

Issues Troubling America — What Involvement for the Jewish Community?*

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IN my optimistic moments, I incline to the view that Watergate will produce the next turning point in the movement of the organized American Jewish community along the political spectrum. At least, I am satisfied that our comparative aloofness from the Watergate battlefield invites, and presents an opportunity for, reconsideration of our role — our manner of involvement — in the process by which our democratic society deals with the issues that trouble it. In order to develop my guesses on this, let me go back a way.

Up to and through most of World War II, the agenda of the organized Jewish community, as distinguished from the political views of individual Jewish citizens, was relatively narrow. We supported the establishment of a Jewish State in Palestine. We combatted anti-Semitism and discrimination against Jews at home and abroad. To a very limited extent, we combatted restrictions on our religious freedom. During the war, of course, the fight against Nazism took the highest priority.

The Post-World War II Years

The years following World War II saw a profound change in our agenda. It is arguable that the prime force behind this change was the shocking revelation of the Holocaust. Before expanding on that idea, let me review the change itself. By and large, it was a matter of the organized Jewish community greatly

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broadening its range of activity, on the basis of a greatly broadened view of what concerned it and of the forces in our society that might have an impact on its security.

In some areas, this was because there was a real and even obvious relationship between the new concerns and recognized Jewish needs. Thus, the major support given by Jews to the civil rights movement, with its heavy emphasis on the problems of Negroes (to use the then current term), reflected a realistic judgment. We knew that, in order to get legislatures to ban discrimination based on religion, we had to press for general anti-bias laws covering race and national origin as well. (It should be noted that that judgment was validated; we did get the laws, and discrimination against Jews has been substantially reduced).

In other areas, the broadening of objectives was predominantly ideological. For example the concern we expressed about maintaining freedom of speech, press and association grew out of an abiding belief that it is desirable to live in an open society rather than out of concern for our freedom as Jews. True, preservation of freedom of expression was never a major item in our program — and during the McCarthy period it became vestigial. Nevertheless, the official position of virtually all Jewish organizations during this period was libertarian.

In still other areas, ideology and self-interest were closely balanced. For example, support of such social measures as full employment laws, housing reforms and social security legislation was prompted not only by acceptance of the

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need to improve our society but also by hopes of direct benefit to the large segment of the Jewish population which was not yet economically privileged. We contributed substantially to the support of these measures and we did so, at least in part, because significant numbers of Jews stood to benefit from them directly.

Of course, in dealing with all these issues, among ourselves and with others, we tended to emphasize the ideological arguments, to present the organized Jewish community as dominated by religious and ethical teachings that would not tolerate the existence of any wrong that society has the power to correct. But it is only rarely at best that whole communities act out of ideology without regard to practical effects. And the effects were certainly there. We did benefit from reduction in the level of racism and discrimination. We did receive the benefits of a society enjoying a high degree of economic health. We did gain from the victories for freedom of speech, press and assembly which often covered freedom of religion as well.

The Lesson of the Holocaust

Thus, the change in the Jewish agenda after World War II was prompted both by increased desire to pursue justice, equality and freedom and by a greater dedication to a broad approach in pursuing practical security. In my view, these two factors, taken together, constituted our primary reaction to the Holocaust. The slaughter of the six million has dominated Jewry for more than a generation (to an extent never understood by Christians). By itself, it can explain most of the political attitudes manifested by Jews during the 50s and 60s. By itself, it gave them practical as well as theoretical validity.

To begin with, the Holocaust was

brought about by a fascist government, the personification of the extreme right. It is no wonder, then, that Jews were almost automatically hostile to those policies which, in this country, were associated with the right — militarism, isolationism, economic conservatism, restraints on freedom of expression and so forth. Understandably, we opposed whatever reactionary or even conservative forces supported. One could deduce most of our public stands by simply taking the opposite view on whatever the John Birch Society said, even though that organization avoided, with only occasional lapses, the appearance of anti-Semitism.

This was not merely an unthinking reaction to rightism. We had validly learned from the Nazis that repression of freedom, racism, secret arrests and imprisonment and the solution of economic problems by embarking on military aggression could be preliminaries to mass slaughter. Furthermore, it was impossible to escape the lesson that all threatened groups had to stick together. We knew, because we had seen, that oppression of one group could become oppression of all.

In addition to shaping the political stance of the organized Jewish community, the Holocaust produced a powerful incentive to action. The concept of "never again," even though not formulated in those words, dominated both the conscious and unconscious thought processes of American Jewry. It gave us the courage and determination to make full use of the mechanism of democracy to obtain full status as first-class citizens.

In sum, the Jewish community understood that it needed to act, that it could act, and that its action must be more than a limited defense against specifically anti-Jewish manifestations. The program had to be geared to creating and preserving a free and socially just society.

Jewish Concerns Change

Now, however, the Holocaust has begun to fade into history. Not that the six million have been forgotten or ever could be. "Never again" is still a powerful concept. Our right and need to act is still understood and our determination to act is undiminished. But our view of how to act, of what objectives to pursue, has changed. Some of the lessons inculcated by the Holocaust have been clouded over by the passage of years, lessons not about facts but about underlying causes. At the same time, other forces have arisen that tend to undermine those lessons.

First, as Jews have achieved greater and greater security in a generally affluent society, their concern about economic reform has ebbed. Tax reform, for example, and increased government expenditures for public housing, guaranteed employment, social security benefits and relief of poverty have lost some of their attractiveness.

Not that there is a simple direct correlation among Jews between wealth and conservatism. In our community, it often appears as though the correlation is negative. This is because the most vocal, and most generous, supporters of liberal and even radical causes come from wealthy families. But this fringe phenomenon is outweighed by the fact that, as the bulk of American Jews moved from financial insecurity to security — from among the poor to the middle class — their political liberalism slackened. Their attachment to the *status quo* became firmer.

Second, this very increase in economic security has decreased the need on the part of Jews to exercise the right to protest. This has decreased our concern with freedom of expression. Aside from a small leftist fringe, we are not the rebels that we were. At the same time, the rise in violent crime in areas where Jews live has made safeguards against arbitrary

law enforcement seem actively harmful. (This has been an especially powerful factor in neutralizing liberal tendencies among the less privileged Jews who live in declining urban areas.) Defense of constitutional guarantees is still part of the agenda of the Jewish community, but rank-and-file support, never very strong, is now miniscule.

Third, there is little doubt that there has been substantial reduction in discrimination against Jews in employment, in colleges and universities, in housing and in hotels and other places of public accommodation. It still exists to a certain extent and needs correction, particularly in the "executive suite," in some exclusive housing and resorts, and in some colleges and graduate schools. And the special form of discrimination faced by observant Jews in seeking employment still requires vigorous action. But discrimination is no longer an ever-present fact of life for every Jew looking for employment, education, housing or relaxation.

On the other hand, Jews find themselves threatened by enforcement of the very anti-bias laws they helped to get. In its simplest form, this threat means no more than enforcement of the laws close to home. This may be in the form of integration of the schools attended by our children rather than by someone else's. Or it may be integration of housing in our neighborhood rather than in a distant state — the well-known "But-Not-Next Door" phenomenon.

More complex and more serious has been the adverse effect on Jews, usually merely as members of the white community, of many "affirmative action" programs designed, rightly or wrongly, to make anti-bias laws more effective. This is not the place to go into the tangled problem of quotas, goals and preferential treatment and the genuine deprivations that these practices often impose on individual Jews. For the purpose of this paper, it is enough to say that this

prolonged conflict has certainly eroded Jewish enthusiasm for civil rights activity.

Fourth, the rise in concern about United States policy towards Israel has tended to drive a wedge between Jews and the non-Jewish liberal left. Many liberals continue to support Israel, being satisfied that their cherished concepts of pacifism and anti-nationalism do not require a different policy. But others have vigorously espoused the other side. At the same time, we have seen substantial and important support for Israel from the right, even the extreme right, coupled with virtually total opposition from the extreme left. This has naturally reduced Jewish antipathy to the right.

Fifth, and most important in the eyes of some Jews, there has been the development, or perhaps only the discovery, of both anti-Israel and outright anti-Semitic sentiment in the radical left and in the black and other minority communities. This, too, has had the effect of mitigating hostility to the right and of permitting outspoken, formal, political conservatism to achieve respectability among Jewish intellectuals.

The 1972 Election

All of these trends came to a head in the 1972 presidential election, which saw a substantial shift of Jewish votes from the Democratic to the Republican Party. The shift suggested that increased affluence among Jews had eroded their traditional support of the Democrats. Decreased concern about civil liberties had reduced concern about what Richard Nixon had long symbolized. Gains in combatting anti-Jewish discrimination had negated the need to cooperate with other less privileged minorities. Widespread hostility to Israel among liberals had made alliance with them less palatable. And rising anti-Semitism within the left and among the blacks had given

many the excuse to stop giving even lip service to social reforms that had never been overly attractive to them anyway.

Of course, Jewish votes for Nixon were also prompted to some extent by concern about whether a turnover in the national administration would cause an adverse change in United States policy in the Middle East. It is anyone's guess how large a factor this was. Few, however, would doubt that it was not the only factor; and my own belief is that the domestic trends outlined above were what dominated.

Two important aspects of the shift should be kept in mind. First, it was not a landslide. The majority of Jewish voters still backed the Democratic candidate (but only 50 percent in New York). Second, one vital aspect of our reaction to the Holocaust has continued undiminished — the determination of Jews that we will use all our political resources to insure both survival of Israel and our own domestic security both as individuals and as a community. Although our views as to how to accomplish this may have changed, our determination to accomplish it has not.

Watergate and the Yom Kippur War

What has been the impact of Watergate on the American Jewish community? It is almost impossible to answer that question because Watergate coincided so closely in time with Israel's crisis. At this Conference meeting, whose keynote is "The Aftermath of the Yom Kippur War," the two events must be taken together.

The interrelationship is seen most obviously, of course, in the relative silence of Jewish organizations on the subject of impeachment of the President. In my view, that is a special situation from which no broad conclusions should be drawn. The vital role of the United

States Government in resolving Israel's perilous situation had to be weighed by the Jewish community in any action it took. That consideration would never justify us in defending what we know to be evil. But in this case it warranted inaction, even on a matter on which we might otherwise have been heard. Moreover, it is by no means clear that we should have been heard even under different circumstances. The question of impeachment is inextricably enmeshed in partisan politics, a matter in which Jewish organizations should not be involved.

On other domestic issues — those on which the organized Jewish community spoke out before Watergate and the Yom Kippur War — it does not appear that our position along the political spectrum has yet been affected in either direction by the recent turmoil. True, we are now more receptive to the views on domestic policy held by President Nixon and the conservative Republicans and Democrats than we were ten years ago. But no more than we were one year ago. In other words, the present middle-of-the-spectrum aura of the Jewish community is due to the pre-Watergate factors discussed above, rather than to either the recent revelations of scandal and corruption or the Yom Kippur War.

Inevitably, the Middle-East crisis has reduced the level of our concerns with all domestic issues. By unspoken consensus, action on those issues has been subordinated, almost to the point of suspension. It might indeed be said that discussion of Jewish involvement in domestic issues is academic as long as our necessary preoccupation with Israel's agony continues.

Consequently, it is probably too soon to judge the full impact of Watergate on American Jewry's attitude toward internal affairs. Our reaction to Watergate has been delayed. Any tendency it may have to produce a loss of enchant-

ment with conservatives has been masked by the deep involvement of the symbol of conservatism, the Nixon administration, in securing Israel's right to survive.

There is no reason to believe, however, that this subordination of domestic concern represents a permanent change in the American Jewish agenda. It is highly improbable that we will abandon our hard-won right to participate in the political processes whereby the nature of our society is determined.

When the impact of Watergate, independent of the Yom Kippur aftermath, is felt, how, if at all, will it affect the political position of the American Jewish community? There is at least a possibility that disillusionment with, even revulsion to, the Nixon administration will cause a reversal of the conservative trend of the last ten years. It must be conceded, however, that this may be mere wishful thinking on the part of one who believes that the Jewish community was on the right track ten years ago and on the wrong one since.

A Return to Liberalism?

In my view, our understanding of the lessons of the Holocaust was sound in the 50s and 60s, and the loss of that understanding endangers our future. Without trying to buttress a series of pronouncements on highly debatable issues, let me just state as my carefully considered dogma that the ultimate threat of virulent, Nazi-type anti-Semitism, in this country, is greater from the right than from the left; that unity with other minority groups, despite our current serious disagreements, is vital to us; that a society deeply divided along racial lines or between rich and poor is not secure for Jews or anyone else; and that the surest safeguard against the ultimate

horror of rampant anti-Semitism is preservation of the general health of our society.

The direction in which the Jewish community will move may well turn on the issue of personal security — of safety in the streets — with which Jews and all other Americans have been legitimately concerned. That concern may continue to push us to the right. However, if Watergate has done anything, it has irreparably impaired the image of the right as the bastion of law and order. Its most effective spokesmen have become the symbols of lawlessness. They have no program for dealing with the ills of society. They offer no personal security outside of methods that approach the terrors of the police state. It may well be that, for Jews, the one unforgettable revelation of the tape transcripts will be that, as late as September 1972, President Nixon and his colleagues were contemplating the "exciting prospect" of using the powers of their position to punish their political enemies. At least, for us, it *should* be unforgettable. It revealed an intention to deal with continuing distress and division by moving toward absolute power.

But this "exciting" plan was only one reflection of a larger phenomenon — the claim that the Executive has unreviewable authority to assert the needs of na-

tional security as a justification for suspending constitutional rights. That is always the justification of despotism, of the left or the right. Even though the threat was exposed when it was no larger than a man's hand, it was a threat and it could become so again. One must hope that the Jewish community has read this aspect of Watergate rightly.

We must assume, because we cannot bear not to, that Israel's security will soon be assured and that American Jewry will again turn to considering its role in our country's pursuit of domestic tranquility. We will then find ourselves in a world troubled by ills that directly affect us. Watergate, as well as the Yom Kippur War will be behind us, part of history but not forgotten. Jews will be reminded that there are, in the words of my assigned topic, "Issues Troubling America." They will have to determine their "involvement."

On that, there is little that I can add to buttress my hopeful prediction that we will move back toward the kind of concern with fundamental solutions that was taken for granted in the 50s and 60s. I can only say that, as professionals, we must act on the assumption that it will happen because otherwise we will have no chance of achieving the changes in society that we regard as essential to protection of the security of all Americans.