, group affiliation, and ethnic identification. Significant variation exists in individuals' responses to Holocaust trauma. Parents' communication patterns (i.e., what is stated about the Holocaust) influence children's responses. Despite the significant and lasting effects, few controlled, empirical studies have been conducted on the psychological effects of Holocaust trauma on the children of survivors (Sorscher & Cohen, 1997).

The limited response of Americans, including American Jews, to Nazi atrocities is an issue that divides the Jewish community. This has become a controversy as "historians have shown that the American Jewish community was at best complacent about the mass murders of Jews in Europe between 1933 and 1945. Even after the war was over, Jewish organizations sought to return the survivors to Poland and other hotbeds of anti-Jewish hatred" (Falk, 1995, p. 364). American Jews and Jewish organizations felt ill prepared to cope with Holocaust survivors in the United States and, thus, were reluctant to extend their assistance.

Culture

Understanding several key elements of Jewish culture will help facilitate the work of helping professionals with their Jewish clients. First among these areas are ongoing struggles associated with identity and assimilation. It is also important for helping professionals to have a basic understanding of key Jewish rites and values.

Identity and Assimilation Fear of cultural loss through assimilation has been a prominent theme among Jewish Americans for more than 100 years. "American Jews, like other Jews before them, have lived within a paradox of faith and fear—the faith that they are an eternal people, and the fear that their generation may be the last. The survival of every Jewish community has been conditional" (Karp, 1998, p. ix). In every generation, survival of the next generation is the priority.

Some Jews view the tradition of matrilineal descent as antiquated, dysfunctional, and contributing to the decline of the Jewish American population. They point out that Judaism was established by Abraham, a man who was born a Chaldean and, thus, is not based in biology (Falk, 1995). Even if socialization rather than biological heritage were the primary criteria for Jewish identity, it is likely that the population would continue to decline. Indeed, the contemporary Jewish community is faced with a paradox: overall their numbers are decreasing and each succeeding generation is becoming more assimilated into the American mainstream, yet the small, ultra-Orthodox Hasidic sect is actually growing in numbers and influence.

Hasidic communities are an example of resistance to assimilation. Hasidim survive from the past but are not identical with it. They are part of the modern world struggling against powerful social forces that would either sweep them away or transform them. The process of cultural and social survival itself has led to change. As more Jews become acculturated and secularized, Hasidim stand out as anti-acculturation.

> In the process, these erstwhile radical mystics and religious revolutionaries who challenged the rabbinic status quo when they first emerged in the late eighteenth century have become redefined as among the most conservative elements in Jewish life, the ultra-Orthodox or—in the increasingly popular Hebrew term *Haredim*—those whose attachment to ritual and religious tradition is anxiously maximal. As Haredim, they are a minority of a minority, approximately 25 percent of the nearly 10 percent of Jews who call themselves "Orthodox." But they are a minority that has been, at least on the surface, able to maintain their alternative lifestyle and values in the face of the secularizing and acculturative trends. Long after they were expected to disappear, they have continued to exist. (Heilman, 1995, p. xii)

Rites Ceremonial rites of passage aid in the negotiation of life stage transitions. Traditionally, the bar or bat mitzvah marks the transition from childhood to adulthood—bar mitzvah for males and bat mitzvah for females. Participation in this important rite of passage may be associated with lower

delinquency among Jewish adolescents. This pivotal ritual helps them understand and accept their responsibilities as adults (Falk, 1995).

These rites are based on 1,500 years of traditions. At age 13, a boy goes through a ceremony in which he recites a blessing, reads from the Torah, and delivers a speech in Hebrew. After his bar mitzvah, the boy is considered to be a man and can give witness in a Jewish court, is held responsible for his wrongdoing, and can be counted as one of a group of 10 adults, or *minyan*, needed for a prayer service (Kahn, 1995).

Bat mitzvah is the more recently developed female counterpart to bar mitzvah and is increasingly acceptable in more liberal congregations. This ritual reinforces generational values and customs of traditional Jewish practices. This transition offers a sense of connectedness to the community. This can be a part of psychosocial growth and development for an individual.

During the last 20 years, adult bar and bat mitzvahs have begun to happen for those who chose not to, or were unable to, complete the ritual at the typical time. A study of adult bat mitzvahs found that often women who study for their bat mitzvahs are making important statements about their commitments as Jews. This is a mechanism for women who grew up in assimilated Jewish families to claim the Jewish identities their families had denied. For assimilated Jews in search of their cultural identity, bat mitzvah may help them to connect with past, present, and future generations of Jews (Kahn, 1995).

Values Major values important to Jewish Americans include justice, self-reliance, education, and families. Justice is a key value in Jewish cultural traditions. "Admonitions to do that which is just have been the core of Jewish existence. The whole concept of *halacha*, the law, rests on the concept of justice so that, as we have seen, Jews ranging in observance from Reform to Orthodox consult *halacha*. To be a Jew depends therefore first, and foremost, on absorbing into one's personality a concern with social justice *in this world*" (Falk, 1995, p. 367, emphasis in original). An outgrowth of this concern with justice is social action, and many Jews have been actively involved with a variety of social agendas.

Self-reliance is emphasized in Jewish culture (Falk, 1995). It is important to be able to rely on yourself because others may prove unreliable. This value may be an outgrowth of the centuries of persecution experienced by Jewish people throughout the world and a sense of recurrent victimization.

The strong value placed on education is evidenced by the large numbers of Jewish Americans completing college and graduate school and their subsequent occupational distribution. The Jewish community is better off economically than most Christian denominations are. This may make poverty particularly painful for the Jews who experience it. Educational and professional achievements are expectations in the Jewish community. In particular, young adults are expected to have secured an education and economic stability before marriage (Falk, 1995). Religious education can also be an important way to preserve culture (Papo, 1993).

In general, Judaism comes from a patriarchal tradition although Reform branches are much more accepting of gender equality than their Orthodox counterparts are. The clear gender roles and guidelines for married life found in Orthodox Judaism can be appealing to young Jewish adults struggling with the contested nature of these roles in contemporary society (Davidman & Stocks, 1995).

Among the Hasidim, there is no place for singles, who are considered half a person. Hasidim have institutionalized mechanisms, such as matchmakers and arranged marriages, for ensuring their members marry. Highly regulated dating is allowed only when young adults are ready for marriage. After a few dates, the suitability of a potential marriage partner is determined. Hasidim are opposed to divorce. Selflessness, devotion, and unconditional acceptance of the partner are encouraged in marriage. Romantic love is de-emphasized because feelings are fleeting. An emphasis is placed on the roles they will play, such as spouse and parent. Strict gender roles emphasize the importance of marriage and childbearing for women. Biological differences are thought to be the root source for the distinct natures of men and women. Women are seen as naturally selfless and devotional. Sexuality is related to Godliness and should only exist within marriage. Jewish laws also establish boundaries for when sexuality can be expressed within marriage. There is an emphasis on modesty, and touching is strictly regulated in public and in the home. Birth control is generally forbidden (Davidman & Stocks, 1995).

A study of the Lubavitcher Hasidim revealed that family is central in religious life. Breakdown of the family is attributed to loss of boundaries in contemporary life. Loyalty, respect, and trust are key family values. There is a strong belief that if the family were to return to a traditional form, other societal ills would disappear (Davidman & Stocks, 1995).

Contemporary Realities

It is important for social workers to move beyond a historical foundation of knowledge and have a basic understanding of the contemporary realities of Jewish Americans. Key contemporary realities include anti-Semitism, loss of culture and population, gender roles, home and exile, and strengths and continuity.

Anti-Semitism and Oppression Anti-Semitism and oppression have been a shaping force among Jews historically and continue to be so in contemporary times. In reflecting on their lives, oppression was a theme identified by members of a group of Russian Jewish immigrants.

> The entire group concurred that it was ultimately due to anti-Semitism that they sought to immigrate to America. Discrimination against Jews for promotions in factories and for entrance to universities was a frequent topic of conversation . . . In light of this oppression, it is interesting to note that virtually all group members stated that they had chosen immigration not so much for themselves but for their children and grandchildren and their futures. All members

> conveyed that living with anti-Semitism and oppression in Russia was a way of life, onerous as it was, towards which they had adapted. The conclusion from their point of view is that immigration to America held the possibility of hope for a better life for future generations but that their generation's suffering was too profound to permit them to envision or enjoy any future of their own. (Feinberg, 1996, p. 47)

Anti-Semitism and oppression are fueled by stereotypes and myths. One such myth is that Jews possess specific traits such as a talent for commerce and finance, aversion to soldiering, obsession for religion, clannishness, and xenophobia. "Derived from the myth is the implicit notion of a demonic power possessed by Jews. As a result of this power, Jews, the paucity of their numbers notwithstanding, can control powerful institutions and even entire kingdoms. Connected to the myth is the conception of a 'Jewish problem' nettling every government and requiring special attention" (Cohen, 1993, p. 6). These stereotypes, which have existed for centuries, provide a historical precedent for Hitler's belief that the "final solution" was eradication of Jewish people from all countries.

Accusations of connections with the occult and demonic powers fuel the contemporary anti-Semitism of American right-wing extremist and neo-Nazi groups. Such groups often believe that Jews have infiltrated and are secretly running the United States government (referred to as Zionist Occupied Government or ZOG). These extremist groups believe Jews must be destroyed as Aryan Whites, the true Americans, assert their rightful place in the United States.

Loss of Culture and Population Jewish Americans face the challenge of maintaining the integrity of their faith and culture while coexisting with non-Jewish culture and society. Maintaining both is difficult, especially when they are not living within the physical boundaries of a Jewish community (Karp, 1998). Opportunities for social mobility and the American emphasis on assimilation undermined maintenance of a Jewish cultural identity. Those who wanted to retain their culture had to take deliberate steps to do so (Karp, 1998).

Increasing secularization has been identified as a threat to Jewish cultural continuity. Evidence of this trend includes the following facts: More than half of Jewish Americans marry non-Jews; 3,186,000 American households contain Jews, yet only 56.8% of these households are entirely Jewish; 700,000 children with at least one Jewish parent are being raised in another religion; the Jewish American population is dispersed across the United States, thus weakening major centers of Jewish life; divorce is relatively common; non-Jewish religious practices are widespread among American Jews (e.g., 28% of Jewish households have a Christmas tree some times or every year, yet only 22% of Jews light Sabbath candles every week); and 72% of Jewish Americans do not belong to any Jewish organization (Falk, 1995).

Participation in Jewish rites and rituals, a key element of Jewish identity, has been dwindling. Only 61% of Jewish Americans fast on Yom Kippur, 59%

attend synagogue on high holy days, 11% attend synagogue weekly, and 17% eat only kosher foods (Falk, 1995). The most widely observed ritual in the Jewish community is the bar or bat mitzvah, although this has often been secularized. Most Jewish Americans (85%) have a bar mitzvah, including 36% who say they have no religion. This rite plays a major role in maintaining contemporary Jewish identity, even in a secularized form (Falk, 1995).

Ultra-Orthodox Jews like the Hasidim are also shaped by their fears of secularization and assimilation. They once faced hostile societies that kept Jews at bay. Now they are confronted with enticing, attractive societies where Orthodox Jews can enter a mainstream contemporary existence. In response, they have adopted a defensive posture and have developed their own schools and insular communities to protect their children from what they view as the inferior but tempting outside world. Another survival strategy is to entice more Jews to become Hasidim. They maintain separate customs and language, and they protect themselves by amassing money and political power. All these efforts are to ensure cultural survival (Heilman, 1995).

Gender Roles Gender roles for Jewish Americans vary significantly with the degree of assimilation and level of religiosity. For example, even though overall Jewish women are likely to be highly educated like their male counterparts, among Orthodox Jews women are still often expected to focus their energies on creating a home for their husband and children. Jewish women in Israel, especially those from Asian or African backgrounds, still live in a traditional society of male authority and female submissiveness. The role of the woman is homemaking and child care. Almost half (45%) of women work outside the home but often part-time, in occupations dominated by women, and they earn less money. Traditional Judaism is patriarchal and women occupy passive roles. In marriage, the man blesses his wife, gives her a Religious Marriage Certificate, and retains the right to divorce her (Rabin, Markus, & Voghera, 1999). Despite these patriarchal realities, in Israel, Jewish women are more likely than Arab women to file for divorce in domestic violence situations, thus indicating they feel some power (Rabin et al., 1999).

Home and Exile Exile and the search for a home is a significant theme in Jewish identity. Throughout history, Jewish populations have been repeatedly uprooted. This history is reflected in a longing for home and the promised homeland. The concepts of home and exile are intertwined in both sacred texts and contemporary existence. In rebuilding communities in exile, the Hasidim participate in a divine cosmic drama in which man assists God. This intense community building has proved a successful buffer against acculturation that has characterized much of Jewish existence in the United States (Belcove-Shalin, 1995b). The strong presence of the Hasidic community in Brooklyn has resulted in transforming and traditionalizing the style of dress and worldview of other Orthodox Jews, including a more stringent separation of the sexes. Building schools is a key part of this community transformation.

Strengths and Continuity Despite ongoing fears of cultural loss, Jewish Americans are finding a variety of ways, from Reform to Orthodox, to express new visions of Jewish identity. As the new millennium opens, Reform Judaism has embraced a new traditionalism including a network of day schools that are transforming Jewish education. There is wide evidence of a cultural and spiritual renaissance, including Jewish studies at many universities, continually expanding student bodies at seminaries, and many highly educated and religiously committed Jews. Still, many fears remain. The high rates of intermarriage and degree of assimilation continue to raise a challenge to survival (Karp, 1998).

Judaism remains despite secularization. The social aspects of being Jewish continue even with a decreased emphasis on religion. The Reform movement, which blends tradition and innovation, may lead secular Jews to return to Judaism and their ancestral roots. For example, the new practices of accepting the child of a Jewish father and a non-Jewish mother as Jewish and allowing gay membership may encourage secular Jews to join reform congregations (Falk, 1995).

On the more traditional side, Hasidim have a high birth rate and high profile beyond their actual numbers. Many Hasidic groups are headquartered in Brooklyn where they have amassed political clout. Their high number of voters enables them to have a significant influence on the surrounding community (Belcove-Shalin, 1995a).

SKILLS FOR CULTURAL COMPETENCE

Given the integration of Jewish Americans into the American mainstream, many skills used by helping professionals are likely to be useful with this population. For Jewish Americans from more insular communities, social workers may need to hone skills in engaging, trust building, and outreach.

Engaging

Ultra-Orthodox communities have taken steps to separate themselves from mainstream America and thus are not likely to participate in social services in large numbers. The strong emphasis on self-reliance is likely to produce self-help resources within the Jewish family and community that are sought out in times of need. Social workers who seek to offer services to this community will need to assess the level of need and work closely with trusted members of the community if they expect to gain access to this population. Rather than seeing this population in large numbers, it is more likely that social workers may occasionally encounter ultra-Orthodox clients in venues such as hospitals where their contact with helping professionals is less than voluntary. Social workers need to listen carefully to clients' stated needs and be conscious of any recommendations that may be perceived as contrary to clients' beliefs and values.