

The Future of American Jewry

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There is probably no group in the world that spends more time examining itself than American Jewry, drawing its habit of doing so from both its Jewish and American heritage, both of which endow American Jews with an enormous capacity for self-examination and self-criticism -- up to a point. Self-examination is a major dimension of every covenantal tradition and American Jewry is the heir to two covenantal traditions. Both what is permissible and what is ignored or avoided in these self-examinations is significant. At the present time, circumstances have brought American Jewry to another round of self-examination. It, too, has been a combination of Jeremiad and avoidance.

In addressing this topic it is easy to be pessimistic, especially as a social scientist, since virtually all the social indicators point in the negative direction, especially when projected in linear fashion, but good analysts, including good social scientists, know that linear projections are never fulfilled as such in the long run, that intervening factors emerge, often unexpectedly or in unexpected ways, to change apparently foretold paths.

As Jews as well as social scientists, we have further reason to expect the unexpected, strange twists in the road of the collective lives of the Jewish people as well as in our lives as individuals. Therefore, this paper will take an optimistic tone, to suggest that it is indeed possible for American Jewry to have a future, even a flourishing one, provided that we read the signs correctly and act appropriately in response to that reading. It will also provide some ideas for a social research agenda for this generation.

How the United States and American Jewry are Different

One of the principal reasons that our expectations have become pessimistic is that our analyses are still rooted in older expectations, even after the United States has demonstrated that the older expectations have their limits when applied to this country and its inhabitants. Americans have been saying that America is different for at least two centuries and probably longer, but it is hard to change habits, especially those rooted in long-standing cultural traditions. Hence, the differences are not necessarily perceived, and if perceived, are not always fully understood.

Two differences should concern American Jews at this time. One is the difference between traditional communities and societies and the United States, and the second is the difference between Israeli and American Jewry. Traditional communities and societies were bounded and slow-changing. Moreover, changes, once occurring, brought

about a new homeostasis and were, functionally, one-time events. Thus, the rural to urban migration in Europe occurred once and the people, once transplanted to cities, stayed there, while in the United States, that was but one of a continuing sequence of migrations -- Old World to New World, east to west, rural to urban, urban to suburban, and so on.

The United States, on the other hand, seems unbounded and lives by perpetual motion as it revolves around the twin magnets of the U.S. Constitution and the American way of life. Indeed, its internal bonds are so loose or flexible that it is only the fact of perpetual motion that keeps the United States from flying apart. This is true of American Jewry as well, in contrast with traditional Jewries. Traditional Jewries were bounded, if only because they often were segregated, and very slow-changing (this without trying to suggest that they did not change, only that the changes were for the most part imperceptible or minimally perceptible to the Jews living in any given time unless there was some kind of upheaval). It may very well be that the American perpetual motion machine has now speeded up to the point where it generates more disintegrative forces than integrative ones, but the problems of America derive from the same perpetual motion that has kept America going. This, in itself, is worthy of study.

And what about Israel? Israel is certainly a modern polity and society that is now becoming postmodern. However, the differences between Israeli and American Jewry are rather obvious. One is the fact of Israel's Jewish majority versus the relatively very small Jewish minority in the United States that is getting smaller because of American population growth and lack of same among Jews. A second difference is that Israel is politically bounded and while its boundaries are permeable and becoming more so, they are boundaries. American Jewry, on the other hand, is completely unbounded. Its Jewishness exists to the degree that Jewishness serves as a magnet attracting those people born Jews, converted to Judaism, or married into Jewish families. Its strength depends entirely on the extent and degree of magnetic attraction. The transformations in both societies would be high on any Jewish social research agenda as should be the content and strength of their common magnet.

As traditional societies fade, magnetic attraction becomes even more important for group maintenance since boundaries either no longer exist or no longer work. The consequences of this are now beginning to be felt in Israel, but that is another subject. Still, a Jewish majority in a state with fixed political boundaries will remain considerably different from the American Jewish community for the foreseeable future.

U.S. Jewry: Moving from Its First Adaptation to Its Second

By the middle of the 1970s or thereabouts, the American Jewry that we know had completed its first adaptation to American life, sociologically, geographically, politically, and economically. American Jews' self-celebration at that time reflected the success of that first adaptation. But, as is the case in a perpetual motion society, American Jews had

no sooner done so than they began a second adaptation. They are now well into it and we can identify its patterns as many have. Five seem particularly important:

1. Perhaps the first in importance is the end of sociological separation. In the first adaptation, American Jews remained a separate group because separate religious and ethnic groups were the accepted way of life in the United States as a whole. The walls of separation might have crumbled a bit around the edges but were still strong. In the second adaptation they have all but disappeared and continue to become weaker.

By almost every sociological measure, American Jews have become Americans. Indeed, part of the first adaptation for all Americans was to assume that "American" was the modifier of an original religious identity -- American Jews, American Catholics, American Protestants. Only in the case of strictly ethnic identifications, the so-called "hyphenated Americans," was there a predisposition in American society to try to eliminate hyphenations. However, Jews, as both a religious and an ethnic group, could be identified by their religion and thus were able to benefit from general American recognition of Jewishness as a primary identity because it was viewed as a religious identity.

Today there are very few American Jews left. Instead, there are Jewish Americans, no longer hyphenated, but American has become their primary identity and Jewish its modifier. This is most visible in the ease with which intermarriage has not only conquered the American Jewish community but has become widely accepted within it, at least as a reality with which families have to make their peace. So much has been suggested for study in this area that I forbear from adding to it.

2. A second is the break-up of older Jewish population concentrations. At least from the time of the Eastern European migration, American Jews were city dwellers, concentrated in the country's major urban centers. Even the suburbanization of the post-World War II generation, which had significant consequences for Jewish life by breaking up the "Jewish street," could be seen as simply a form of more dispersed city living.

In the present generation, however, Jewish migration has moved into a new phase. Jews have become scattered more widely throughout the United States and even those who can be identified with particular metropolitan areas have settled in wide belts of counties and townships in lower densities than ever before, making it more difficult for them to build functional Jewish institutions or to maintain their contacts with such institutions. Take, for example, the eight largest Jewish communities by common calculation in the United States. Compare their concentration of Jewish population in 1930, in 1960 and in 1990, and my point will be made, not to speak of the new Jewish communities scattered throughout Vermont or the Colorado ski resorts or the smaller towns and cities of southern California, each with its own handful of identified Jews and larger number of known Jews. What densities are needed for the maintenance of synagogues? Schools? Centers? Of the Jewish institutions? How long will people travel to fulfill Jewish needs? Are their viable alternatives in a low density world?

This geographic sea change is just beginning to be recognized by Jewish leadership and major Jewish institutions. It will require new responses because it is very real, whether we are speaking of the spread of Jews throughout southeastern Florida rather than being concentrated in Miami Beach, southern California rather than just West Los Angeles or the San Fernando Valley, the San Francisco Bay area from north of Petaluma to south of San Jose and from Sacramento to the Pacific instead of just in San Francisco, or the massive sprawl that is now considered the New York Jewish region.

3. These two phenomena have brought about the unraveling of the Progressive solution which formed the anchor of the first Jewish adaptation to America. The American Jewish community that we know was born in the Progressive era when the Central and Eastern European Jews from the older and newer immigrations first came together. The models of community and community organization derived from Progressivism were ideal for helping Jews find their place in American society on an organized basis. The degree to which this is so has often gone unnoticed by historians and social scientists because they have been entranced by Jewish radicalism which, as they have indeed documented, was a flame that flickered briefly in the American milieu. The Progressive solutions typified by the Jewish community federations (then federations of Jewish charities or welfare federations), the American Jewish Committee, and the great American Jewish women's organizations (both the National Council for Jewish Women and Hadassah, each in its own way), generally has been overlooked.

Almost all the accepted canons of organized Jewish life in the United States derive from that Progressive era, whether faith in trained professionals guided by lay boards or the particular ideas of compassion combined with efficiency that motivate the policy and administration of those organizations, or the form and content of education to prepare people for active community life had their Progressive roots, as does the very idea of federated action which became the basis of American Jewish unity. One by one, these points of consensus have come unraveled in the past two decades. The Progressive solution per se no longer holds, however valid it may be from an objective point of view, and new solutions need to be found to replace it.

4. American isolationism has come to an end. American Jewry was never isolated from the rest of world Jewry, especially from the Jews of Europe and the Mediterranean in the nineteenth century and the Jews of Israel in the twentieth. Indeed, organized American Jewry responded to Jewish concerns and trouble spots throughout the world from its very earliest beginnings, whether to assist Marranos in the eighteenth century, victims of pogroms in the nineteenth, or victims of wars in the twentieth. Emissaries came to collect money for the Jewish community in Israel even before the American Revolution. Since Judah Touro's bequest funding the first Jewish building outside of the walls of the Old City of Jerusalem in the 1850s, American Jewish support for the rebuilding of Eretz Israel has been continuous and has grown to massive proportions for a voluntary effort. Moreover, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries Jews lent their political support to their brethren overseas as well as their financial.

Nevertheless, throughout all of this American Jewry itself remained curiously isolated in the same way that the United States as a whole did, despite its involvement in world affairs in this century. That is to say, their domestic life was essentially untouched by world trends even though it was regularly remolded by world or Jewish crises as they came periodically. Thus, just as World Wars I and II and the Cold War brought about major transformations in American society, so, too, did periodic Jewish crises from World War I on through the Six-Day War and beyond influence the attitudes and organization of the American Jewish community. American Jews, even American Jewish leaders, walked through it all seemingly oblivious to the Jewries outside of the United States except as victims needing American Jewish help. American Jewish views of their relationships with Israel were that these were bilateral relationships of philanthropist and beneficiary only, a sentiment reciprocated by Israeli Jews who looked to the United States as a whole as their model in so many ways.

Since the Yom Kippur War and the oil embargo of the 1970s, however, Americans and American Jews have begun to discover how intertwined and even dependent upon the rest of the world both are. First of all, Israel has been transformed from a victim into a prospering state that is now seen as making peace with its neighbors. Moreover, whereas, when the historical twentieth century began with World War I, there were nearly five million Jews in the United States and perhaps fifty thousand in Eretz Israel, and even when the state was declared in 1948 six million versus six hundred thousand meant a ten to one ratio in favor of American Jewry, today the ratio stands at approximately five to four, i.e., almost parity. It is widely expected that the number of Jews in Israel will pass the number in the U.S. sometime before 2010, making Israel the largest Jewish community in the world.

Beyond that, very few Jews still active even remember a time when there were other great diaspora Jewries to rival American Jewry. At least since immediately before World War II American Jewry has been the largest, richest, and most powerful Jewish community in the world. In many respects that remains true and only Israel is likely to be able to rival American Jewry in that respect. But European Jewry is reemerging as a significant, if not powerful, Jewish concentration; the Jewries of the ex-Soviet Union, despite their weaknesses, are numerous enough and vocal enough to make their demands in world Jewish forums; and the Jewries of the Southern Hemisphere and even Latin America have become more visible to American Jewry in recent years. Thus, from a two-way partnership, American Jewry finds itself increasingly in a six-way partnership in a Jewish world in which it remains a senior partner but still a partner.

5. Changing American Jewish-Israeli relationships. The forementioned demographic and economic reasons coupled with the possibilities inherent in the peace process undoubtedly will bring changes in the American Jewish-Israeli relationship. In addition, we are again back to a period of growing separation in the concerns and interests of the populations of the two communities as each becomes more preoccupied with its own special situation and needs. Moreover, the unraveling of federated giving and, hence, federated action among American Jewry is part of the unraveling of the Progressive solution. It also affects the way in which the American Jewish community will relate to

Israel in the future. The American Jewish-Israel relationship will have to move from that of rescuer to victim to one of partnership to strengthen Jewish life throughout the world.

How to Adapt and Remain Jewish

How, then, will American Jews remain Jewish? Obviously, no one knows the answer to that with certitude. Various scenarios have been suggested:

1. That the majority of American Jews will continue the quickening process of assimilation, most will lose their Jewish identity, but a hard core of traditional Jews will remain, mostly but not exclusively Orthodox, so that a community of perhaps a million to a million and a half will survive in the United States for the foreseeable future.
2. An increasing number of American Jews whose primary concerns have to do with Jewish continuity will emigrate to Israel, in one sense further weakening American Jewry, in another, preserving its most Jewish parts in a world in which new technologies are making intercontinental communications ever easier, thereby allowing intercontinental connections that had never existed before.
3. American Jewry will survive more or less as is, perhaps with some drop in population, but there will be a reversal of present trends for reasons at present unknown, and immigration of Jews from other parts of the world will keep the size of the community more or less stable.
4. American Jewry will undergo a sea change and become just another American "church" with adherents moving in and out on an individual basis, depending upon individual taste, and only a small hard core remaining Jewish in the traditional sense of the term.

No doubt there are other scenarios as well, but these seem to be the most likely ones, either separately or in some combination.

What we can say is that for Jews to remain Jews in any recognizable way we must recognize that some things are impossible, whereas some things can be experimental. Among those things that will make the survival of Jewishness and Judaism impossible would be the end of the family as the basis for stable social organization, the end of Jewish observance as the basis for Jewish behavior, the end of Jewish community organization, formal and informal, as the basis for Jewish solidarity, and the end of Jewish education as the basis for the perpetuation of the Jewish way of life and the character of the Jews. For many, all of these things have already happened or are happening. For them, unless matters are reversed, the end result should be clear and there is no sense avoiding recognition of that.

Of those things which can be experimental we can include changes in Jewish ritual, provided that they do not run against the basic tenets of Jewish thought, changes in the status of different groups in Jewish society, provided that they also do not, changes in the basic subject matter of Jewish education, and institutional changes in the Jewish community. Once again, large segments of American Jewry are already very much involved in those experiments. The results have been mixed, but as experiments they are not all in.

American Jewry does have several pluses that could help it down this difficult road. One is the Jews' substantial experience with an orientation toward voluntary commitment. As more and more aspects of life become matters of choice rather than custom, tradition, or inheritance, it becomes more and more necessary for groups such as the Jewish group to rely upon voluntary choice to sustain themselves. American Jewry has become relatively good at that (though it could become much, much better) and that will stand it in good stead.

Two, American Jews also have imagination and inventiveness. This is extremely important as they are called upon to meet new challenges in new ways. The particular combination of their Jewish inheritance and American experience has given American Jews special capacities in this area that are of extreme importance.

Three, American Jews have a willingness to experiment. Like most Americans they are not wedded to the past and are willing to try new things. All of this generally is more positive than negative, though it also opens the door to negative possibilities, many of which are felt already. Restraint, even self-restraint, often is eliminated in the uses of Jews' imagination, inventiveness, and willingness to experiment. But, on the whole, all three of these elements should stand American Jewry in good stead. Indeed, their problem will be more one of finding anchors than in raising sails.

Needed: The Renewal of the Covenant

In the last analysis, what will be needed, however, is not merely an appropriate sociology and politics but an appropriate and massive revival of belief and with belief, interest and commitment to bring about a change in direction and mobilize Jews to make the needed changes. We have seen what has happened in Protestant Christianity in the past three decades with the revival of Christian fundamentalism and power of action that it has reintroduced into a fading and weak-kneed American Protestantism. Even if we do not agree with everything that Christian fundamentalism has wrought, we must recognize how significant, compelling, and powerful it has become through this revival or rebuilding of belief and the sense of obligation that flows from it.

Protestant fundamentalism must be seen as a current manifestation of the covenantal tradition which has animated Judeo-Christian civilization in the United States from its earliest days and Jewish civilization wherever it was to be found since much earlier.

Indeed, that covenantal orientation is biblical and hence informs both the Jewish and Christian traditions in one way or another. Now American Jews, indeed the vast majority of world Jewry, need a covenant renewal to bring about a positive future.

Make no mistake, the renewal of the covenant is not a matter of sentimental commitment; it is a matter of undertaking serious obligations. It is the essence of the covenantal tradition that it is based more upon the obligations that parties to the covenant accept and agree to undertake than on the exercise of rights that individuals or groups claim. Much has been made in the American Jewish experience of the identity of prophetic Judaism and the American dream, particularly in its more progressive versions. Overlooked has been the fact that true prophetic Judaism is based on a real sense of obligation while the American dream has been based on a demand for rights. Biblical Judaism demanded that widows and orphans be assisted because the assisters were so obligated as *bnai brit*, not merely because the widows and orphans had a right.

This sense of obligation is at least to some extent embodied in the American vision, but that vision has long since given way to the American dream and needs to be restored. That is not the task of American Jews qua Jews, only insofar as they share that task with all other Americans, but only American Jews can develop a renewed covenant and a kind of belief in its validity that will obligate them for Jewish purposes. They can only do this in conjunction with the rest of world Jewry, particularly Israeli Jews who are increasingly faced with the same choices. To date, only those Jews who see themselves as Orthodox, particularly ultra-Orthodox, have been willing to come to grips with this problem of covenant obligation, often in ways that seem to contemporaries to be at least moderately perverse. However, they will survive and they do have a future, even if it has its own ups and downs and it will not be exactly what they hoped for. Whether or not the rest of American and indeed world Jewry does is up to them.

Conclusion

As I stated at the outset, I am optimistic, but it is a qualified optimism; that is to say, I believe that enough American Jews can take themselves in hand and rebuild a viable Jewish life in the United States as part of a similar movement throughout the Jewish world. But I believe that to do so they must recognize some simple truths: first of all, that ethnicity as a definition for Jewishness is fundamentally a sham. This is not to say that we do not begin by defining Jews as those who are of proper Jewish descent. Nor is it meant to suggest that those Jews who see themselves primarily as Jews ethnically are not part of the Jewish fold. What it does say is that Jewishness can only survive built around Judaism.

Judaism cannot be preserved through ethnicity. At most, ethnicity is a way station, an initial means of defining who is a Jew and who is not, that is to say, to make the needed separation between Jews and non-Jews. Ethnicity itself has virtually no compelling power, as we have seen over the last generation. It sounds great, it fits in with the

environment, but it offers little of substance to hold the most serious and feeling Jews to their Jewishness either culturally or religiously. Thus we must get over trying to foster Jewish ethnicity per se.

Second, as Saadia Gaon said over a thousand years ago, Jews are Jews by virtue of their Torah, their constitution. It is a religious constitution. No one group need have a monopoly over the interpretation of that constitution as long as that interpretation stays within the spirit of the Torah and allows its adherents to remain connected to the other Jews who follow other interpretations through a common basis. There is or should be great freedom to choose, but Jews who wish to remain Jews must accept the obligations of the Torah in a meaningful and recognizable way, to understand what the Torah demands of them, not just what they would like to read into it.

Under such conditions, for example, intermarriage is not always the dreaded phenomenon that it is when only ethnicity is at stake. It is easier for those born non-Jews to commit themselves to living according to the Torah than it is for them to suddenly transform their ethnicity. The latter is not impossible but it is very difficult. The former is also difficult but it can be the product of a conscious decision and such decisions should be encouraged for the sake of the Jewish people and, I dare say, the world.

Advocates of Jewish continuity must emphasize that being Jewish is a matter of obligation and Jews must be prepared to accept their obligations. The Jewish people themselves developed the devices through which to do so, namely, the brit or covenant and the Torah. These are not matters of ethnicity, these are matters of accepting obligation. Jews may fool themselves into thinking that there are easier ways but there are none.

This may mean, indeed is likely to mean, that many of those born Jews will assimilate into the non-Jewish world. That is not the worst thing that could happen, nor would it be the first time. At the very least the Jewish people will enrich the world's genetic pool if that happens. As long as there is a critical mass of Jews who remain Jewish we can be satisfied. Perhaps that is all that any covenanted community can expect. Accepting the obligations of covenant is a difficult thing and most people born in a particular generation, even those born into a covenanted community, may not be ready to do so. Those who are, must soldier on.

The Jewish world in the United States, Israel, Canada, and elsewhere is rapidly dividing into two camps: those who aspire to Jewish continuity and those who aspire to Jewish normalcy. This division is likely to be the major divide among Jews for the foreseeable future. These two camps have yet to define themselves sufficiently to find ways to bridge the differences among their adherents, particularly in the Jewish continuity camp. Some of the decisions that they will be making in due course will have considerable gravity for Jews wherever they are.

If this puts me in the fundamentalist camp, so be it, but it is not the fundamentalism of the fundamentalists. It is the fundamentalism of William James, the great American

philosopher, who argued persuasively that the universe is a federal universe, that is to say, built on diversity, but a diversity that is systematic, i.e., that its parts relate to each other. Such a universe is grounded in covenant, but it includes not just the commitment but the operative parts as well. That is to say, covenant alone is not enough. It is the very real operative parts that make the federal universe work. The Jewish people can revive itself through covenant, but only if that covenant is translated into a proper way of life.