

*Text of Address by
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JUST A FEW WEEKS AGO, in countries near and far, millions of Jews gathered their families and friends together in joyous Passover celebrations. The Exodus story was told and retold in a variety of tongues, and the matzos and traditional Seder plate were surrounded with favorite local flavors and condiments. But transcending the differences was the underlying purpose of the ceremony, which was the same the world over -- to proclaim the miracle of Jewish survival and to rededicate ourselves to a Jewish future.

The very fact of Jewish survival has perplexed and confounded historians and scholars for centuries. And in light of the unprecedented tragedy that engulfed our people in the first half of this century, it is surely a miracle that we are here at all to proclaim, with energy and determination, our intention to maintain our identity as Jews.

Contemporary Jewish existence takes a variety of forms: In the State of Israel, we are witness to the miracle of Jewish nationhood reborn. The uniqueness of the reestablished Jewish State lies in

the fact that Jews determine the contours and complexion of Israeli society. This is a revolutionary phenomenon in Jewish life. The possibilities for the flowering of Jewish culture and for a singular Jewish fulfillment in this environment are unique. At the same time, Jews are alive and well outside of Israel -- and none so thriving as the American Jewish community.

THE ARGUMENT is often made, and with a good deal of merit, that Jewish existence outside of Israel is marginal, that anywhere outside of a Jewish state Jews exist on the periphery of society. And it is this concept that I would like to explore with you today. For marginality means many things -- many, but not all of them, pejorative. Certainly when Jews are barred from participation in social, political, and economic life, marginality facilitates exclusion, oppression and persecution. Even a neophyte student of Jewish history and Jewish life can cite examples of this kind of marginality in our past, and even today in such places as the Soviet Union, Syria, Ethiopia. Exclusion and persecution are tragic, and our current agenda must, as a principal focus, address their elimination. Another kind of marginality, less threatening to Jews as individuals, but fully as dangerous, in the long run, to Jews as a group and to the survival of Jewish culture and civilization, is represented by the offer made to West European Jewry by enlightened Christians on the threshold of Jewish Emancipation: full partici-

pation to Jews, but only if they are willing to relinquish their Jewish identity. In the words of Clermont-Tonnerre: "To the Jew as person, everything; to the Jew as Jew, nothing." Many European Jews settled for this kind of marginality, and were lost forever to the Jewish fold. Acceptance of this offer also continues to characterize many Jews today, throughout the Diaspora.

Marginality in the United States is a very different phenomenon than it is or has been elsewhere, for in this country marginality is the norm. Jews are only one of many groups that have chosen both to maintain their uniqueness and distinctiveness and to participate fully in American society. Protestants, Catholics and Evangelicals, Blacks and Asiatics, Polish, Greek and Hispanic Americans and the children and grandchildren of Americans of a host of other nationalities and backgrounds are committed to being, at one and the same time, members of their own group and of the larger American society.

This is a year of commemoration in the United States. In recalling the end of World War II and the liberation of the death camps 40 years ago, Jews have special reason to give thanks for the uniqueness of America. This country's friendship for Israel; its championing of the cause of Soviet Jewry; and its role in the rescue of Ethiopian Jews are only a few of the many reasons American Jews count their blessings in this wonderful land. But the greatest miracle of



America for Jews has been the very role open to us in American society. We participate in the larger society not only as Americans but as Jews. America welcomes our full participation as Jews, and recognizes and respects us as full-fledged Americans. And we have responded by participating fully in the political, intellectual and economic life of the nation, while at the same time creating the institutional structure of a living Jewish community.

The noted Israeli author, A.B. Yehoshua, in a talk to the American Jewish Committee's Board of Governors Institute in Israel last February, expounded a thesis he has enunciated in many of his writings: Jews, he argues, are a neurotic people. Only a neurotic people, he insists, when confronted with the choice between Diaspora and return to their land would choose Diaspora; and Jews have made that choice, repeatedly, in every millennium, when it was presented to them.

Yehoshua is right, of course, in noting that Jews have, at several junctures in our past, opted to remain in the Diaspora despite the alternative of return to Zion. But he is wrong, I think, in assuming that this represents neurosis. I would argue that ever since the destruction of the First Temple, and the exile of the Jews from their land in the sixth century before the common era, the Jewish consciousness has included two concepts in counterpoint -- on the one hand, Jewish national rebirth in the Land

of Israel; and on the other, the extension of Jewish creative existence beyond the borders of that land, a geographic universalization of Jewish life.

ONE NEED NOT probe deeply into the recesses of Jewish history to know how often Diaspora has been a true exile, a disaster for Jews. We are well aware of the sufferings and degradations that have befallen us, in various times and places, because we were outsiders. Indeed, Zionism -- the commitment to restore the Jewish people to their land -- emerged because it was seen as the only viable solution to the constant threats of physical harm and cultural and religious annihilation that Jews faced in the Diaspora. But while it would be foolish to suggest that the black record of the Diaspora can be overlooked, I do suggest that we need to reexamine Jewish history more realistically, and to understand that along with the dangers and vulnerabilities of the Diaspora there has evolved a universalization of the Jewish perspective, a dimension that is fundamental to the Jewish character today, wherever Jews live.

We Jews talk justifiably about all we have given to the world. But we have also taken from the world, through our creative interaction with every civilization with which we have come into contact. Virtually every significant creative product of Jewish history has represented a synthesis of the Jewish internal

experience with the experience of other civilizations. The Bible itself represents a fusion and transformation of much that the Jewish community absorbed from the earlier Canaanite and northwest Semitic cultures. The Talmud provides countless examples of Greco-Roman institutions, concepts and styles which entered Jewish life during the Hellenistic period. The great flowering of Hebrew poetry in the Middle Ages resulted from the encounter between Hebrew poets and their Arab counterparts. The burgeoning of Jewish philosophy emerged from the exposure to classical Greek thought through the instrumentality of Arab translation, and theological categories entered the Jewish mind through the encounter with Christianity. Perhaps most significant for us to remember is the fact that all of contemporary Judaism is the result of the interaction and confrontation of traditional Judaism with modernism following the Enlightenment.

Language is not simply a set of conventions; it is a way of structuring reality. New dimensions were added to our ability to understand, interpret and describe human experiences by our contact with a variety of linguistic traditions. The resulting Judeo-Arabic, Judeo-Spanish and Judeo-German languages all brought to the Jewish experience the richness of the cultures from which they were absorbed. And together, all these confrontations with different modes of thinking, speaking, writing, and social outlook have served to broaden the Jewish vision, to transcend parochialism and to

make of the Eternal People a truly universal people as well.

I maintain that this unique Jewish experience -- this marginality with respect to the cultures around us -- has always carried with it profound blessings as well as dangers. Thus the decision of our own Diaspora Jewish community to assert a commitment to our continuity outside of Israel represents neither a distorted idealization of our past nor a rejection of the centrality of Israel. Neither of these is acceptable -- they are, indeed, unthinkable. Rather, our decision represents our commitment to retain for ourselves this particular kind of marginality.

When American Jews choose, for themselves and their children, a future outside of Israel, they opt, nevertheless, for a Jewish future, with deep ties to Jewish roots, traditions and values; an unyielding commitment to the safety and well-being of Jews the world over; and a special bond of involvement, love, history and destiny with the land and the people of Israel. But it is also an American future -- one we can help shape and transform with that special vision of responsibility and commitment that stems from our own values and history.

THE JEWISH PAST has much to contribute to America's present and future. And that synthesis is a fitting agenda both for the American Jewish Committee and for the larger Jewish

community. Our long-range perspective as a universal people, our transcendence over parochialism, and our commitment to social and ethical values far more abiding than shifting ideologies of left and right, enable us to examine and respond to complex national and international problems without being readily co-opted by competing political forces. And that is our great strength.

This is precisely what I want to stress. The American Jewish community is broadly represented along the entire political spectrum. We are a non-partisan community and this agency must be a non-partisan agency. This means that we must reject the easy cliches and engage the fundamental questions facing our society. In this era of increasing polarization, when social concerns, foreign policy and domestic political philosophy are all too often argued in terms of dogma, the value systems we have synthesized and the analytical skills we have honed, thanks to the complexities of our history, help us to reject simplistic solutions.

CHANGE IS UNSETTLING, always, but we Jews are witness to the fact that a living society is a changing society. We must be ready to challenge prior assumptions --those of others, and our own as well. Our experience has equipped us well to play this role, and we must bring that experience to bear in each of the policy areas where we hope to make a contribution.

Take, for example, the vital social policy issues hotly debated right now, under pressure of mammoth budget deficits. We hear much talk about the role of government, market forces, the need to retain (or dismantle) all those social programs that were put in place over the past fifty years. We hear far less about the moral imperatives of social policy. Yet responsible sources tell us there are 20 million people hungry in America today, and our own eyes are witness to the growing numbers of men, women and children who are homeless in our large metropolitan areas. Individual welfare programs, however unproductive, may be sacrosanct to some social thinkers; raising (or not raising) taxes, keeping (or reducing) entitlements may be sacrosanct to others. But in the Jewish tradition, the moral imperative to feed the hungry, and to do for the old, the sick and the needy what they cannot do for themselves, is central and must not be lost in the polemics of right and left. When so many of our public figures are turning to the Bible for quotations to support their stance, we must underscore our prophetic tradition: "Share your bread with the hungry," the Prophet Isaiah proclaimed. "Take the homeless into your home; clothe the naked when you see him; do not turn away from people in need."

We know, and we must assert, that neither the unselective retention of all the social programs enacted over the past half-century, nor their indiscriminate dismantling, will solve the problems of poverty and inequality in this country.

We can help create a fair and discriminating approach, because fairness is the only ax we have to grind. We must insist on the open-minded and objective review of what works and what doesn't, and help to forge a fair and reasonable policy for the future. And as the People of the Book, we must recall the biblical injunction in the Book of Deuteronomy: "If there is a needy person among you, any of your fellow countrymen in any of your communities in the land which the Lord your God is giving you, you must not steel your heart, nor shut your hand against your needy countryman, but you must open wide your hand to him..."

AFFIRMATIVE ACTION is another issue in which we have played, and continue to play, an important and constructive role. It is constructive because it goes beyond decrying the quotas we correctly oppose to searching out remedies we can support. Robert Pear, in a New York Times article on April 14, that described Justice Department plans to reexamine some 50 or more cases that involve "race-conscious remedies," singled out the AJC position from all others for precisely this reason. He wrote --and I quote:

The American Jewish Committee... strikes a delicate balance, opposing quotas as "inimical to individual rights," but stressing the need for other remedies. Hyman Bookbinder, the Committee's Washington

representative, recommends training programs to help blacks and members of other minority groups qualify for jobs.

The Committee, a respected voice on civil rights issues, supports the judicious use of numerical goals, saying they may sometimes be necessary to monitor the effectiveness of legitimate affirmative action programs.

"As opposed to a quota," Mr. Bookbinder said, "a goal is a realistic numerical objective, arrived at in terms of the vacancies expected and the number of qualified applicants available in the relevant job market."

"Such fine distinctions," Pear concluded, "are rare in the tumultuous debate over affirmative action."

We don't always win friends, even among Jews, with such fine distinctions. But I am convinced they promote the search for solutions to what remains perhaps the thorniest of civil rights issues. We know that equality of result is not a civil right. But we must also bear in mind that, in the Jewish tradition, helping to reduce gross inequality in society is a positive social good. Surely keeping this goal alive in these troubled times is an appropriate task for us.

Defense issues are often presented as a conflict between defenders of Ameri-

can strength and proponents of American weakness. But despite the pressure to choose up sides, we know that neither a blank check to the military nor a naive conviction that U.S. defenses need no further augmenting will guarantee American security and move the world away from nuclear confrontation. We know that neither unwavering belligerence nor self-deprecation is the answer to our foreign relationships; that defense proposals must be determined without ideological preconceptions. We should welcome the fact that our country has overcome its tendency to self-flagellation, and the double standard by which America could do no right and our adversaries could do no wrong. But we must remember that this is too complex a world to be reduced conceptually to a primordial battlefield of good versus evil. And American interests are too complex to be decided according to unyielding doctrines of either isolationism or interventionism.

EVEN ON ISSUES where Jewish interests are directly involved -- such as the recent assaults on the separation of church and state -- the simple answers of the past are not enough. We must protect the Constitution, which so wisely established the principle of separation. And we must continue to alert American society to the destructiveness and dangers of a so-called "Christianized America." But we must also respond creatively to the deep dissatisfaction of many Americans with what they (and we) perceive as a disintegration of the basic

values that have made this country great. It is urgent that we overcome the impression that we do not care about the deterioration of family life, the vulgarization of sex through pornography, the cynicism about honesty, patriotism and civility in our society. We must help develop curricula that can inculcate core values, and participate, as Americans and as Jews, in public discourse designed to define and enhance these values. At the same time, we must reexamine our teaching of these values in the educational structures of our own Jewish community as well.

As American Jews, we also have a specific role to play on the international scene, and we at AJC take our international relations very seriously indeed. By nurturing relationships with world leaders, we are not only in a better position to enhance Jewish security in Israel and throughout the world, but also to project our vision of a more caring world for all people.

OUR SPECIAL ROLE, as Jews and as Americans, is to help develop approaches that will bring our Jewish ethical outlook to bear on social issues -- whether they involve foreign affairs, defense policy, the budget deficit or how to teach core values in the public schools. To do so, we must explore our own value system more thoroughly, and we must work harder to synthesize our Jewish heritage, the American national character and our own basic humanity. A

revitalized investigation of Jewish sources and our reattachment to them is an appropriate role for us at the AJC.

It must be admitted, however, that not everyone, in or out of this agency, agrees with our pragmatic approach. Those who approach the American Jewish Committee with preconceived ideological commitments, whether they be of the right or of the left are likely to find us wanting. For we know that neither right nor left has a monopoly on political wisdom, and our commitment is not to the right or to the left, but to the common good. Further, we are convinced that ideological precommitments reduce and impair our ability to understand and deal with important problems, because they often provide apparent answers without the adequate deliberation that guarantees those answers to be valid.

In my view, unswerving commitment to political ideologies is fundamentalist reductionism translated into political terms. And we Jews -- and particularly this group of Jews -- cannot accept that and remain true to our Jewish traditions. Just as we reject religious fundamentalism, we must reject the fundamentalism of political ideology. For we are committed to the reasoned analysis and study of every issue -- its implications for Jews and its implications for the larger community -- and a commitment to this organization must involve a commitment to reasoned analysis and an openness to the views of others. Those with confidence in the power of human

intelligence to deal effectively with complex problems and concerns will find themselves at home in the American Jewish Committee. Those who expect the organization to reflect their own preconceived ideological commitments may, at times, find themselves disappointed.

THE PERVASIVE POLITICAL and ideological polarization we experience today, and the fragmentation and disarray it engenders, affect American Jews as well as the larger community around us. I believe our approach to the major issues perplexing our country and the world is not a luxury; it is a necessity, if we are to remain a strong and united nation. We can, and we must, help American Jewry and our society as a whole develop reasonable consensus positions on matters of vital social concern -- positions that are infused with the moral values that undergird both our own unique Jewish traditions and American traditions as well.

This, to my way of thinking, is what it means for American Jews to opt for the marginality of the American Diaspora. And in exercising this option, the American Jewish Committee must provide enlightenment and leadership.