RESPONSE TO SCHIFFMAN AND COHEN

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As an historian of twentieth-century American Jews, I find it difficult to accept the premise of Lawrence Schiffman's and Shaye Cohen's thoughtful papers. Perhaps because I use historical methods to analyze the relatively recent events of a young Jewish community, I am disturbed by the premise that American Jews in the last decades of the twentieth century sufficiently resemble other Jewries centuries ago to draw analogies regarding responses to schism or the establishment of boundaries between Jews and gentiles. Like Schiffman and Cohen, I appreciate the historical uniqueness of a particular time, place, and group. While I would not deny the continuities that link American Jews with their Jewish predecessors, I consider of questionable value the process of seeking historical lessons in the distant past.

Standing at the vantage point of 1988, I am struck more by the differences than by the similarities between our postindustrial American democratic capitalist society and the societies of ancient Babylonia and Palestine, the Hellenized countries of the Mediterranean world, or medieval Islam and Christendom. In fact, Schiffman and Cohen implicitly agree. When Cohen develops his analogies, he speaks specifically of the characteristics of contemporary America that can also be found in the prerabbinic world, namely, voluntarism, weak rabbinic influence, no central authority, theological and ritual diversity, and therefore diffuse and permeable boundaries between Jew and gentile. Yet I question how significant these characteristics were for the prerabbinic world. Cohen is starting from American assumptions and concerns and transporting them into another historical time and place. I fear that he distorts the experience of both America and the Hellenistic world. Were he to take the Second Commonwealth as his point of departure, would he necessarily come up with the same characteristics? Perhaps. I don't know, for I am not a scholar of the centuries before the common era. I do know that the significant characteristics Cohen lists do not include such standard, historically recognized attributes of American society as its individualism, experientialism, consumption capitalism, democratic politics, immigrant origins, and, on the negative side, its racism, competitiveness, violence, and anti-intellectualism. In truth, the problem lies not with Cohen but with the starting point: the assumption that disunity threatens American Jews and that we can learn lessons from history.

This problem also bedevils Schiffman's paper. Like Cohen, he begins his analysis with a metaphor drawn from modern science. Cohen refers to semipermeable membranes and Schiffman to a litmus test. Both metaphors testify to the primacy of contemporary thinking in the subsequent historical discussions. The ancient world knew neither litmus tests nor semipermeable membranes.

If we are to make that world intelligible to ourselves, we can use such metaphors but we must recognize that in so doing we are translating from one culture to another and that important nuances are lost in the translation. Indeed, more than nuances may be lost. Schiffman recognizes this problem when he encloses the adjective "modern" in quotation marks when it modifies Canaanite society. The Canaanites were not modern, just more technologically advanced than the desert tribesmen. Although historians may disagree over the content of modernity, they agree that modern societies share characteristics that are not merely relative. To return to Schiffman. Why a litmus test? Why one test of identity? Can membership in such a complex group as the Jews be refined to a single test? Why an individualistic test? I suspect that were there not a lot of intermarriages taking place among American Jews, Schiffman might not have come up with marriageability as the litmus test. But Schiffman like Cohen is too good a historian to stick with such a simple mechanism as a litmus test. Instead, he describes a fairly complex process of schism, of alienation, of separation, and even provides sufficient evidence to allow for a different reading. His conclusion also avoids a simple cause-and-effect interpretation. Differences of "opinion regarding Jewish status and the subsequent inability of groups of Jews to marry one another must," he writes, "inevitably be accompanied by" a schism. Ironically, Schiffman's emphasis here is not on the process leading to schism but on how ideological/theological disputes produce two separate groups of marriage partners. His interpretation avoids the political. I would argue that it is when theology becomes ideology -- that is, when it enters the realm of politics -- that defining marriage partners becomes a political tool, a means of exercising political power.

Indeed, I am disturbed at the political agenda that threatens to overwhelm the historian's skills. By turning to history for lessons even from fine historians, we risk engaging in polemic, lining up history on "our" side -- whichever side that is (both Schiffman and Cohen appear to favor unity). Since Schiffman and Cohen are accomplished scholars and neither stoops to polemic, the danger can be seen most clearly in the current popularity of comparisons of American Jewry with Babylonian Jewry. This favorite image of American Jewish speech-makers carries a clear political message vis-a-vis Israel as it asserts the religious and cultural creativity of American Jews. But it also alerts us to the real issue at stake: political power.

If my analysis is correct, then we are asking the wrong questions and starting from the wrong premises. The questions to be asked are: Why are we so concerned about disunity? Why do we fear schism and the threat of schism? Why has religion become the main arena of political debate among American Jews? What relationship do the previous four or five decades have with the current situation? Why do we want to learn from history? If there are lessons to be learned from history, why do we American Jews avoid our own history and seek analogies with the ancient and medieval past? Since these questions seem to me to be the relevant ones rather than those that Schiffman and Cohen were asked to address, I will try to answer them from my perspective as an historian of American Jews. Hopefully, my responses to these questions will prove more useful than any critique I could offer of Schiffman's and Cohen's contributions.

American Jews have put disunity on their communal agenda because there is relatively little of it. Were American Jews plagued by violent disputes, excommunications flying forth, bitter squabbling over scarce resources, political competition and vigorous ideological debate, they would undoubtedly have neither the time nor the consensus to make the subject of disunity a matter of reasoned public debate. The absence of deep, pressing disputes among American Jews allows us to contemplate unity vs. disunity, the sources, problems, and solutions. Those of us with historical memories can summon from the not-so-distant past (certainly not as far back as the first century of the common era) relevant examples of significant disunity -- for example, in the McCarthy period, when American Jews were deeply divided over Jewish communists. The sharp attack on Breira only a decade ago represented a reminder for those with short historical memories of the dangers of becoming political bedfellows with communists or fellow travelers. Zionism also stood, before the

establishment of Israel, for an ideology that divided American Jews across class, religious, and political lines. A prominent historian of American Zionism would not have titled his study of the postwar movement *We Are One!* were it not for the historical significance of this development.

But to say that the absence of communal chaos provides the basis for concern with disunity is not to explain the current interest in the subject. This interest is partially fueled by the researches of historians regarding American Jewry's response to the Holocaust. The lack of unity that characterized American Jews in those years contributed to their political ineffectiveness in saving European Jewry. A concern with disunity in 1988 can be read, then, as a concern for the political effectiveness of American Jews. Having achieved an unprecedented degree of consensus and a substantial measure of political influence, American Jews are worried lest they risk current gains in damaging intramural disputes.

Yet the interest in disunity focuses less on politics than on schism, or religious separatism. This emphasis echoes Israeli politics and may also mark the religious coming of age of American Jews. For the first time American Jews, or at least secular American Jewish communal organizations, appear concerned about religion. After decades of benign neglect, religious practices and theological questions are engaging more than a handful of rabbis, scholars, and devout Jews. The recognition and authority accorded religious leaders in Israel and their political influence undoubtedly have made Judaism a more attractive battleground for American Jews. The loss of other political battlegrounds, most notably the decline of the secular Jewish left, has contributed to the new interest in religious issues. With the entry of many observant Jews into secular Jewish organizational life has come an agenda that reflects some of their enduring personal concerns. Finally, the rising curve of fascination with schism may point to the real Americanization of Judaism. In the United States, religion has been characterized by ferment, schism, sectarianism, and political controversy. A strong link has always existed between religion and politics, from John Winthrop's Boston to Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority. The absence of substantial religious politicking by American Jews until recently suggests the salience of Jewish immigrant origins, especially the selective character of migration. That contemporary religious politics have been pursued by those who also appear to be furthest from the American mainstream, namely, the most Orthodox, should not obscure the authentic American dimensions of such behavior. If an earlier generation learned the lesson of religious pluralism from American religion, we may be learning a new lesson of religious schism, competition, and intolerance.

This is not necessarily the type of lesson we may want to learn, and so we turn to history for a different way of imagining the present situation. Since the interest in history indicates a concern for legitimation and authenticity, the oldest history undoubtedly is the best. The further back in time a historian goes to a period of unquestioned Jewish ancestors, the better. American Jews are often reminded of their short history, their upstart newness on the world Jewish historical stage. Some scholars even suggest that American Jews lack a collective history as they lack a Jewish literature. All they possess is journalism and autobiography. Given such strictures, we turn to the ancient past for analogies and lessons, simultaneously endowing our present with an authentic Jewish dimension. After all, if Jews in prerabbinic times struggled with similar boundary problems and medieval Jews faced the challenge of schism, then American Jews stand within a venerable Jewish tradition. Unfortunately, ignoring our own, albeit short, history limits possibilities for understanding our current predicament. Historians recognize that the present grows out of the immediate past. This is the past we should study lest, in Santayana's famous warning, we are condemned to repeat it. And for American Jews, their recent past contains two profound historical events that are not easily assimilated: the Holocaust and the establishment of Israel. These events exerted a palpable influence on American Jews, as the memory of the Holocaust and the present reality of Israel continue to do.

The last half century has witnessed a transformation of American Jews that we barely understand. The enormous diversity and genuine disunity of the immigrant era has yielded to decades of growing uniformity and consensus. But American Jews have purchased these changes at a price. The Jewish community has narrowed the range of its concerns and excluded dissident groups -- most notably the communists and anti-Zionists -- from its councils. The rewards for restriction have been substantial. Political effectiveness, cultural creativity, and religious innovation have soared as American Jews have turned away from internal dissent. If this is one of the lessons of our current history, then perhaps we should continue the exclusionary process, reading out of the Jewish community first those who intermarry, then those who divorce without a *get*, then those who convert along nonhalakhic lines, then all who are halakhically suspect. Do these new minorities threaten American Jews as the communists or anti-Zionists did? Here is the crux of the debate over disunity. Who defines the minority and who gains the political power to exclude that minority from the Jewish community?

The current controversy over disunity reflects a political struggle for leadership. Because American Jews have consolidated, the stakes appear higher, no less than schism. So the trend of the past decades is being resisted, often by those who previously supported exclusion. In 1976 the political scientist Daniel Elazar proposed a series of concentric circles as the model of the American Jewish community. An observant Jew himself, he placed in the inner circle the Jewish Jews, those whose lives were regulated by a Jewish rhythm. Indeed, Jewish Jews feel that they belong in the center and want to exercise the power that comes with centrality. But we know, or should recall, that there are other models. In capitalist America, wealth buys power, and the wealthy have often claimed for themselves the right to lead. In democratic America, votes control power, and American Jews fought bitterly (e.g., in the American Jewish Congress struggle) over how much influence the masses deserved by virtue of their numbers. Then there were the claims of the intellectuals, ideologues, creative artists, rabbinic elite. What we can learn from history, from our American Jewish history, is that individuals do exert influence, that change does occur, and that compromise is possible. But we should also remember that we live in a unique world, that analogies are limited, and that our biases shape our perceptions of reality.

concrete decisions we must make should encourage inclusiveness and experimentation. If we are willing to address this new reality together, we will help to limit absolutist demands. Whether there will be one Jewish people or two, if that is the issue, or whether we are truly different wings of one people, the process of reconciliation remains the same for all of us. And that process was richly demonstrated here today.

Let me add one other thing. CLAL is delighted to be working with the American Jewish Committee, which has been involved for years in interdenominational activities, the City University of New York, the Synagogue Council, and the many Jewish federations that are involved in dialogue. It is a great joy to have been able to do this with a broad spectrum of colleagues, and I look forward to the opportunity for us to gather again. On behalf of CLAL and the AJC, I thank all of those involved -- both the speakers and the participants -- in this enterprise. It is a beginning, but a critical one, and one of which we should all be very proud.