



Jewish Futures, Past and Present

By Libby Garland

Sitting in the Jewish Division of the New York Public Library in September 2000, inching through reels of microfilm in the course of researching for my dissertation on Jews and American immigration restrictions, I did something of a doubletake when I came across the following item from September 1924. The American Hebrew, a leading English-language Jewish weekly, was advertising that its upcoming Rosh Hashanah issue would present "A Vision of Tomorrow," a special symposium "in which well-known men and women will essay the mood of prophecy and give our readers a bird's-eye view of America in the year 2000."

This caught my interest not only because it gave me the eerie feeling of sitting on the other end of a time telescope from the authors (when they imagined Jews in the future, did they think of me sitting in the library, peering back at them trying to envision me?), but also because in my work with the Jewish Public Forum (JPF) at CLAL, I was part of a team that was planning our own exploration of the future, a conference entitled "Playing the Jewish Futures: Scenarios on Religion, Ethnicity and Civic Engagement in the Year 2015." It was both odd and gratifying to stumble onto a parallel enterprise from the past.

I took my hand off the microfilm reader's fast-forwarding knob and read. The magazine had gone all-out soliciting articles from luminaries in the American Jewish world and beyond. In "American Judaism in the Year 2000," Hebrew Union College President Julian Morgenstern argued against the simplistic idea that American Judaism was in decline. In "Social Service in the Year 2000," the Joint Distribution Committee's former European Director, Boris Bogen, weighed in with an opinion that Jewish agencies would play an ongoing role in providing aid for the needy, and Stephen Wise contributed "The Bond of Jewish Oneness," in which he made a case for the importance of Jewish education in preserving Judaism. Helen Keller wrote about a brighter future for women; W.E.B. DuBois, editor of the renowned African American paper *The Crisis*, wrote about his vision of what a day in New York City would be like in a future without racial segregation. There was fiction and poetry riffing on the future theme, and artwork-images of a New York filled with towering buildings, or connected by underground mass transit running swiftly through "gleaming chutes of polished steel." Some imagined a future of youth zipping around on flying machines, ignorant of but curious about a distant ethnic past preserved by elders in music or museums; some focused on the possible course of geopolitics.

All in all, it was kind of a nifty venture, with certain similarities to what the JPF was doing-soliciting a broad range of perspectives to speculate about the Jewish and American futures in light of vast technological and societal shifts, imagining the future through a combination of narrative and analytical approaches. I admit to being a bit surprised to find such adventurousness in *The American Hebrew*, a magazine written by and for the elite, English speaking segment of American Jewry and tending toward a staid, dignified sensibility. This was not a publication whose readers crammed into noisy downtown Yiddish theaters or frequented union rallies. The ads for Bennett Brothers Platinum Mountings for Your Diamonds, Mme. Wolf's Adorable New Parisian Hat Models and the Robert Louis Stevenson School for Girls ("a refined school for refined girls") suggest the target audience.

Yet the real occasion behind this special issue-the biggest societal shift in play-was connected to the "other half" of Jewish life. The *Vision of Tomorrow* theme was not just in honor of Rosh Hashanah, but more specifically addressed the recent passage of sweeping immigration quotas that would drastically reduce the number of migrants arriving from Eastern and Southern Europe. Would an American Judaism remain viable without streams of incoming Jewish migrants? The great, four-decade wave of Jewish migration from Eastern Europe had radically reshaped Jewish America: eighty-five percent of America's three and a half million Jews were immigrants or the children of immigrants. Could American Jews define themselves not in relation to a European center?

More than two-thirds of the world's fifteen and a half million Jews lived in Europe, three and a half million in Poland alone. The Great War and its aftermath, which had devastated European Jewish communities and catapulted American Jewish organizations into new international Jewish leadership roles, had already heightened American Jews' sense of their centrality in modern Jewish life. But could they imagine themselves-for better or worse-in the more isolationist mode the United States was moving toward?

Contributors understood that prediction is a dicey business. The magazine printed a letter from Cyrus Adler, President of the Jewish Theological Seminary, explaining why he was declining to write an article. "To take the role of Prophet," he wrote, "...would be a harrowing experience." Stephen Wise agreed in part: "I mean to tread warily in the realm of forecast," he wrote. But if his description of a flourishing and unified American Jewry in the year 2000 reflected desire more than analysis, he saw utility in the exercise nonetheless: "Hope, too, is a manner of prophecy, which enjoys the advantage of being enforceable by will." Boris Bogen, too, began his piece on social service with a caveat: "Propheying today is rather a risky enterprise. The experience for the last decade demonstrates the futility of predicting events." Still, even if the War had turned all assumptions about history on their heads, he thought it was worth talking about the future of social service, which he did not believe would be rendered obsolete. "We can

assume, without running any great probability of error," he wrote dryly, "that the poor will still be with us in the year 2000."

The task was a Rorschach, of course, for as authors described "the future" they were really projecting their most urgent concerns about the present. This was not lost on them. Those who wrote from the fictional vantage point of the year 2000, for instance, satirized the political backwardness of 1924 America, placing critiques of the rejuvenated Ku Klux Klan or the rabidly anti-Semitic Henry Ford into the mouths of more enlightened citizens who populated the future.

The jabs at the KKK and Ford's anti-Jewish campaigns, though, highlight how dated much of what preoccupied these authors as they thought about the future seems to us now. The raging debates over immigration restriction-which had ended in triumph for the nativist camp-revolved around the war-heightened fever for "100 percent Americanism," and Darwinist arguments about which "racial stocks" were fit for democracy. These were the prevailing terms of political and scientific debate in the United States. Whether one was for or against immigration restrictions, entering the debate meant engaging with arguments about the national loyalty of "hyphenated Americans," the role of ethnic institutions in "Americanizing" foreigners, theories of eugenics, and of the malleability of "racial" and "national" selves and groups. The magazine even included in its symposium-albeit with a strong editorial statement of disagreement-a nativist piece by scholar David Starr Jordan, a zoologist by training and a strong proponent of restricting migration to "desirable" races.

During that era, it was not so easy to articulate how Jews and Judaism fit into a racialized national vision. For instance, were Americanness and Jewishness mutually exclusive characteristics? The magazine's cover shows a tableau of a toga-clad, dark-haired (Jewish?) beauty, with her hand on the shoulder of a gender-neutral child wearing a matching outfit. Above the caption "Facing the Future: Our Children's Children," the two figures stand in front of what seems to be an enormous, arched window. Directly outside the window, a vast American flag waves in the foreground, while the woman gestures at the Statue of Liberty in the distance, who wears, of course, her own toga and holds her torch in the sun.

But if the image on the cover seemed to reflect nothing but a wholehearted patriotism, the magazine's contents raise questions that might undermine such an optimistic interpretation. Does the image erase all traces of anything recognizably Jewish? If Jews became so thoroughly American, would the American future be devoid of Jewishness? If the Jewish view of Lady Liberty was no longer fundamentally imagined from an incoming boat, would it be Jewish? Would Jews "gradually give up one Jewish belief, ceremony and institution after another, adopt strange, non-Jewish ways and practices, ...until eventually...Judaism must surely perish?" No, Morgenstern, Wise, and others answered, Jews can be Americans and Jews at the same time.

This American/Jewish dichotomy might seem utterly bizarre to American Jews these days, but it mattered very much at the time. The new immigration laws harshly decreed that aliens-in particular, certain kinds of racially suspect aliens-deeply threatened Americans and Americanism. Of course, those Jews in the United States who were most directly implicated in the discussions of alienness were for the most part not writing in or reading *The American Hebrew*. The Yiddish media were also deeply concerned about the politics of Americanism, race, and the effects the quotas would have, but Yiddish-speaking immigrants and their native born kin generally fretted less about the long-term viability of American Judaism and more about whether their European relatives and friends would be able to flee their war devastated homes.

In retrospect, we can see that the futures imagined in this issue of *The American Hebrew* were limited by the concerns, social positions, and political desires of the editors and authors, and by their historical moment. Despite the rising tides of both Zionism and European anti-Semitism, in 1924 no one could factor Israeli statehood or the Holocaust into the narrative of American Jewish life seventy-five years down the road.

Still, I found myself fairly impressed with the effort. Though the authors were not prophets, they weren't wrong about what they identified as critically important forces in American life that in time would come to change the meaning of being Jewish. The immigration quotas, which barely budged for forty years, did close the country to would-be migrants around the world, including European Jews, and fundamentally reshaped the nation's demographics and American conceptions of race and ethnicity.

And moreover, there was something admirably bold about *The American Hebrew's* asking what American Judaism would be in the year 2000. "To many the question may seem daring," wrote Julian Morgenstern, "to some perhaps preposterous, to not a few even absurd and presumptuous." Cockiest of all was to respond with a hopeful vision: "There are very many," Morgenstern continued, "who can interpret the course of Judaism in America only darkly and visualize its future only forebodingly or hopelessly. To them the prediction that in 2000 there will still be Judaism in America, and that it will be positive, virile, inspiring, must seem the height of folly."

Is Judaism positive, virile (or perhaps "active," to use less gendered language), and inspiring these days? Would Morgenstern think so? Perhaps. None of the authors paused to wonder what a similar conversation might look like at the turn of the twenty-first century. What might future historians make of the Jewish Public Forum's efforts to understand how the big trends-globalization, biotechnology-are changing the meaning of being Jewish?

