

The Mystery of Jewish Identity

What makes for cohesion among Jews, despite their countless internal conflicts? Is it God? Could it be their festivals and customs? Is it anti-Semitism? Do secular Jews indeed have a *true* Jewish identity? Or is their identity a vague quality, virtually impossible to distinguish from that of non-Jews? What does being Jewish mean nowadays?

The model for Jewish identity described here, ‘the five-slice pie chart’ aims to answer these questions. The model has proven relevant for other identities as well.

IDO ABRAM, December 2005

1. Multiform Nature

From the origins of the Dutch Republic in the sixteenth century to the present, Dutch society has consistently been multiform in all respects.¹ The arrival in recent decades in the Netherlands of a few hundred thousand people from other countries has made Dutch society still more multiform, turning it into a community – often ethnically as well – where distinctive groups comprising different cultures and views coexist. The quest for European unification and the disappearance of national borders in the European Community (EC) will continue to increase the multi-cultural component, as will the accession of new member states to the EC. The Netherlands is a multi-cultural and multi-ethnic society. How does this affect Jews in the Netherlands, and what will be the consequences for their Jewish identity?

2. Jewish Identity in the Netherlands: The Five-slice Pie Chart

A world of difference separates people’s images of themselves from the way they are perceived by others: they see, experience, assess and express themselves differently from the ways that others see, experience and assess them and express such perceptions. We use various names to identify these different images. We refer to the self-image as ‘identity’ and the image that others have of us as ‘imago’.² We determine our self-image: identity = *self*-definition. Our imago is attributed by others and is the ‘self’ that *others* ascribe to us. Imago = *imposed* identity.³

Cultural and ethnic minority groups, including Jews, tend to feel very strongly about their identity. They take comfort in their characteristic features, which make them feel at home and give them a sense of freedom. Positive perceptions of personal identity give rise to self-esteem and self-respect. They may also, however, have negative consequences, which are known as ‘ethnic chauvinism’: ‘we’ are better than ‘they’ are, and those other groups are a bad lot compared to us. Such chauvinism may but need not materialize. Examples abound of successful ‘mixed marriages’ – between individuals and between cultures (with

¹ Schöffner, I. ‘The Jews in the Netherlands: the Position of a Minority through three Centuries’. *Studia Rosenthaliana* 15 (March 1981) 1.

² Abram, I. “‘Alle tranen zijn zout’. Over intercultureel leren in opvoeding en onderwijs”. In: Jan C.C. Rupp & Wiel Veugelers (Red.). *Moreel-politieke heroriëntatie in het onderwijs*. Garant, Antwerp and Apeldoorn, 2003, p. 220-226.

³ *Informatiebrochure Programma Sociale Cohesie*. NWO, The Hague, May 2000, p. 19.

respect to style of dress, language, music, sports, technology...). History teaches that being attached to personal identity need not be an obstacle to appreciating and adapting to other cultures. On the contrary, personal identity is the outcome of this attachment and these outside influences combined. The metaphorical term – based on the poem⁴ by Rudyard Kipling – ‘For East is East, and West is West, And never the twain shall meet’ is as well-known as it is fallacious – both for East and West and for North and South. And, as we shall explain: for Jews and non-Jews as well.

How many identities does an individual have? We tend to distinguish between several identities, such as national, cultural, professional, social and individual identity. Five identities altogether, give or take a few. The number of identities depends on the number of distinctions applied. Each emerging identity corresponds with different areas of experience that forge a bond between the members of a group. Common areas of experience are therefore known as bonds, comparable to family ties. People feel a sense of concern about issues that apparently matter to that identity, about things that are truly important, about values they wish to preserve. Areas of experience are also known as value fields.

Five areas of experience constitute the current identity of Jews living in the Netherlands: Jewish culture, Israel, the Shoah (the Holocaust) / anti-Semitism (hatred of Jews), the personal histories of individuals and Dutch culture. The sequence in which these keywords appear is arbitrary; keywords listed first are no more important than the ones at the end.

The relevant written formula is as follows:

Jewish identity = I + II + III + IV + V, in which

- | | | |
|-----|---|---|
| I | = | Jewish religion, culture and tradition (<i>Jewish culture</i> , for short) |
| II | = | Israel, yearning for Zion and Zionism (<i>Israel</i> , for short) |
| III | = | the Shoah and anti-Semitism, persecution and survival (<i>the Shoah and anti-Semitism</i> , for short) |
| IV | = | an individual’s personal history (<i>personal past</i> , for short) |
| V | = | Dutch culture and environment (<i>Dutch culture</i> , for short). |

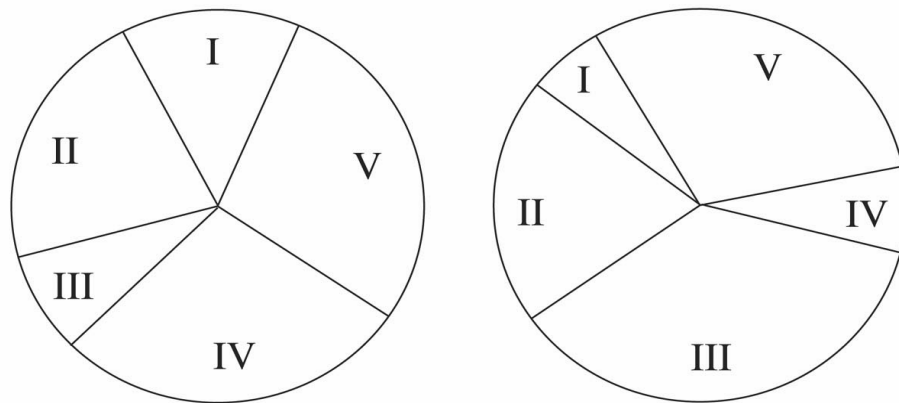
The ‘five-slice pie chart’ illustrates this in a diagram.

Remarks:

1. The Jewish identity referred to here comprises both a personal (IV) and a Dutch (V) component.

⁴ ‘The Ballad of East and West’.

2. The five areas of experience need not all influence Jewish identity in equal



measure. The ‘segments’ in the pie chart are thus not necessarily all the same size, i.e. equal in importance. The influence of some segments may even be virtually negligible. Those segments will be so narrow that they are almost a straight line.

3. Jewish identity is not static but evolves continuously within each individual. The segmentation that applies today may change during the year ahead. That is why there are two circles rather than one.

Many people mistakenly believe that only Segment I (Jewish culture) determines Jewish identity, and that only religious Jews have a Jewish identity. Non-religious Jews (narrow Segment I), assimilated Jews (large Segment V), cosmopolitan Jews (narrow Segment II), anti-fascist Jews (large Segment III) and other Jews have Jewish identities that originate from areas of experience I through V.

Area of experience I: Jewish culture

Culture and tradition – broadly speaking – are passed on from one generation to the next through customs, habits, standards, values, opinions, prejudices, linguistic metaphors, superstitions, myths, theories (including academic ones), taboos, institutions (including marriage, church, school, political affiliation), technological advances, hopes for the future, fears ... the list is endless.⁵ Culture and tradition – the two concepts are synonymous in this discourse – may also be described as a cohesive set of values, standards, attitudes, expectations and ideas with which a group attributes meaning to and interprets reality, *and* the way they are visualized through types of behaviour, feelings, symbols, utterances and treatment of natural surroundings.⁶

Another word for Jewish culture (or Jewish tradition) is ‘Judaism’ or the Hebrew word *Torah*. One of the meanings of the word *Torah* is ‘teaching’. The Torah teaches that

- learning is the most important mode of life
- learning is more important than praying
- learning to do should prevail
- debate and differences of opinion are essential elements of learning

⁵ Friedrich, C.J. *Tradition and Authority*. Praeger, New York / Washington / London, 1972, Chapter 1: ‘Tradition as Fact and Norm’.

⁶ Hagendoorn, L. *Cultuurconflict en vooroordeel. Essays over de waarneming en betekenis van cultuurverschillen*. Samson, Alphen aan de Rijn, 1986, p. 18. *Nota Cultuur en School*. Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, Zoetermeer, 1996, p. 12.

- every word, every sentence and every usage has several – often highly divergent – meanings
 - between individuals and God there is no mediator but a learning process as described here
 - the expression ‘an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth’ does not signify retaliation but usually has an entirely different meaning, namely ‘financial compensation’
 - love your neighbour as you would yourself
 - freedom, justice and peace are prophetic visions
- and so on and so forth.⁷

There is no single Judaism, and the Tora lends itself to multiple interpretations; ‘prescriptive’ Judaism is a fiction. Study and humane actions cannot be standardized. Multiformity is undoubtedly the most striking attribute of age-old and multi-local Judaism, especially beyond our own temporal and geographic horizons. Development and innovation are the only ways for Jewish religion, culture and tradition to retain and enrich their value and significance.

Area of experience II: Israel

In 1948 the State of Israel was established. Zionism originated as a political movement in the nineteenth century. Yearning for Zion dates back centuries. The psalmist has described this yearning as: ‘If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its cunning.’⁸

Jews that reside in the Netherlands today tend to feel very strongly about Israel. This seems obvious, as nearly all of them have relatives, friends or acquaintances who have settled in Israel, visit Israel or intend to live in Israel one day. This bond does not mean that Jews never criticize Israel. They do, but the disappointment expressed in their reproaches is mitigated by sympathy for the one country on Earth where Jews are always welcome and to they can turn for help.

Nearly all Jews support Zionist principles, such as:

- ‘The unity of the Jewish People and the centrality of Israel in Jewish life.
- The ingathering of the Jewish People in its historic homeland, Eretz Israel, through Aliyah from all countries.
- The strengthening of the State of Israel, which is based on the prophetic vision of justice and peace.
- The preservation of the identity of the Jewish People through the fostering of Jewish and Hebrew education and of Jewish spiritual and cultural values.
- The protection of Jewish rights everywhere.’⁹

Distinctions between Zionist and non-Zionist Jews have thus become virtually irrelevant. Most Jews, in the Netherlands and abroad, are favourably disposed toward Israel. Since the Six Day War (1967) and the Israeli-occupied territories, however, the euphoria has all but disappeared. A sense of euphoria did exist between 1948 and 1967.

⁷ Abram, I. *Jewish Tradition as Permanent Education*. SVO, The Hague, 1986.

⁸ Psalm 137.

⁹ The Jerusalem Program (1968). This text was amended in June 2004.

Area of experience III: the Shoah and anti-Semitism

Shoah means catastrophe in Hebrew. It is also the designation for the persecution of the Jews in Europe from 1933 until 1945: the deliberate destruction organized by Germany's Nazi regime of six of the nine million European Jews. During the *Holocaust* (the Greek word for the *Shoah*), Jews had to fend for themselves: in their hour of doom, few came to their rescue. The world remained silent.

Many Dutch people abandoned the Jews as well:

- Before 1940 Jewish refugees (except for the most prominent among them) were largely prohibited from entering.
- Before 1940 the Dutch state built Camp Westerbork and other camps – at the expense of the Jewish community – to house the few Jewish refugees who were admitted.
- Countless Dutch people ‘obediently and diligently’ helped the Nazis register and deport Jews.

Out of an estimated 140,000 Jews in the Netherlands, approximately 102,000 were murdered. The percentage of Jews killed in the Netherlands, which was considerably higher than anywhere else in occupied Western Europe, was approximately 75 percent, compared with about 40 percent in Belgium and Norway, about 20 percent in France and about 15 percent in Italy, while virtually all of Denmark's few Jews escaped. Even in Germany, proportionately more Jews survived than in the Netherlands. During the war, it appeared that Jewish Dutch people were in fact different from non-Jewish Dutch people, and that Jews were less well integrated than they had thought they were. The question as to why Jews were more heavily affected in the Netherlands than in other occupied countries in Western Europe continues to puzzle researchers and remains a highly emotional issue. The causes mentioned include¹⁰:

- The occupation in the Netherlands was well-organized and deeply influenced by the SS.
- With few exceptions, organized resistance against the Nazis materialized rather late in the Netherlands. Jews participated in this resistance. By the time the underground resistance became more widespread, it was too late for most Dutch Jews: they had already been deported.
- The majority of the Dutch population, including the Jews, was law-abiding and compliant. Anti-Semitism here was certainly no worse than elsewhere in Western Europe and was more likely to be less or equally severe. Anti-Semitism in the Netherlands will be discussed at Area of experience V, which concerns Dutch culture and environment.
- The religious and political compartmentalization in the Netherlands meant that Jews, even those who were assimilated, were relatively isolated.
- The Netherlands was already densely populated. Desolate and remote areas that might serve as hiding places were rare. Escape routes to unoccupied countries were long and treacherous. Moreover, by far the most Jews (80 percent) lived in one city: Amsterdam. This situation further complicated going into hiding. Still, 25,000 Jews attempted to escape persecution that way. About 16,000 of them succeeded, usually helped by non-Jews. Over 3,000 Jews escaped from the Netherlands.
- And, last but not least, the majority of the non-Jewish Dutch population responded with indifference to the fate of the Jews.

¹⁰ Moore, B. *Victims and Survivors. The Nazi Persecution of the Jews in the Netherlands 1940-1945*. Arnold, London, 1997.

The *Shoah* did not materialize out of thin air but arose from the ancient and perhaps eternal anti-Semitism. A passage in what is probably the most popular Jewish classic the *Haggadah* (the narration) illustrates these origins. The tale is about the exodus from Egypt led by Moses. At *Pesach* (the Jewish holiday of Passover) families at home read from the *Haggadah* during a festive evening meal (the *Seder*), which includes *matzes* (unleavened bread). Together with family, friends and children, they sing songs and tell stories. They also reminisce about pleasant and unfortunate experiences. On anti-Semitism, the *Haggadah* reads as follows: ‘For not only one has risen up against us, but in every generation oppressors rise up against us to destroy us.’ Still, optimism prevails. The exodus from Egypt is primarily the story of the liberation of the Jews from slavery in Egypt.

The modern historian Raul Hilberg shares a slightly different interpretation. On the one hand, he emphasizes the continuity of anti-Semitism, while on the other hand he regards the Holocaust as its most extreme form. He has identified three consecutive stages from the fourth century A.D. ‘The missionaries of Christianity had said in effect: You have no right to live among us *as Jews* (solution: *conversion*). The secular rulers who followed had proclaimed: You have no right to live *among us* (solution: *expulsion*). The German Nazis at last decreed: You have no right *to live* (solution: *annihilation*).’¹¹

Since the Shoah, Jews are known above all as survivors, whether they reside in the Netherlands, the United States, Israel or anywhere else. They are also survivors who understand that their survival may be questioned.¹² This issue is moreover a lesson that others can learn from the Holocaust as well: once we become aware that prejudice and discrimination can cause massive destruction, we cease to take survival for granted.

Area of experience IV: personal histories

The Jewish identity described here is not hereditary and is not presented as ready for instant use. It may be religious but may just as easily be at odds with Judaism. It evolves over the course of our lives as Jews through encounters and conflicts with other people, other constructs and other cultures. Jewish identity may be a source of pride as well as a source of shame. It is a constant presence and gives us food for thought. Jewish identity is a responsibility. It will never be stripped from us entirely, nor can it be fully imposed on us. We can ignore Jewish identity but cannot escape it, unless we are willing and able to assimilate fully. It emerges when we are ourselves.

In addition to being contemporary history (as Benedetto Croce argues), history should include our personal past: ‘In every generation, every one is bound to look upon himself as if he had himself left Egypt.’ This passage – also from the *Haggadah* – is about ‘updating the past’: applying history to ourselves.

This personal note is particularly appealing to others. The contribution from a classical – i.e. usually male – scholar to the Torah is not what he has in common with other scholars but what makes him unique, i.e. his personality. How he learns, how he teaches, and above all how he lives.¹³ This generally holds true for other Jews as well. The issue is thus

¹¹ Hilberg, R. *The destruction of the European Jews*. Revised and definitive edition. Holmes & Meier, New York / London, Vol. 1, 1985, p. 9. Italics and text in parentheses added by Ido Abram.

¹² Steiner, G. ‘The long life of a Metaphor. An Approach to The Shoah’. *Encounter* 68 (February 1987) 2.

¹³ Interview with Shmuel Safrai. In Abram (1986), p. 7.

how they interpret the areas of experience stated here, and specifically how they deal with them in everyday life and their ties to these experiences. Paraphrasing the well-known statement from the Hassid Zusya of Hanipol, those reaching the Gates of Heaven will not be asked why they did not live their life as Moses or Miriam but why they did not live it as themselves.¹⁴

*Area of experience V: Dutch culture*¹⁵

Jews have settled in the area now known as the Netherlands since the end of the sixteenth century. At the end of the eighteenth century (1796), two centuries later, they were made equal to native Dutch citizens before the law. Thanks largely to the efforts of socialists, liberals, Catholics and Protestants, Dutch society became increasingly multiform in the course of the nineteenth century. The contemporary dispute over state funding for denominational and non-denominational schools reaffirmed the trend toward multiformity.

Jews deviated from the example of the Protestants and Catholics, in that they did not form a separate institutional compartment. Like the children of socialist and liberal parents, Jewish children attended state schools in large numbers. Many Jews felt more Dutch than Jewish. Most were perfectly happy living in the Netherlands. They grew accustomed to the strain of anti-Semitism that prevailed here and experienced it as rather mild and hardly cause for alarm.¹⁶ On average, Dutch Jews were content with life in the Netherlands, were law-abiding, and rarely felt self-conscious about being Jewish.

World War II brought an abrupt end to this apparent idyll and fascinating acculturation. Unfortunately, it did not wipe out anti-Semitism, although anti-Semitism ceased to be labelled as mild or innocent.

3. Scope

The model described above, illustrated by the five-slice pie chart, enables us to structure Jewish experiences over the centuries without obliterating their diversity. The model accommodates the experiences of individuals such as Moses, Esther, Flavius Josephus, Maimonides, Spinoza, Marx, Herzl, Kafka, Freud, Schönberg, Einstein, Golda Meir and other – in some cases less well-known – Jewish men, women and children. To this end, we will need to extend our horizons beyond our national borders and chronological confines and above all beyond our own limited perspective, our personal sphere, our individual stories. Areas of experience II, IV and V may then be described as:

- (the land and / or the state of) Israel, yearning for Zion and Zionism
- Personal histories
- Surrounding culture (or cultures) and surroundings.

¹⁴ See the short story 'Die Frage der Fragen' about Sussja von Hanipol, in Buber, M. *Die Erzählungen der Chassidim*. Manesse Verlag, Zürich, 1949.

¹⁵ See e.g. the articles in Berg, H. (Ed.). *De Gelykstaat der Joden. Inburgering van een minderheid*. Joods Historisch Museum / Waanders, Amsterdam / Zwolle, 1996. Also Bloemgarten, S. 'De joodse identiteit van een assimulant'. *De Gids*, Volume 150, Issue 6 / 7, 1987.

¹⁶ Blom, J.C.H. and Cahen, J.J. 'Joodse Nederlanders, Nederlandse joden en joden in Nederland (1870-1940)'. In: Blom, J.C.H. and Fuks-Manfeld, R.G. and Schöffer, I (Editors). *Geschiedenis van de joden in Nederland*. Balans, Amsterdam, 1995, p. 284. Jaap Meijer has even described the mild anti-Semitism in the Netherlands as 'aimiable risjes': an endearing distaste for Jews. Meijer, J. *Hoge hoeden / lage standaarden. De Nederlandse joden tussen 1933 en 1940*. Het Wereldvenster, Baarn, 1969, p. 87-104.

Jews may be a minority or a majority. In the State of Israel they are the majority, as they were in the Jewish states that once existed but no longer do. In the *Diaspora* they have always been one of many minorities.

Each slice of the pie chart may be subdivided into several partial segments. The emerging total of X segments forms an 'X-slice pie chart'. Conversely, 'Jewish religion, culture and tradition' (Segment I) in fact comprises everything, including segments II through V. The complete identity circle then consists exclusively of Segment I. The number 'five' is thus rather arbitrary.

The 'five-slice pie chart' in fact comprises '15 slices':

- (1) Jewish religion
- (2) Jewish culture
- (3) Jewish tradition
- (4) The Land of Israel
- (5) The State of Israel
- (6) Yearning for Zion
- (7) Zionism
- (8) The *Shoah*
- (9) Anti-Semitism
- (10) Persecution
- (11) Survival
- (12) Personal histories
- (13) Surrounding culture
- (14) Surrounding cultures
- (15) Surroundings.

We could select a different structure as well. The website for all of Jewish Netherlands (joods.nl), for example, comprises the following sections:

- (1) People & Society
- (2) Mokum & Medina (Amsterdam and outside Amsterdam, but in the Netherlands)
- (3) Israel
- (4) World
- (5) Culture
- (6) Leisure pursuits
- (7) Religion
- (8) Educational
- (9) History
- (10) Economy.

In the few years that this site has existed, several new sections have been added. The names have been modified and amended repeatedly.

We have not yet elaborated on the concepts 'Jew' and 'group' (community). Depending on the explicit or implicit definitions we select – various options are available and in use – the ideas conceived here acquire a specific meaning and practical relevance. This is what characterizes a model and consequently the five-slice pie chart as well.

Typical statements about identity include:

- Dutch Orthodox rabbi: ‘The *Halakha*, which lists the commandments, characterizes Judaism. Living according to the *Halakha* makes Jews Jewish.’¹⁷
- Israeli political scientist: ‘Nowadays, Israel, more than any other factor, is the unifying force that Jewish religion once was.’¹⁸
- English (Jewish) literary scholar: ‘The *Shoah* is currently the cohesive element in Jewish identity.’¹⁹
- Dutch author: ‘As a survivor of the *Shoah*, I am continuously conscious of the victims, especially of my parents, family members, relatives and friends who were killed. My existence is linked with their tragic fate in many ways, and out of deference I hear them in all my contemplations.’²⁰
- French artist: ‘I speak only for myself, as a French sculptor of Jewish heritage, as they say, although I find the term repulsive. I am above all an artist and then a Frenchman. And nothing else.’²¹
- British (Jewish) comedian: ‘Ever been to a Catholic-Jewish wedding? You can tell immediately who is who. The Jews eat, the Catholics drink.’²²
- American stand-up comic: ‘I am gay and Jewish. So I’m angry.’²³

4. Overlap

The segmented circle suggests that areas of experience I through V do not overlap. This impression is fallacious.

No culture is entirely unique. Nor is Judaism. This complicates distinguishing various aspects of areas of experience I and V. The reciprocal influences are also apparent from Jewish names or the garments that Jews wear and the languages they speak, the architecture of synagogues, ‘Jewish’ cooking and even Jewish religious rituals. ‘The music of East-European Jews, for example, is often described as sounding ‘Jewish’. But sometimes these East European Jews sing as if they were at a Byzantine-Christian mass.’²⁴ Another case in point is the authentic Dutch *Aap-Noot-Mies leesplank* (a wooden board featuring images and words to teach children to read), which has inspired several Hebrew versions.

The above description of Area of experience II mentions the psalm ‘If I forget thee, o Jerusalem ...’ and the Zionist principle of ‘strengthening of the State of Israel, which is based on the prophetic vision of justice and peace’. This illustrates that I and II have overlapping experiences.

¹⁷ Mayer Just. ‘Wat is jodendom’. In: Houwaart, D. (Editor). *Mijn jodendom*. J.N. Voorhoeve, The Hague, 1980, p. 110. Not quoted literally.

¹⁸ Avineri, S. *The Making of Modern Zionism. The Intellectual Origins of the Jewish State*. Basic Books, New York, 1981, p. 220-222. Not quoted literally.

¹⁹ Steiner (1987). Not quoted literally.

²⁰ Anstadt, M. ‘Jodendom – een nagalm der profeten’. In Anstadt, M. (Contents and editing). *Een Ander Joods Geluid. Kritische opvattingen over Israël*. Contact, Amsterdam / Antwerp, 2003, p.14. Not quoted literally.

²¹ Interview with Etienne Lenoir (not his real name). Jacobson, L. *Joodse ontmoetingen*. Forum, Amsterdam, 1993, p. 153 and 176. Not quoted literally.

²² Interview with the British comedian Earl Okin. Van der Valk, M. ‘Joods publiek is hartstikke lastig’. *Nieuw Israelitisch Weekblad*, 25 January 2002.

²³ Television broadcast of the show *The comedy factor*. Host: Jörgen Raymann. The section quoted is from the American (or English) stand-up comedian Jason Stuart. Broadcast on Nederland 3, 29 May 2002.

²⁴ Kasper Jansen. ‘Mag ik één keertje een beetje opscheppen?’. Interview with cantor Hans Bloemendal. *NRC Handelsblad*, 24 December 2003.

Anti-Semites are rarely Jewish, which complicates distinguishing between areas III and V. According to one interpretation, the biblical words ‘Esau hated Jacob’²⁵ (Segment I) symbolizes the ‘eternal’ anti-Semitism and the ongoing tensions between Jews (Jacob) and their surroundings, where *goyim*, the non-Jews (Esau), circulate. Some interpretations, however, are entirely different and are less paradigmatic and gloomy.

Since we are all products of our upbringing and our surroundings, no matter how much we resist both circles, IV always comprises elements of I and V.

Quoting the aforementioned passages from the *Haggadah* in their entirety reveals that *all* five areas of experience figure during the Passover Seder. ‘In every generation, every one is bound to look upon himself as if he had himself [in person; IV] left Egypt [hostile culture, III and V], as it is said: *Tell your son on that day, “It is because of that which the Lord did unto ME when I departed from Egypt.”*’ Thus it was not our forefathers alone whom the Holy One blessed be HE, did redeem. He redeemed US along with them [from bondage; III], as it is said: “*He took US out from there, so that He might bring us to and give US the land [Israel; II] which he pledged unto our ancestors.*”’ The complete quotation obviously relates to Area of experience I.

Basically, the five-slice pie chart simplifies the Jewish identity model. The chart does not indicate the overlaps, although they do exist. The poems below illustrate these overlaps as well. The first is by the Dutchman Jacob Israël de Haan,²⁶ and the second is by the Israeli Dan Pagis, who was born in Romania.²⁷

TURMOIL

*The one in Amsterdam often said: ‘Jerusalem’
And came driven to Jerusalem,
He muses:
‘Amsterdam, Amsterdam’.*

WRITTEN IN PENCIL IN THE SEALED FREIGHT CAR

*Here, in this carload,
I, Eve,
with my son Abel.
If you see my older boy,
Cain, the son of Adam,
tell him that I*

The poem by De Haan demonstrates how segments II (Zionism) and V (Dutch culture) overlap. The one by Pagis reveals the overlaps between segments I (Jewish religion) and III (the Shoah). The personal histories of De Haan and Pagis resound in both poems

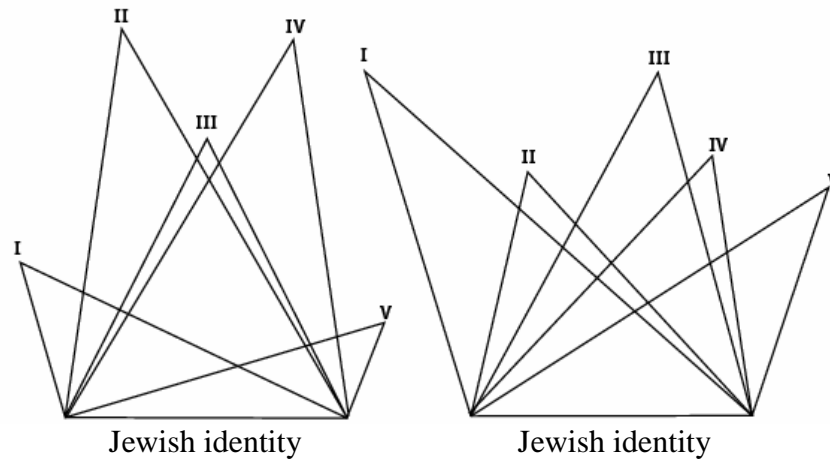
²⁵ Genesis 27:41.

²⁶ De Haan, J.I. *Verzamelde gedichten*. 2 volumes. G.A. Oorschot, Amsterdam, 1952. The poem is from the collection ‘Kwatrijnen’.

²⁷ From the anthology *Gilgoel* (Metamorphosis). In Hebrew ‘son of Adam’ denotes a person. The translation of the poem is from *The Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse*, edited and translated by T. Carmi. Allen Lane, London, 1981.

(Segment IV): De Haan settled in Israel in 1918 and Pagis shortly after the Shoah. And *Turmoil* obviously conveys Jerusalem's mystic-religious attraction – as well as that of Amsterdam, 'the Jerusalem of the West' (Segment I).

Replacing the segments with triangles illustrates the overlap:



The segments in the circle and the five triangles in the figure above represent experiences and ties with a past and a future. They consist of interpretations of the present, considered from the past and looking toward the future. This gives the overarching concept of 'Jewish identity', in all its multi-faceted meanings, an ideological connotation with the corresponding ideological debates about the interpretations indicated.

5. Jewish Identity and Jewish Imago

A similar five-slice pie chart – or five triangles with a common base – illustrates the *Jewish imago* with respect to how others see, experience, assess and express the clusters

- I = Jewish religion, culture and tradition
- II = (the Land or State of) Israel, yearning for Zion and Zionism
- III = the Holocaust and anti-Semitism, persecution and survival
- IV = personal life stories of Jews
- V = the surrounding culture (cultures) and the environment.

While these others may be Jews (e.g. parents, friends or family members or relatives), they can just as easily be non-Jews from the neighbourhood or elsewhere. 'Jewish imago' is also an ideological construct: an interpretation that links the past with the future.

Jewish identity may differ considerably from Jewish imago, as self-image may from the image perceived by others. Jews may, for example, perceive Zionism as a national liberation movement. The 'gathering of exiles', the return to the Land of Israel is also intrinsic to the Jewish Messianic concept.²⁸ This Messianic concept symbolizes the liberation of both the Jewish people and of all people in general.²⁹ Arabs have an entirely different assessment of this return of the Jews. They are inclined to associate Zionism with

²⁸ Van Loopik, M. *Terugblik op de toekomst. Messianisme, een joodse visie op tijd en geschiedenis*. B. Folkertsma Stichting voor Talmudica, Hilversum, 1993, p. 5: 'De traditie erkent een aantal overeenkomsten tussen Mozes en de Messias', zoals onder meer 'het terugvoeren van het volk naar het land Israël' [Traditionally, several similarities exist between Moses and the Messiah, such as leading the people back to the land of Israel.].
²⁹ See the section 'Messianisme en zionisme' in Van Loopik (1993), pp. 68-73.

oppression and humiliation of the Palestinian people by the State of Israel: ‘The contrast between the two national versions reached a peak in the war of 1948, which was called “the War of Independence” or even “the War of Liberation” by the Jews, and “El Naqba”, the catastrophe, by the Arabs. (...) [T]he Naqba (catastrophe) of 1948 appeared to them as the continuation of the oppression and humiliation by Western colonialists.’³⁰

The distinction – between Jewish identity and Jewish imago – may be far more subtle. A *jüdische Selbsthasser* and a non-Jewish anti-Semite may agree fully about several matters, as a non-Jewish philo-Semite and a Jewish chauvinist may as well.

Still, the two images of Jewish identity and Jewish imago never coincide perfectly. Differences persist. Otto Weininger, the best-known and probably the most extremist Jewish self-hater, who called himself a Jewish anti-Semite, shared the same observation. He distinguished anti-Semitism among Jews from anti-Semitism among Indo-Germanic people as follows: ‘Jewish anti-Semites feel only antipathy toward Jews; anti-Semitic Aryans, on the other hand, however courageously they may struggle against Judaism, are always by nature what Jews never are – *Judaeophobic*. They *fear* Jews.’³¹

Just as the segments of the five-slice pie chart – or the five triangles – overlap, Jewish identity and Jewish imago overlap. Never, however, do they coincide perfectly.

Jewish identity and Jewish imago are thus competing images that overlap but never coincide perfectly. Self-image is not by definition superior to the images that others have of oneself; nor does the opposite hold true.

6. Segments: Number, Names and Focus

In Section 3 (Scope) we demonstrated that the Jewish identity circle may comprise more or fewer than five segments. In Section 4 (Overlap) we explained that segments may overlap one another, despite their different designations. As a consequence, the Jewish identity circle will generally comprise a *random* number of segments, and the names of these segments may well *differ* from the ones they were ascribed in the five-slice pie chart. The same holds true for the Jewish imago circle.

The segments may also focus on *specific* sub-themes, such as the Sabbath, hope and love, how to make a celebration enjoyable, secrets, future expectations, the origins of the Israel-Palestine conflict, *mishpoche* (family) or the most impressive elements of an exhibition. The advantage of focusing is that part of the identity or the imago becomes more visible. The disadvantage is that the contours of the total image fade or even disappear altogether, although this is intrinsic to ‘zooming in’ (focusing) and ‘zooming out’.

If it is unclear which segments are more important than others, all will be equal in size. The segments may be brought to life through several techniques, for example by illustrating them with quotations, poems, stories, drawings or photographs.

Instead of segments in a circle, we could use triangles with a common base. The circle and triangle diagrams serve only to visualize the ideas devised here.

³⁰ Avnery, U. *Truth against Truth. A Completely Different Look at the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*. Gush Shalom, Tel Aviv, 2003, points 21 and 29.

³¹ Weininger, O. *Geslacht en karakter*. De Arbeiderspers, Amsterdam, 1984, Note 529.

7. Identity and Imago

- 'Identity' is both continuous and changeable. The same holds true for 'imago'. This sounds complicated but is in fact simple, as the following example makes clear. Look at photographs of a random person at different ages: for example as a baby, a four-year old, an adolescent, at age 20, at age 30, at age 50 and in old age. Each time, you will see the same person, whose appearance has changed somewhat but not entirely. The person in the photograph will confirm this (identity). Others looking at the same photographs will say the same (imago). Hopefully, this makes clear that the terms 'identity' and 'imago' evolve but also stay the same.
- What makes the identity construct fascinating but complicates it at the same time is that it is both intangible and omnipresent. It is so comprehensive on the one hand and so difficult to fathom on the other, because it concerns a process that according to the psychoanalyst Erik Erikson is 'localized' both within *individuals* and within *the culture of their community (group)*.³² Within individual identities, the identity of the group to which such persons belong is consistently perceptible.

The same holds true for the 'imago' construct. In the imago that Individual A has of Individual B, the imago that A's group – the group to which A pertains – has of B is consistently discernible as well.

Complicating matters, most people belong to *several* communities or groups, such as their family, clan, clubs, nationality, professional group.

- Identity = self-definition, imago = imposed identity. Both identity and imago primarily concern images that overlap on the one hand and compete on the other hand. In *extreme* cases, they may *virtually* coincide or have *almost* nothing in common. But they never coincide *perfectly* and are never *devoid* of common aspects.
- Generally speaking, identity and imago are two types of images that we need to take equally seriously and need to investigate equally meticulously. While this sounds obvious, it rarely occurs in practice. *As a rule, however, majority groups ignore the identities (self-definitions) of minority groups.* The damage has been extensive, like in the worst case of repression or violence, which is addressed in the following item.
- Societies comprise *majority* and *minority groups*, groups with more and groups with less power. Over time, we observe changes in the balances of power: not all majority groups retain power, and not all minority groups remain powerless. Changing balances of power are integral to all human relations.³³

What do we know about the less powerful groups, or more accurately: what do we know about the identities of for example the dozens of ethnic or religious minority groups in the Netherlands? What do we know about the identities of minority groups, such as children, the unemployed, the elderly and the infirm? Usually very

³² Erikson, E.H. *Identiteit, jeugd en crisis*. Spectrum, Utrecht / Antwerp, 1971, p. 19.

³³ Elias, N. *Wat is sociologie?* Spectrum, Utrecht / Antwerp, 1971, p. 80.

little, unless we happen to pertain to one (or more) of those groups ourselves. What is the reason behind this ignorance or disinterest? Norbert Elias has explained ‘that we find over and over again that people pertaining to groups that are more *powerful* than the other groups they deal with believe that they are *better* people than the others.’³⁴ People who think they are superior are rarely interested in people that they consider inferior. The moment they come to regard a certain group as inferior, they are thus generally disinterested in the identity of that group: in how that group sees, experiences, appreciates and expresses itself. They are satisfied with their own impression of the group, and that is the imago, obviously a negative one. This is how minority groups acquire their negative imago, and how majority groups come to deny or ignore the identity of majority groups.

This situation is difficult to fathom and lacks a distinctive name. We shall call it ‘the breeding ground for racial hatred’. It is the breeding ground for repression of an arbitrary group by another group that is more powerful and may lead to violence and conflicts.

- From the moment that a minority group develops self-awareness, it starts to be undermined by the repressive force. As soon as the dominated ceases to repudiate or conceal itself to disarm its respective racist opponents, it expands its influence. As soon as this group demands to be accepted in its current form, with all its differences, it is on the path to equal rights.³⁵ *Emancipation of minority groups and acceptance of their identities – i.e. minority identities – by majority groups are two sides of a coin.*
- The two images ‘identity’ and ‘imago’ should be granted the same opportunity to prove their merits. This may be achieved by ignoring the disseminator or the source of the images. The images, whether they are imposed or chosen, may not derive their authority from the person or idea from whence they originate. Only the recipient of the image – and he or she alone – may determine whether (or not) the image is convincing, and whether (or not) he or she agrees with it.
- We originally devised the five-slice pie chart to express the multiform nature of Jewish identity (1982).³⁶ It is used at various Jewish institutions in the Netherlands, including the Jewish Historical Museum and the Jewish social services (Joods Maatschappelijk Werk). The chart has also inspired ideas about identity among other groups, such as elderly Antilleans, Moroccan teens, students at general secondary schools and primary schools and asylum seekers.³⁷ Next, we decided to use areas of experience to describe these identities as well – or rather *all* identities.³⁸ Five areas of experience (ties, value fields) form *the personal identity of an individual residing in the Netherlands (native Dutch or of foreign extraction):*

³⁴ Elias, N. ‘Een theoretisch essay over gevestigden en buitenstaanders’. In: Elias, N. & Scotson, J.L. *De gevestigden en de buitenstaanders. Een studie van de spanningen en machtsverhoudingen tussen twee arbeidersbuurten*. Spectrum, Utrecht / Antwerp, 1976, p. 7.

³⁵ Memmi, A. *Racisme hoezo? Ontmaskering van een onderdrukkingsmechanisme*. Transkulturele uitgeverij Masusa, 1983, Note 40.

³⁶ Abram, I. ‘Een joodse visie op culturele identiteit’. *Samenwijs. Informatieblad opleiding, onderwijs en vorming minderheden*. 2 (1982) 7.

³⁷ Abram, I. & Wesly, J. *Knowing me, Knowing you*. Ger Guijs / Forum – Institute for Multicultural Development, Rotterdam / Utrecht, 2006.

³⁸ Abram & Wesly (2006).

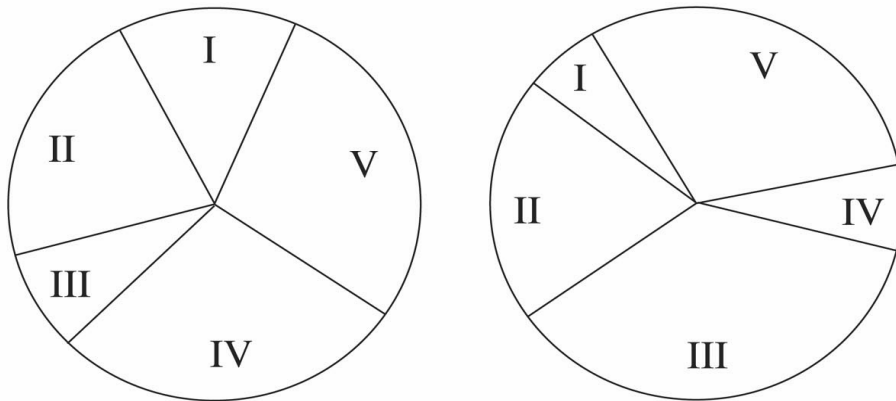
- the culture of the group to which one belongs
- underprivilege (discrimination); being subject to suspicion or persecution
- liberation (emancipation); feeling at home; being respected and accepted
- personal life history; what truly matters (personal values)
- Dutch culture (or rather: cultures) and the Dutch surroundings / context.

This may in turn be conveyed in a formula and written as:

Personal identity = I + II + III + IV + V, in which

- I = *own culture*
- II = *underprivilege*
- III = *liberation*
- IV = *personal life history*
- V = *other cultures in the Netherlands.*

This may also be illustrated as a five-slice pie chart.



Jewish identity – and the corresponding model described above – may be perceived as one of the many possible applications of this five-slice pie chart for ‘personal identity’.

About the author

Ido Abram was born in Indonesia (at the time the Netherlands East Indies) in 1940. He studied philosophy, mathematics and general linguistics at the University of Amsterdam. From 1990 to 1997 he was an endowed professor of ‘Education about and after the *Shoah*’ at the University of Amsterdam. He now is the director of Stichting Leren (Amsterdam). His publications are about Jewish identity, ‘growing up after Auschwitz’ and intercultural learning. He lectures and designs educational programmes.

Stichting Leren
 B. Rulofsstraat 19 hs
 1071 WK Amsterdam

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