Chapter 8

Unpacking My Jewish Identity

Unpacking My Jewish Identity through the Ravensbrück Memorial Site

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The *Harry Potter* series contains a single Jewish character — a student by the name of Anthony Goldstein. If his name is unrecognizable, it is likely because he is mentioned fewer than ten times in the entire series and has a single line of dialogue in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* — when the main character Hermione Granger criticizes the educational direction of the school, Anthony responds, "Hear, hear" (2003, ch. 16). Scant bits of information are known about Anthony; we get details rather than a personality sketch. We know that he is a member of Ravenclaw, the house that prizes learning and wisdom, and that he is a high enough achiever to have been named prefect (Rowling 2003, ch. 10). We know that he is a member of the student resistance group Dumbledore's Army (Rowling 2003, ch. 16), indicating that he is equipped with a strong sense of social justice. And, above all, we know his name and that he is Jewish. He is not Jewish through his actions, or deeds, or attitudes, or even any indication in the text. It was only after the final publication of the series that J.K. Rowling issued a statement about his Jewish ancestry on Twitter: Anthony Goldstein, Ravenclaw, Jewish wizard" (2014). His surname, Goldstein, is the one aspect of his existence in the series that marks his Judaism. His given name, Anthony,

doesn't even reinforce this vision as the name is of Latin origin and steeped in Christian history rather than biblical Hebrew or Jewish origin. He has no textual expression of his own religious identity or engagement with his faith, and, as readers, we are left to construct a profile of "Anthony Goldstein, Ravenclaw, Jewish wizard" that contains little more information than that very sentence.

I refer to Anthony Goldstein not only because of my pathological need to inject Harry Potter into every discourse, but also because I think he can be a useful conduit with which to examine the concept of identity, and my personal Jewish identity in particular. The concept of identity is nebulous in and of itself, as its popular usage is at odds with its etymological roots. The word's common usage generally refers to an individual's statement about their own persona, or someone's name and personal information, a self-focused statement of uniqueness. However, the word derives from the Latin *idem*, which means "the same." This applies more neatly to the concept of a collective identity; if you are going to have an identity as part of a larger group, by definition, it's necessary to delineate not only what exactly constitutes membership in that larger group, but also what sorts of values and desired actions accompany the aforementioned membership. Theorist Alberto Melucci provided a definition for the term "collective identity" in his book *Nomads of the Present*:

> Collective identity is an interactive and shared definition produced by several interacting individuals who are concerned with the orientations of their action as well as the field of opportunities and constraints in which their action takes place. The process of constructing, maintaining, and altering a collective identity provides the basis for actors to shape their expectations and calculate the costs and benefits of their action. Collective identity formation is a delicate process and requires continual investments. As it comes to resemble more institutionalized forms of social action, collective identity may crystallize into organizational forms, a system of formal rules, and patterns of leadership. (1989, 34)

This is where the *idem*, the Latin root of sameness, creeps back into the dialogue. If we follow Melucci's definition, because a collective identity is a shared and continual "delicate" process, it has a degree of

unanimity within it, some sort of cohesion over these values and mores determined through dialogue by the community in response to historical stimuli and other flashpoint moments. The person who takes membership in the group absorbs and reflects these values, slightly but not completely modulating the message. This output reshapes the collective identity, helping lead these values closer to the crystallized form that Melucci sees as the hallmark of a more institutionalized identity.

At its finest, collective identity is a dialogue, replete with engagement and interaction from all members. Yet this sameness and crystallization coming from the desire for a stronger identity can often lead to a flattening of the individual in the pursuit of the collective. In her piece on the role of values in Israel advocacy, Mira Sucharov suggests that "once they are associated with a particular group, individuals may be more inclined to adopt the group's values as a way of maintaining group cohesion and their own place within it" (2011, 364), which can have a stultifying effect, preventing the dialogue from moving forward. By defining identity as a list of traits and then having all members within the group adhere to the defined list of traits, it leads to a flattening of the perception of that collective as nothing beyond said amalgam of traits. This is how we return to Anthony Goldstein. His author-chosen traits hew very closely to the Jewish values outlined and prized from the time of the Torah to the modern day. He is studious, as proven by his membership in the house that prizes learning, and a high achiever within his studious house. According to the Harry Potter mythos, the mechanism that assigns students to their houses (a magical hat) is a potent object capable of seeing into their inner essence. If we follow this, we can argue that the hat is reading Anthony's inner Jewishness and assigning him based on that. As it says,

> "There's nothing hidden in your head
> The Sorting Hat can't see,
> So try me on and I will tell you
> Where you ought to be.
> [...]
> Or yet in wise old Ravenclaw,
> If you've a ready mind,
> Where those of wit and learning,
> Will always find their kind."
> (1998, ch. 7)

In essence, Anthony would never have had a choice vis-à-vis his affiliation; he was read before his introduction to the story as the intellectual, making him the stereotypical modern "good Jewish boy," aligning with classical Jewish masculine values before even acting in his story. At our holiday meals, we Jews do not tell stories of warriors and duels, but of rabbis and humility. In the Torah, whenever a man of simplicity, intelligence, and faith is matched against a man of physical strength, the man of simplicity and intelligence is always prized over the man of aggression. In Genesis, gentle Jacob outwits brawny Esau, thus earning their father's blessing despite being the younger sibling. Isaac praises Jacob's "cunning" and states that, "I have made him a master over you" (Genesis 27). The invoked mastery and cunning are the causes and justification of Jacob receiving the religious token of praise, rather than condemnations of his deceit. This thread runs through the Bible to more contemporary interpretations of Judaism, even secular ones. Morris Cohen, a philosophy professor at the then-majority Jewish City College of New York from the 1910s to 1930s, aimed to instill a newer "construction of Jewish masculinity" in his students by abhorring football, prioritizing debate and cosmopolitanism, and creating a "combative" classroom that forced students' intellects to the fore (Grinberg 2014, 143-44). This was in contrast to the prevailing Protestant attitudes of the era, which held that "character" consisted of "strength, honor and athleticism, particularly on the football field" (Grinberg 2014, 131).

Anthony's pursuit of intelligence, already a hewing to both classical and modern Jewish masculinity, is burnished by his membership in the student resistance group, Dumbledore's Army. Their enemies, the Death Eaters, believe in the purity of wizard blood and the exclusion of those who do not fit their pure-blooded ideals, a hearkening to Nazi ideology. They similarly share tactics of fear with the Nazi regime of old; once the Death Eaters take control of the government, they issue mass propaganda, create show trials for those who weren't born to two wizard parents, and eliminate those who speak up against them (Rowling 2007). By being an active resister, Anthony is the embodiment of the common Jewish refrain to "never again" repeat the Holocaust. According to a 2012 report from the Public Religion Research Institute, 46% of all American Jews surveyed believed that a commitment to social equality was the most important quality in Jewish identity, more than twice the second highest number (Jones and

Cox 2012, 14).[1] Are these traits uniquely Jewish traits? Of course they aren't. Nevertheless, because Anthony is placed under the Jewish umbrella and is the sole character in the entire Harry Potter universe to be placed under this umbrella, they become Jewish traits and draw him in with the established collective. As Sucharov said, he is adopting the group's values in order to ascertain a place among the group's members. Goldstein is the barest of a bare bones representation of collective identity: he is not afforded individuality beyond the traits that reinforce his people's prized virtues. He contributes to the dialogue only to reinforce it.

For far too long, my personal dialogue with modern Jewish identity has felt less like a rich cultural exchange and more of an Anthony Goldstein-esque shell. I haven't felt like I played a role in the construction of this identity; I felt only its crystallization. I've felt as though I entered into a hardened and fully formed organizational identity with the attached expectations, the endgame of the process outlined by Melucci, rather than playing a hand in shaping it. Like Anthony Goldstein, my family name and the circumstances of my birth have led to my induction into the Jewish community; it is the result of existence, rather than actions, and I was designated as Jewish, rather than designating myself as Jewish. This has led to a twin feeling of both disconnection and definition. Because Judaism is something ascribed to be a part of me from my birth, I've felt owned by this collective, and because of the crystallized *idem*, the sameness, I've felt unable to own it personally. As an individual, you shape yourself by placing yourself inside chosen collectives, taking part in their value-based dialectic and ascribing parts of them to yourself. These Jewish values and mores handed down from time immemorial didn't neatly fit me and weren't decided upon by me. I had no sense of why exactly we couldn't eat pork or shrimp, nor why we weren't supposed to switch the lights on and off on Saturday. I'd read and fundamentally comprehended all the explanations for the religious practices, but the explanations never held much water for me, always boiling down to "It's just what we're supposed to do." The religious antipathy extended into internalized cultural pressure; I was keenly aware of the large number of doctors and lawyers in my extended family, an echo of the traditional expectations and stereotypes to be both well-read and well-compensated. I grew up half

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1 According to the survey, the second highest valued trait (20% among all Jews) was support for Israel, with religious observance third at 17%.

assuming that I'd enter law, because I had neither interest in nor aptitude for the sciences. Like Anthony Goldstein, I was an academic high achiever, yet I felt it less a statement of my Jewishness and Jewish values and more a statement of my personal perseverance and desire. Like Anthony Goldstein, I felt a strong sense of social justice, yet I feel as though those attitudes were enhanced less by growing up in the Jewish community and more by attending a multicultural and open-minded high school.

The chief gap, however, came with the place seen to be the centre of Jewish cultural identity. Growing up, that was Israel. In his paper on diasporic security, Ilan Zvi Baron relays the nine common features of diaspora according to social scientist Robin Cohen. The fourth feature is "an idealization of the real or imagined ancestral home and a collective commitment to its maintenance, restoration, safety and prosperity, even to its creation" (Baron 2014, 293). In my Ottawa diaspora community, Israel was promoted as such. I was raised to see Israeli culture as synonymous with Jewish culture. I learned how to speak Hebrew and sing Hatikvah, the Israeli national anthem, and I went on four trips to the country. The Jewish youth group of which I was a member — United Synagogue Youth — had a special position for an "Israel Affairs Vice President," whose role entailed promoting the country and giving back to it. Every Shabbos service contained a prayer for Israel, and a portion of my Bar Mitzvah gifts went to support Magen David Adom, the Israeli Red Cross. Israel was not chiefly depicted as the religious home of Judaism but rather as the secular home of the Jewish people; as Sucharov writes, "Israel was founded on a peculiarly non-religious definition of what it means to be a Jew … citing the Zionist justification for existing as a Jewish state within the modern tradition of ethno-nationalism" (2011, 366). Yet at the same time, it felt as though the Jewish community's prior home for centuries was fading away. I learned very little about the traditional shtetls that many of Europe's Jews used to call home, and the only European Jewish culture I consumed came from an old storybook on the tales of Chelm. My grandfather was the only person in my family who spoke even beginner's Yiddish, and when I tried to study it in school, the class got cancelled because I was the only one who registered. None of my immediate family was born in Israel, yet three of my great grandparents were born in Europe. I felt a greater connection to Europe, yet it was not nearly as prominent in the Israel-centric cultural dialogue that formed the basis of the Jewish collective identity. As a result of this and many other tensions, my personal contribution to the collective

identity dialogue consisted of my name. I was born Jewish, and I would remain Jewish, yet I could not consider myself as having a share in these valued diasporic positions.

That said, there is a key commonality between the Eurocentric and Israel-centric visions of Jewish identity: the centrality of the Holocaust in the cultural dialogue. In the Israel-centric vision, it is a tragedy that shows the necessity of a Jewish homeland, safe from all those who wish to harm them. Much of Zionist ideology was built on the idea of the "New Jew," who was responsible for defending the state of Israel and the Jewish people by extension (Sucharov 2011, 370). The Holocaust burnished this seeming necessity; Daniel Boyarin writes, "[o]ver and over again, Zionist writers in the 1940s wrote in near-fascist terms of the 'beautiful death' of the Warsaw rebels and the 'ugly death' of the martyrs of the camps" (1997, 293). The thought was that only a strong Israel could prevent the Holocaust from coming again. In addition, support for and unity with Israel, the surviving bastion of the Jewish people that had been lost in Europe, transformed into one of the key lessons of the Holocaust, whose resonance grew and grew in the North American consciousness approaching modern times. Daniel Navon discusses how contemporary Holocaust memory has evolved in both Israel and the United States in the wake of Israel's Six Day War in 1967; when facing impending doom as per the rhetoric coming from Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser, Israeli and American Jewish political leaders conveyed the message that it was not merely Israel but the entire Jewish people who were on the brink of annihilation. The spectre of a "second Auschwitz" in Israel was so terrifying to the North American Jewish population that both sides felt no option but to bond together (2015, 349-54). In this way, tangibly supporting and defending Israel with all your might became a form of atonement for the lack of aid from North America during the Holocaust. Both this desire for national strength and this lingering guilt ensured that Israel would remain at the centre of Holocaust memory in North America, and that Holocaust memory would remain at the centre of Israeli-North American interactions.

In the Eurocentric vision, it is an unspeakable trauma that must be spoken about constantly, a trauma that decimated families and touched nearly everyone on the continent. Monuments abound across the continent, from the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin to the cenotaph containing the ashes of the martyrs murdered in the gas chambers in Nice, France. German-American theorist Herbert Marcuse, who did not identify as a religious Jew, used the term

"Auschwitz" to describe unspeakable crimes after the Second World War, yet stated in a letter to Martin Heidegger that "only outside of the dimension of logic is it possible to explain, to relativize, to 'comprehend' a crime by saying that others would have done the same thing" (Tauber 2013, 122-23). It is not only a touchstone trauma for the Jewish population but for the non-Jewish as well. Annabelle Littoz-Monnet writes: "In the 1990s, the Holocaust was transformed into a definitional myth for the European project. A 'definitional myth' is understood, here, as a narrative chosen by a given society in order to explain how it came about and who it is" (2013, 489).

It was with some trepidation and anxiety that I approached my stay at Ravensbrück Memorial Site, my first visit to a former concentration camp. I was unsure how I would react. It was a site of historical touchstone trauma in a culture I was no longer feeling touched by, and I wasn't sure whether I could fully approach it while I was still wrangling with my personal animus with the Israel-centric view of Judaism. Walking into the site, I was struck by a sense of disquiet. The site of so much horror was, paradoxically, stunningly gorgeous. The houses where we stayed were quaint and painted with leaves. The lake was still and shimmering from the sun. The garden was delicately manicured and full of bright colours. It was as though it were a scene ripped from a Monet painting … and yet, every element of it was poisoned by its history. The quaint houses once belonged to the prison guards who terrorized the camp. The lake was where the Nazis dumped the ashes of those they burnt in the crematorium. The gorgeous garden was a mass grave. I could not properly react to these scenes; should I feel guilty for finding them pleasing, and if so, would I be betraying all sides of a Jewish identity?

My initial hesitancy at Ravensbrück became a mild paralysis, as when I was confronted with the specific nuances of the memorial site; I could not nail down how I felt like feeling. Education at Ravensbrück is shown through the lens of a "situational narrative," which requires "[rendering] the history and its actors accessible and vivid to visitors" (Meyer 2014, 96). Dr. Matthias Heyl, the educational director and our guide, ensured that we experienced the history as vividly as possible. One key instance came at the entrance to the camp area itself. Dr. Heyl introduced us to the two gates: a larger one for the prisoners and a smaller one used exclusively by the guards. Decades before, the gates had been adorned with barbed wire; but when we visited the camp, the barbed wire was long gone, replaced by a simple, unadorned stone opening (see fig. 8.1 below).

FIGURE 8.1. The Gates of Ravensbrück. (Ethan Calof personal collection, July 2017.)

The gates themselves were more than merely an entrance to the camp; they represented the entrenched power dynamics and ideological constructions during the time of the Holocaust. The larger gate, the one for the prisoners, was designed to shepherd humans in a mass. Ravensbrück featured prisoners from many different societal classes, all of whom were suffering different forms of persecution and had differing forms of power within the internal camp structure. They ranged from political dissidents to Jews to Jehovah's Witnesses to criminals; yet all of them were homogenized beyond the gate into one massive clump.[2] Conversely, the overseers' gate allowed them to retain their individuality and superiority, as there was only enough space for one person at a time to pass through. This deliberate design was not unique to Ravensbrück, serving as a reminder that the dehumanization of the prisoners was so thorough that it was even built into the architecture.

When it came time to pass through the gates, I was frozen in indecision. They were not merely doors. If I went through the prisoner door, I'd be walking in the footsteps of my fellow Jews, appreciating their lives and pain in a walk of mourning and remembrance. If I went

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2 Of course, there were differences in how the prisoners from each group were treated within the walls of Ravensbrück, many of which are outlined in Jack G. Morrison's book *Ravensbrück: Everyday Life in a Women's Concentration Camp*. Of note: Jewish prisoners were rarely if ever given desirable work assignments, and their barracks were the first to get overcrowded. I don't mean to suggest that the prisoners had homogenous identities and treatments; rather that they all existed on the underside of the prisoner-overseer binary.

through the guards' door, I'd be laying claim to the space, showing that I could rise above the labels placed upon my people by the Nazi government. Yet, in no possible situation would I, a Jewish man, have been considered for the guards' door; I could only have been a prisoner. Would I be disrespectful to my forbearers and holding myself above them? And by taking the prisoners' door, would I be continuing to live in fear and providing power to my forbearers' oppressors? I decided to go through the prisoners' door, but I remember that I only decided which door to take based on necessity, and only after a minute of contemplation. Of course, I was making a choice that could never have been made by the Jewish prisoners of Ravensbrück, yet the historical weight of power dynamics, symbolism, and unity were nevertheless guides for my processing. I had been situated in the memory rather than in the present.

Dr. Heyl's approach of turning Ravensbrück into a more interactive and situational educational site imbued the former concentration camp with a unique position in my own personal dialogue. There was no staidness in the site, which allowed me an unfiltered window into the potency of its history. Spaces, like identities, derive their meaning from a cooperative dialogue; meaning and weight are ascribed to the spaces by how actors engage with them through dialogue. I felt the full weight of the past trauma. It became clear that the language I needed to engage with Ravensbrück was a specifically Jewish one. I was drawing from my collective identity, or designated structure, to ascribe meaning to the site, and by extension contribute my share. I framed my door choice specifically as a Jewish person, not just an everyday person. When I saw memorials, artwork, gravesites, and placards that honoured the dead, I defaulted to the Jewish rituals of mourning. I placed a stone on every surface I could (a tradition signifying that someone has visited a grave), reasoning that the ashes and bones and death were not restricted to tombs. At the memorial for the women who were penned in a tent during the winter of 1944-45, one of my fellow students and I decided to say the Mourner's Kaddish, the traditional prayer to commemorate those who have passed. While I have never been a particular believer in the religious aspects of Judaism, it felt like the language I needed to communicate my sense of loss and absence. Ravensbrück may not have been a site created exclusively for the detainment of Jewish victims, yet it was still a site of Jewish death. They suffered for their faith, their race, their existence, and it was the least I could do to reach out in solidarity and respect. Like Anthony Goldstein and I, they had been designated

as Jewish by no choice of their own; yet unlike us, they suffered death and trauma due to their membership in this ascribed essence.

The most powerful event for me came on Friday night during our stay at the Ravensbrück Memorial Site. Two of my professors and the aforementioned student decided to do the traditional Sabbath services of candle lighting — a prayer over the wine and a prayer over the bread — and they invited me to join them. I sat down, again with trepidation. I had abstained from Sabbath services at home for a long while, reasoning that if I didn't believe in the prayer, it would feel exploitative and uncomfortable to participate in it. While at Ravensbrück, however, it had a radically different connotation. This was, again, a place where Jews had suffered merely due to the circumstances of their birth. To be unapologetically Jewish, to engage in our historical cultural dialogue and own an aspect of a persecuted people in a place of their persecution, felt like the most powerful form of rebellion to me, far more so than swimming in the lake or sleeping in the guards' houses. It felt as though I were not only using my individual power but the power of a far larger and more resilient whole to reclaim the space from the death and the horror. At that point, the Jewish collective identity ceased to be a crystallized external structure for me and became a facet I could engage with on a personal, interactive level.

It would be a mistake to say that my journey to Ravensbrück led to a religious awakening. I'm not suddenly a theist, nor am I going to register for the next Birthright trip. I still take issue with and feel estrangement from the diasporic community's attachment to an idealized version of Israel, and I have no plans on flattening my sense of self in order to fit into a larger whole. That said, my trip to Ravensbrück served as a reminder that my Jewishness is an inextricable part of me that must be acknowledged and dealt with. As with Anthony Goldstein, it was given to me, and as with Anthony Goldstein, it will stay. It does not have to be only a shell and an identifying marker; yet by the same token, I don't need to incorporate the whole *idem* to have an identity. In moving forward with Melucci's definition of a collective identity, I felt, for the first time, that I had a share in the interactive definition of what it meant to be Jewish. I could be unapologetically Jewish without feeling the need to resort to every aspect of the societal expectations accompanying Jewishness. While Anthony Goldstein never had a chance to define his own Jewishness by any aspects other than his traits, I had that opportunity, proving to myself that the only aspect necessary for a share in the collective was a willingness to engage.

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