THE SECULAR IDEOLOGY OF JEWISH ETHNICITY IN NEW
ZEALAND

Hal B. Levine
Victoria University of Wellington

Gans (1979) and Alba (1990) have argued that ethnicity in white America is becoming increasingly "symbolic" as the social structural factors which supported group solidarity become eroded by the forces of modernity. Jewish ethnicity has been fundamentally affected by these forces which have lessened occupational and social concentration and the cultural distinctiveness of Jews. In an era when personal identity is continually reconstructed and idiosyncratically defined, a countervailing ideology of civil Judaism has developed which stresses the survival and solidarity of the Jewish people in such a "post-traditional" environment. This paper examines the meaningfulness of the themes of secular Judaism to a sample of New Zealand Jews who were interviewed at length about the nature of their Jewish identity. Secular Judaism seems to have had a very small impact upon them. I suggest that the difference between New Zealand and the United States and Australia, where secular Judaism is seen as an important ideological force, can be accounted for by the position of New Zealand's small, mobile and markedly unobtrusive Jewish community, in a society which has been described as being aggressively secular and egalitarian.

Jewish ethnicity is changing in ways which give contemporary Jewishness a dynamic "polyvocal" quality. Schnapper for example, writes about "Jewish Identities in France" (1983) while Wooncher (1986: 69) recognizes that American Jews are becoming "an increasingly diverse category of people." A shift in the balance among the basic elements of Jewish identity (religious tradition, organizations, socioeconomic concentration, ideology, and personal identification) may be a key factor inducing this change. I have recently presented evidence that a similar generalization made by Gans (1979) and Alba (1990) about the changing components of "white" ethnicity is valid for Jews interviewed in New Zealand (Levine forthcoming). Gans and Alba maintain that cultural practices, group organization, common interests and experiences are all becoming less important to the viability of white ethnic groups than a deliberate and voluntary kind of individual identification. This "symbolic ethnicity" (Gans 1979) characteristically
leads to substantial variation in individuals' conceptualizations of ethnic identity. Such variation can itself undermine ethnic solidarity and group formation if identification becomes too detached from ethnic social structures (Alba 1990: 208, 310).

An apparently countervailing trend has emerged among Jews, however, which redefines the basis of Jewish unity. A secular ideology of Jewishness has been elaborated in voluntary organizations that encourages solidarity and survival regardless of religious or institutional affiliation. Woccher characterizes this "civil Judaism" as "the core of as much commonality of belief and behaviour as American Jews are capable of attaining" (1986: 161). Medding, an Australian sociologist (cited in Rubinstein 1991: 42), would apparently agree. He notes that in America there has been a movement away from "a community of shared belief into a community of shared identity. Religious belief and commitment has declined... identity based on the Holocaust and Israel, and the fight against anti-Semitism has taken its place." Rubinstein says that this has not happened in Australia, where these secular symbols are important but "the two modes co-exist."

The contrast between Australia's Jews, which Rubinstein (1991: 42) characterizes as the diaspora community most intensely involved in secular and religious Judaism, and neighboring New Zealand's, is particularly interesting because Jewish life "across the Tasman" is attractive to New Zealand Jews. If Woccher, Medding, Rubinstein and (as we shall see) our informants, are right, different combinations of secular ideology and tradition exist for United States, Australian and New Zealand Jewry. In the New Zealand case, which is the focus here, Jewishness may be relatively weak in all of its dimensions.

My central concern in this paper is to examine the meaningfulness of secular Jewish ideology to individuals interviewed for a project on New Zealand Jewish identity. I use these interview data, along with parts of the corpus of material written about local Jews, to suggest how and why the relationships between secular Jewishness and other aspects of Jewish identification characteristics of New Zealand differ from those found in Australia and the United States.

The Themes of Civil Judaism

Woccher's discussion of "the American Jewish civil religion" contains an insightful description of the content of secular symbols that have universal significance to Jews. The centrality of Israel, remem-