
OBSERVATIONS

Jewish Liberalism Revisited

Charles S. Liebman & Steven M. Cohen

IT IS a truism embraced by countless spokesmen for American Jews, and by no small number of observers: Jews are more liberal than their fellow Americans, *and* their liberalism derives from loyalty to Jewish “values” or, more specifically, to the Jewish religious tradition. “Jews are the most liberal group in the country,” wrote the sociologist Nathan Glazer over 40 years ago, in a statement with which few have had occasion to quibble. And as for the reason why, here is Albert Vorspan, who served for many years as the leading spokesman for the “social-action” program of Reform Judaism:

A commitment to social justice is inherent in Judaism. . . . [A]

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Judaism without keen involvement in the struggle for human decency is a contradiction, a denial of the deepest elements of the Jewish spirit.

But is either part of the truism true? To answer this question, we examined evidence from a survey of American social attitudes conducted almost annually between 1973 and 1994 by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC). What the data reveal is that Jews do indeed differ from non-Jews in terms of their own self-image: a full 48 percent of the former, versus only 27 percent of the latter, define themselves as liberal. And Jews also tend to be more liberal than other Americans on at least three defining issues: a commitment to the welfare state and to some redistribution of income; a concern for oppressed minorities, especially American blacks; and a passion for individual freedom, especially freedom of speech. On still other issues, especially having to do with sexual morality and with the separation of church and state, they are more liberal still.

We will have occasion below to qualify these statements significant-

ly. But let us pause to note a deep problem, right at the start, with the standard explanation for Jewish political attitudes. For if, as many contend, political liberalism is somehow embedded in Jewish tradition (“inherent in Judaism,” in Vorspan’s words), those Jews who are closest to the religious tradition should be the most liberal, and those farthest away should be the least liberal. In fact, however, the opposite is the case. Frequent synagogue attendees register views in the NORC survey that are consistently *less* liberal on almost every issue than those who attend synagogue infrequently or not at all, or who are intermarried.

This pattern holds true not only on such matters as aid to the poor or to blacks, or on the government’s role in reducing income differences, or on freedom of speech, but—dramatically—on sexual and social matters as well. For example, 58 percent of intermarried Jews say that homosexual sex is not wrong, in contrast to just 10 percent of those who attend religious services at least twice a month (the comparable figure for the vast majority in between is 49 percent). The only exception to the

pattern concerns church-state issues, and specifically prayer in the public schools: here, religious, less religious, and nonreligious Jews alike are all opposed, in almost equal numbers.

That exception aside, however, if we judge by the religious *behavior* of American Jews, there is little support for the notion that Jewish liberalism derives from an attachment to the Jewish religious tradition.

Nor should that really come as a surprise. Jewish religious values, as expressed in the Bible, the Talmud, and later rabbinic literature, are ethnocentric rather than universalistic. In most traditional sources, Jews are commanded to assist the Jewish poor but not necessarily the non-Jewish poor; to return the lost objects of their fellow Jews but not the lost objects of non-Jews; and so forth. What is more, the Torah imposes restraints on freedom of speech, is far more sensitive to questions of individual obligation than to questions of individual rights, and envisions a society of laws to regulate the private conduct of individuals. True, the tradition enjoins the practices of compassion, concern for others, and even a measure of social justice; but, with notable exceptions, these injunctions are intended to regulate relations among Jews, not between Jews and non-Jews.

When it comes to sexual morality, the gulf between the clear teaching of Jewish tradition and contemporary liberalism is much wider still. The Ten Commandments flatly proscribe adultery. As for homosexuality, the biblical passages prohibiting it, along with such other "abominations" as incest and bestiality, were deemed so central that the ancient rabbis decreed they be read aloud in the synagogue on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the Jewish calendar. The tradition's continuing concern with the proper channeling of sexual appetites is evident in the relatively strict codes of dress and in proscriptions on relations between the sexes that char-

acterize millennia of Jewish law and practice. In short, no credible case can be made that a permissive attitude toward extramarital or homosexual sex represents the Jewish tradition. Quite the contrary.

OF COURSE, those who trace Jewish liberalism to Judaism have a fall-back position, and one worth considering seriously. What really motivates American Jews, they say, are certain ingrained attitudes which, though ultimately derived from the religious tradition, by now transcend it and exist independently of specific religious behavior like synagogue attendance. The Jewish tradition, they concede, may not be unambiguously liberal in the contemporary sense; but that is not the point. After all, even the authors of the American Constitution presupposed the institution of slavery, and made no provision to ensure women the right to vote. But if, within the *spirit* of that same Constitution, slavery could be abolished, and women granted suffrage, it is similarly possible to maintain that no inversion of the Jewish tradition is involved in applying to society at large the virtues of compassion and social justice which the tradition mandates in connection with Jews.

If we accept this line of reasoning, it makes perfect sense that non-Orthodox Jews (who incidentally far outnumber the Orthodox in America) should tend to be more liberal. After all, it was Reform Judaism that, starting in the 19th century, consciously set out both to discard Jewish practices it found outmoded and, at the same time, to universalize what it took to be the core Jewish values. According to the mandates of their own religious tradition, non-Orthodox Jews *ought* to be more liberal.

Unfortunately, however, this too does not get us very far. For one thing, while an insistence upon compassion, a demand for social justice, and even (according to the scholar Moshe Greenberg) freedom of speech may have roots in the tra-

dition, a commitment to any or all of these does not necessarily lead in a straight line to the particular positions of many contemporary liberals. A concern for the equal treatment of minorities, for example, need hardly translate into support for what today travels under the banner of affirmative action; a belief in freedom of speech need not require one to adopt a tolerant attitude toward the spread of pornography (an issue that, as it happens, has split the liberal and feminist communities). In each of these cases, and in many others like them, one could argue that contemporary liberalism, far from fulfilling the spirit of traditional Jewish values, traduces both spirit and letter alike.

For another thing, legitimate interpretation of the tradition has its limits, and no tradition can survive if it is infinitely malleable. Many of the same Jewish liberals who appeal to the tradition in defending their zeal for "social justice" tend simply to ignore or radically distort its teachings with regard to relations between the sexes. Nor, finally, can any tradition be legitimately interpreted except by those who understand it—something that cannot be said of many who presume to speak in the name of Jewish values.

HERE, INDEED, is where the major qualification we mentioned at the outset becomes relevant. For the most striking result of our examination of the NORC data is this: when Jews are compared not with other Americans in general but specifically with other Americans *who resemble them*—in age, education, income, and pattern of residence—the vaunted Jewish "difference" all but disappears.

Thus, on the question of whether the government should spend more on welfare, Jews are only four percentage points more liberal than their non-Jewish peers, and only two percentage points more liberal on the issue of whether the government should act to reduce income

gaps between rich and poor. Similarly, Jews are no more likely than their social and economic peers to favor greater government aid to American blacks, and only three percentage points more likely to attribute the disadvantaged position of blacks to discrimination. Finally, when it comes to freedom of expression, Jews are only three percentage points more likely than their non-Jewish peers to be in favor of atheists or Communists speaking in their communities or teaching at universities.

To be sure, Jews do still take decidedly more liberal (not to say libertine) positions on sexual morality than even those non-Jews who share their age, education, income, and residential patterns. This is a phenomenon noted by Earl Raab in "Are American Jews Still Liberal?" (COMMENTARY, February 1996), and we can confirm it on the basis of a much larger sample over a longer period of time. Thus, hold-

ing constant for socioeconomic factors and residence patterns, we found that 24 percent more Jews than non-Jews approve of abortions for any reason; 21 percent more approve of legalizing marijuana; 7 percent more are opposed to banning pornography; 7 percent more assert that pre-marital sex is not wrong at all, 15 percent more that extra-marital sex is not always wrong, and 26 percent more that gay sex is not wrong at all. An analogous gulf divides Jews from similarly situated non-Jews when it comes to church-state relations: 37 percent more of the former oppose prayer in the public schools—and as we noted earlier, this opposition cuts across denominational lines.

In the end, though, these may be the only discrepancies that still need explaining. American Jewish liberalism does not, it turns out, nowadays comprise a *special* sympathy for African-Americans, or for the poor; nor does it feature an extraordinary

attachment to civil liberties. As for those issues on which the Jewish position is still distinctive, on at least one set of them, namely relations between church and state, that position might arguably be traced to a perception of group self-interest: since America is (still) a Christian country, prayer in the public schools would tend to take on a Christian character, thus implicitly posing a threat to a religious minority like the Jews. Similar fears, real or imagined, may also lie in part behind Jewish permissiveness in those sexual matters on which Christian churches have taken a strongly conservative position.

But whether this sufficiently explains the anomaly or not, one thing we can say with confidence: whatever the source of the—selective—liberalism of American Jews may be, there is little if any evidence to support the notion that it reflects the impact of Jewish values, or of the Jewish tradition.

MUSIC

I Heard It at the Movies

Terry Teachout

FILM COMPOSERS, long treated as second-class figures by the musical establishment, have lately come into their own. *Schwann Opus*, the quarterly catalogue of recorded classical music, recently featured two of

TERRY TEACHOUT, COMMENTARY's music critic, reviews recordings of film music for Fi: The Magazine of Music and Sound.

them on its cover: Miklós Rózsa, who wrote the scores for such big-budget Hollywood epics as *Ben-Hur* and *El Cid*, and Bernard Herrmann, best known for his collaborations with Orson Welles (*Citizen Kane*) and Alfred Hitchcock (*Psycho*). *Gramophone*, the classical-music magazine, has launched a section devoted to film music and has also brought out a collection of reviews,

Gramophone Film Music Good CD Guide.¹ And there has just appeared the first English-language biography of Erich Wolfgang Korngold, the Austrian composer who, in addition to scoring such popular films of the 30's and 40's as *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, also wrote con-

¹ Gramophone Publications Ltd., 256 pp., \$15.95 (paper).