

COUNTERVAILING TRENDS IN AMERICAN JEWRY: An Interview with Norman Podhoretz

Manfred Gerstenfeld

- A trend toward increasing indifference in the Jewish community is being countered by a return to religious observance.
 - The second Palestinian uprising in 2000 had a profound effect on American Jewish attitudes toward Israel. Most American Jews who care about Israel take their cue from the Israeli government, and in Israel, public opinion had also shifted, leading to the Labor party's dramatic demise in the 2003 elections. But had the Israeli left won the debate, American Jews would have gone along as well.
 - An important characteristic of American Jewry is that it remains stubbornly liberal despite realignments and evidence that neither the friends nor the enemies of yesterday have the same attitudes today. Like most non-Jewish liberals, the majority of American Jews were against the war in Iraq. Nevertheless it has been assumed all over the world that support for the war was disproportionately high among Jews.
 - As early as 1969 I wrote that the distinction between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism was only theoretical and was becoming invisible to the naked eye. Jews and non-Jews alike attacked me for saying this. By now, the truth of this observation has become so obvious that fewer and fewer people deny it.
 - The main target of anti-Semitism is now the State of Israel. Anyone who truly cares about the Holocaust and wants to avert another one has to be absolutely firm about the safety and security of Israel.
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Greater Indifference, Greater Observance

Retired editor of *Commentary* Norman Podhoretz told a conference a few years ago that in his youth: "I was infected with the virus of utopianism, from which I have spent the last forty years recovering." He analyzes developments in the American Jewish community with this in mind.

For Podhoretz - a radical in his younger days who was never a communist - the community's main characteristic is the presence of two countervailing trends, which are

difficult to measure by opinion polls or sociological analysis. "The first is the increasing indifference manifesting itself in assimilation and intermarriage, and attitudes toward Israel. Israel was the one subject almost the entire elder Jewish generation cared about. Now a large slice of the community is indifferent. Some are even unfriendly.

"The second trend is the return to religious observance and the move to the 'right' by parts of the Reform movement and the Reconstructionists. I went to a bar mitzvah at a Reconstructionist synagogue in Philadelphia with much Hebrew in the liturgy. In Reform congregations one also finds more Hebrew and many people are now wearing *kippot* (skullcaps) and *tallitot* (prayer shawls).

"The Conservative synagogue I belong to has become almost indistinguishable from an Orthodox one, except that women participate fully in the service and sit alongside the men. Midge Decter, my wife, once wrote a book called *Liberal Parents, Radical Children*. Today, a title for another book might be *Conservative Parents, Orthodox Children*."

Visible Jews

"No sociologist in the 1950s anticipated such a development. They were focusing on increasing Jewish assimilation and attenuation of loyalty to the community. When I was an undergraduate at Columbia University in 1946-1950, Jews formed a minority of about 17 percent in the college without a visible campus presence. Nobody wore a *kippa*. Today, one sees *kippot* all over the Columbia campus. At Harvard there is a strictly kosher kitchen with two stoves; likewise in Princeton.

"One sees many observant young Jews around; some are bothered by questions one would expect only from the ultra-Orthodox. They go on dates but the men and women - some of them Harvard seniors - wonder whether Jewish law permits them to even hold hands. Orthodox congregations of young professionals have sprung up all around America; lawyers, doctors, stockbrokers, scientists, and other academics are serious about their orthodoxy.

"Similarly, people who were largely uninterested in Judaism for most of their lives now send their children to day schools like the Orthodox Ramaz or Conservative Solomon Schechter ones. Their numbers may not be that great, but in many areas of life - including politics - intensity is more important than numbers."

The Impact of Renewed Palestinian Violence

"The second Palestinian uprising in 2000 had a profound effect on American Jewish attitudes toward Israel. Most American Jews who care about Israel take their cue from

the Israeli government. After the Oslo Agreement, Israeli government leaders like the late Yitzhak Rabin or Shimon Peres said such things as: 'We are making peace and it's great; we must not permit the terrorist acts still going on to discredit the process.' It was to be expected that American Jews would echo these attitudes; and they did.

"I spoke and wrote frequently against the Oslo process from its beginning. I wasn't against it in principle, but I did consider it a disastrous misreading of reality. It was clearly going to lead to war rather than peace. The Jewish audiences to whom I lectured usually reacted by saying, 'Who are you to know better what is vital to Israel's security than great generals such as Prime Ministers Rabin or Ehud Barak?'

"My answer was, 'They are no longer generals but politicians, and they think and act accordingly.' Then, after Barak offered the Palestinians incredible concessions at Camp David in July 2000, the second uprising began. We have since learned that preparations for violence had started well before.

"This new eruption of violence led many American Jews to reconsider their position. Again they were taking their cues from Israel where public opinion had also started to shift. This led to the Labor party's dramatic demise in the 2003 elections. But had the Israeli left won the debate, American Jews would have gone along as well."

Evading the Unbearable Reality

After the renewed outbreak of Palestinian violence, Podhoretz published a *Commentary* article in December 2000 entitled "Intifada II: Death of an Illusion," in which he wrote:

The unbearable reality being evaded was that Israel's yearning for peace was shared neither by the Arab world in general nor by the Palestinians in particular - that their objection was not to anything Israel had done or failed to do, but to the very fact that it existed at all. Then, as time went on, and episode after episode occurred exposing the delusion of Oslo for what it was, more and more rationalizations had to be invented, and more and more lies had to be told to keep it alive. Too much hope - and too much political capital - had been invested in the "peace process" to allow any opening of eyes that had been blinded and minds that had been closed by the dazzling mirage on the White House lawn.

Podhoretz now adds: "Though the road map process is still in its very early stages, we may be witnessing a similar drama here. History never repeats itself fully, and Ariel Sharon and George W. Bush are likely to be tougher on terrorism and entertain fewer illusions about the Palestinians than their predecessors. But with the inauguration of a new 'peace process,' one already sees a softening in American Jewish opinion which will continue as long as the Israeli government indirectly encourages it by the positions it adopts."

A Stubbornly Liberal Community

"Over time, the Jewish community will probably become less influential in American society than it is today when - despite its small numbers - it is still politically important because Jews are so politically active and contribute so much money to political causes. This is how American democracy works. Each interest group is expected to press its own agenda as far as it can, which means that if American Jews become less passionate about Jewish interests as such, those interests will be neglected or ignored by the political powers that be.

"Another important characteristic of American Jewry is that it remains stubbornly liberal in a rather vague sense despite changes, traumas, realignments, and evidence that neither the friends nor the enemies of yesterday have the same attitudes today. As generals are said to do, much of the American Jewish community is always fighting the last war. In this case, since the right was traditionally more hostile to Jews than the left, it goes unnoticed that a reversal has taken place in recent years, with the right becoming much friendlier to Jewish interests - and especially Israel - than the left.

"As my generation dies out, a more serious Jewish move away from liberalism may very well occur. It has started already, though it is not yet statistically very significant. Depending on what happens it might accelerate. The resurgence of overt anti-Semitism all over the world - again, more on the left than on the right - will probably have a big impact on American Jewish attitudes.

"Even today, Israel is the one issue where most American Jews depart from the politically correct liberal position. Though dovish in general, they tend to sympathize with the Israeli military. Even so - like most non-Jewish liberals - the majority of American Jews were against the war in Iraq."

Neo-Conservatives

"Nevertheless it has been assumed all over the world that support for the war was disproportionately high among Jews. In fact, it has been charged that the Jews - euphemistically called 'neo-conservatives' - captured the White House and cajoled the Bush administration into invading Iraq solely to serve the interests of Sharon. This is a ridiculous idea, based on the absurd notion that the few intellectuals of Jewish origin in the administration - my own son-in-law Elliott Abrams is one of them - could manipulate such formidable leaders as George Bush, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, and Condoleezza Rice.

"Nor is it correct to characterize these leaders as neo-conservatives. None of them began on the left and moved to the right, which is what the neo-conservatives did:

hence the 'neo,' meaning new. To understand the true role of the neo-conservatives, one has to go back to the Reagan administration. Unlike Bush and his main foreign-policy advisers, all of whom are lifelong conservatives, Reagan himself was in effect a neo-conservative: he had been a liberal and a Democrat until his fifties. Be that as it may, in running for president against Jimmy Carter in 1979-80, he found that the view of the world and America's role in it held by the neo-conservative intellectuals represented a coherent and persuasive statement of what he himself had come to feel.

"This view was powerfully vindicated by the taking of American hostages in Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Much the same thing happened to George W. Bush on 11 September 2001, when the United States under his presidency was attacked out of the blue. Once again the neo-conservatives had a ready explanation for this huge act of terrorist aggression, as well as the outlines of a policy for dealing with it. The explanation articulated what Bush understood intuitively, which is why he accepted and acted upon it. Many people who opposed his policy in both America and other countries then attempted to discredit it by suggesting that he had been manipulated by a bunch of cunning Jews who cared only about the interests of Israel."

Two Ancient Anti-Semitic Canards

"This slander draws on two ancient anti-Semitic canards. The first one derives from the forged *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. It asserts that a sinister Jewish conspiracy aims to control the world in its political, financial, and other major aspects. The Nazis talked about the Jewish domination of culture in Berlin and Vienna in the 1920s. Today's modified defamation asserts that the manipulation is always in favor of Israel.

"The other, related, canard accuses Jews of dual loyalty. This fallacy has been a major component of American anti-Semitism, which has been much milder than the overseas variety. It flourished in the sewers and margins of society and drew on the idea that the Jews' primary loyalty is to their own 'tribe.' Once Israel came into existence, it mutated into the charge that Jews were loyal to Israel at the expense of the United States.

"This charge was so threatening that some American Jewish leaders - mainly of German origin - were opposed to the establishment of Israel out of fear that it would give even greater credence to the suspicion of dual loyalty. The truth, of course, was and is that Jews have found a true home in America, and that they know it. In fact, their support of Israel has consistently been based on the conviction that such support is entirely consistent with the interests of the United States."

The Resuscitation of Slander

"For this and many other reasons, the dual-loyalty slander seemed to have died out, but it re-emerged during the first Gulf War and has now erupted again. The special genius of anti-Semitism has always been to attack Jews from both directions. Jews have been accused of being responsible for communism as well as for capitalism. They have been portrayed both as revolutionaries and as counter-revolutionaries. The first allegation comes from the extreme right and the second from the extreme left, who have never had any trouble joining forces when it comes to maligning the Jews. Today we see the same phenomenon at work.

"On the extreme right, Pat Buchanan, for one, openly accuses the neo-conservatives - by which he means the Jews - of dual loyalty and of dragging America into a war solely for the benefit of Israel. On the left, the same line is propagated, even though it doesn't care about loyalty to the United States.

"As early as 1969 I wrote that the distinction between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism was only theoretical and was becoming invisible to the naked eye. Jews and non-Jews alike attacked me for saying this. By now, however, the truth of this observation has become so obvious that fewer and fewer people deny it. The result is a merging of the Jewish concern about Israel with a new anxiety over the resurgence of anti-Semitism, especially in Europe. As I noted earlier, this development is the one factor which could frighten American Jews to the point where they would mobilize once more around their Jewishness."

The Left's Abuse of the Holocaust

"For some years now, the great uniting factor has been the Holocaust. I have always been uneasy about its elevation to a central position because it stresses victimization as the major motif of Jewish life and Jewish history, and I consider this unhealthy.

"The Holocaust has also been exploited and abused by many people on the left. They can weep about the murdered Jews of the past while at the same time taking political positions which, if acted upon, could lead to the destruction of Israel. Dwelling on the Holocaust of the past thus provides 'anti-Zionist' leftists with a protective cover for hostility to the endangered Jews of the present.

"For many years I have been arguing that the main target of anti-Semitism is now the State of Israel. Anyone who truly cares about the Holocaust and wants to avert another one has to be absolutely firm about the safety and security of Israel."

Conservative Christians as Friends

"This is why I defend the conservative Christians who have taken such a strong stand in favor of Israel. True, one of their leaders, Pat Robertson, has bought into hoary anti-Semitic fantasies about the alleged conspiracy of Jews and Masons in the eighteenth century, but bad as this is, it seems to me trivial - or academic - as compared with his support of Israel in the living present.

"Many liberal Jews don't want the fundamentalist Christians as friends, which is absurd. Israel needs all the allies it can get. Again, it is true that the support of some Christian fundamentalists derives from a belief that the second coming of their Messiah must be preceded by Jewish sovereignty in the Holy Land, followed by a mass conversion of the Jews to Christianity. But as Irving Kristol has quipped, at the end of days we'll find out whether these fundamentalists are right, and in the meantime we can embrace them as the friends and allies they now are.

"In political life one survives by the ability to tell who are one's friends and who are one's enemies. Many American Jews seem amazingly deficient in this elementary ability. In the past, as I indicated earlier, it was the parties of the left that favored civil liberties, civil rights, and emancipation for the Jews, while the parties of the right resisted such measures. But in the last thirty-five years - beginning with the aftermath of the Six-Day War of 1967 - we have seen more and more evidence of a historic reversal where Israel is concerned. On the left there has been increasing hostility toward Israel, while on the right there has been increasing friendliness.

"Many Jews resolutely refuse to accept this. They are blinded by an atavistic anxiety which takes the form of the belief that these Christians want to convert their children and turn America into a place where Jews would be less than fully at home. This anxiety has no connection with contemporary realities. Another quip of Irving Kristol is that the main danger to Jews from Christians nowadays is not that they wish to persecute or convert the Jews, but that they want to marry their daughters."

No Civil Liberties Crisis

Podhoretz considers that there is no civil liberties crisis in the United States. "Anyone who was alive during the Second World War - I was a child then - will remember how Earl Warren, then the governor of California and later the very liberal Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court, supported the internment of the Japanese Americans. Nothing remotely comparable has happened to American Muslims.

"Just the opposite, in fact. For example, Muslims with overt connections to terrorist organizations have even been invited to the White House. At airports, the fear of being accused of racial profiling has made inspectors reluctant to search people who look like Arabs or Muslims, while old ladies and even government officials are treated as though they might be terrorists.

"This kind of thing is simply silly, but there is nothing silly about taking serious steps to make it more difficult for terrorists to attack us again. Like most Americans, I support a number of intrusive measures. If the choice is between giving the FBI or the CIA a little more power as against increasing the dangers of other terrorist attacks, normally sensible people will always go for the first option. Civil liberties are sufficiently protected by the Constitution and fully independent courts, and nobody suppresses watchdog organizations such as the ACLU. Like most Americans, I reject the idea that the Justice Department under Attorney General John Ashcroft represents a threat to civil liberties."

Hiding the Truth about Muslims

"Political correctness causes severe problems for homeland security. In the media there is almost nothing about Muslim religious leaders who support terrorism and preach *jihad* in their mosques. In the Muslim community itself, we hear only very weak protests - if any at all - against extremism, and hardly any Muslim clerics speak out against it. One of the leading opponents of Islamic terrorism, Fouad Ajami, who grew up as a Muslim in Lebanon, is a brilliant and courageous exception. But he cannot be considered a member of the Muslim religious community.

"In general, the media give us a highly selective picture of Islam, which is represented as a 'religion of peace,' with hardly a word about the doctrine of holy war." Podhoretz wrote on this in the April 2002 issue of *Commentary* in an article entitled, "The Return of 'The Jackal Bins'":

Television...was soon inundated with material presenting Islam in the most glowing terms...it was from the universities that the substantive content of the broadcasts was derived, from interviews with Muslim academics whose accounts of Islam...were selectively roseate. Sometimes they were even downright untruthful, especially in sanitizing the doctrine of jihad, or holy war, or in misrepresenting the extent to which leading Muslim clerics all over the world had been celebrating suicide bombers as heroes and martyrs.

Now he adds: "Many American Jewish liberals bend over backward in endorsing the view that Islam is a religion of peace and that Muslims are against terrorism. Of course we should all do everything possible to encourage reformist elements within the Muslim world. But before that can be done the reformers must make themselves heard and show us that they exist."

The Increased Visibility of American Muslims

"Muslims became more influential in the United States after 9/11, though one might have expected that they would be less so. There is a current in the Republican Party

headed by Grover Norquist. He has close ties with the Muslim community, which he considers a potentially good source of Republican voters. He is among those responsible for the meetings at the White House to which I referred earlier.

"I would guess that most Americans are not fooled by the sanitized picture of Islam which is accepted by many liberals and sometimes even the Bush Administration. The administration is so eager to prove that the war against terrorism is not a war against Islam that it twists itself into pretzels to demonstrate how much it admires Muslims.

"Despite my own criticisms of the American Muslim community, I would not say that it is a big threat to America. I also suspect that the next generation of American Muslims will become more Americanized than its immigrant parents, because the melting pot still seems to be more effective in promoting assimilation than 'multiculturalism' is in promoting separatism and balkanization."

Paying the Price for the Iraqi War?

Some political analysts estimate Israel will have to pay the price for the Iraq war as a compensatory Western gesture to the Arab and Muslim world. Podhoretz says, "I am putting my money on George Bush and betting that he will not force Israel to pay such a price. Bush understands that Israel - on a small scale but much more intensively - has been for a long time in the same predicament in which the United States now finds itself. For that reason, I think he will resist asking of Israel what he would not demand of the United States.

"Of course, Bush is being subjected to pressure from people inside his own Administration and from Tony Blair. They still imagine that Israel is the main obstacle to peace, and this will, as it already has, lead to temporary lapses on Bush's part. But unlike Blair, and unlike his father as well, Bush feels a strong kinship with Israel and he also recognizes its need to defend itself against terrorism. He is probably the best friend Israel has ever had in the White House."

Podhoretz considers most Jewish leaders self-appointed and wonders "how many divisions they have behind them." Yet he says, "there has been a change since the second intifada, 9/11, and the war in Iraq. Several heads of organizations seem to have become more realistic in their political assessments and to have had their spines stiffened.

"Until 2001 the American Jewish leadership was far too monolithic in its liberalism. Furthermore, few of the lay leaders know much either about Jewish history or about Judaism, and they therefore lack a strong sense of what there is to defend and protect. For many of them the most important thing is 'access,' which means getting invited to the White House or the State Department.

"But Jews are no longer in the same situation as they were before World War I, when such 'access' was so difficult that it took a major figure like Louis Marshall to achieve it. In any case, there is no Jewish leader today with the stature of Louis Marshall. I, for one, fear that the current leadership will regress into a knee-jerk liberal position as time goes on."

Podhoretz speaks from experience about people's opinion swings. As he has repented of his radical positions consistently over decades, he points out that these have not oscillated backward and forward like those of several current Jewish leaders.

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Norman Podhoretz was born in 1930. A graduate of Columbia and Cambridge Universities, where he studied liberal arts and English literature, he also earned a degree from the Seminary College of Jewish Studies at the Jewish Theological Seminary. In 1960 he became editor of *Commentary*, a position from which he retired in 1995. At present he is Editor at Large of the magazine, and a Senior Fellow of the Hudson Institute. The most recent of the nine books he has published are *Ex-Friends* (New York: Free Press, 1999), *My Love Affair with America: The Cautionary Tale of A Cheerful Conservative* (New York: Free Press, 2000), and *The Prophets: Who They Were, What They Are* (New York: Free Press, 2002).

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Dr. Manfred Gerstenfeld is Chairman of the Steering Committee of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, where he founded and directs the Center's Post-Holocaust and Anti-Semitism program. A version of this interview will appear in his forthcoming book, provisionally titled *Changing Jewish Attitudes and Expectations in the American Public Square*, as part of the Jews in the American Public Square project initiated by the Pew Charitable Trusts.

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