

The Future of American Jewry



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By

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LET THERE BE NO DOUBT about it: American Jewry is surviving and will survive.

Over five million living Jews are irrefutable proof that we shall continue to grow even though our gates are almost closed to immigrants. The character of our survival in the future is threatened by a residual social and economic discrimination on the one hand, and by an enveloping blanket of assimilation on the other. Both forces tend to draw Jews out of the Jewish community.

To meet the threat of discrimination, American Jewry has countered with an educational program aimed at enlightenment; and Jewish organizations are laboring to further the process of intergroup understanding.

Beyond the Jewish community, in many cities of the country, mayors' friendly relations committees meet to thresh out interracial and interreligious problems, and there have been notable successes. Moreover, rulings of the United States Supreme Court in the area of desegregation indicate that progress is being made even in the thorny field of anti-Negro discrimination. To the canker of injustice in employment, education, housing, and public accommodations, we have applied the cautery of remedial legislation. In addition, we are working hard

to maintain an effective separation of Church and State. It is imperative that we do this, if we are to save the conscience of the Jewish child from the encroachments of those Protestant churches which seek to use the school system as an instrumentality to strengthen Protestantism in its struggle with a militant Catholicism.

Assimilation is a threat to survival because it is an aspect of flight from prejudice, but by its very nature it also becomes a means of survival, as when it permits the individual to become so like his neighbor that he is no longer different.

Most humans living in a social environment welcome the chance to become one with their fellow men. The process is unconscious, inevitable, and, on the whole, desirable. Similarity reduces the friction of daily contact to a minimum: you do not dislike the like. We will survive, for we will be accepted because we are like others.

The Jew of today and of the oncoming tomorrow will be a native American living primarily in a half-dozen large cities. At least one of these cities will be in the West, for in the next century civilization, culture, and wealth will slowly shift from the Atlantic to the Pacific basin. Once the tremendous natural resources of Western and Southern Asia are exploited, culture and civilization and commerce will boom in that part of the world, and the American West will share in the ensuing prosperity.

Our children will begin to resemble their neighbors even in a physical sense, not only because of a common speech and common food, but by virtue of the results of intramarriage and intermarriage. In the common Jewish melting pot of intramarriage, the German, the Lithuanian, and the Galician Jew will have disappeared to emerge as an American Jew. The thousands

of Gentile converts who annually marry into Judaism will all the more produce an American Jew who is ethnically and anthropologically not different from his next-door neighbor. Our grandchildren thus will look like their Gentile neighbors, will dress like them, and will eat the same food.

Fifty years hence, the percentage of those who will observe the dietary laws away from home will be minimal. Of course, kosher style food will be consumed, with relish, in all large American cities by Jews and Gentiles. But this is not Jewish tradition; it is but a delectable aspect of transculturation, a process whereby even immigrants impress their personality on their host group.

It will be increasingly difficult to distinguish a Jew by his name, even as it is today. It is symptomatic of this trend that, in 1953, the president of the Orthodox Rabbinical Council of America bore the good old Yankee name of Adams. Indeed, if our great-grand-children cease to call themselves Irving and revert to the biblical name of Isaac, who will then even suspect that behind the name Isaac there stands a Jew?

When the twenty-first century rolls around, the typical Jew will be a culturally literate college graduate engaged in some form of non-manual occupation. Already one out of every six gainfully employed American Jews has earned an academic degree. In time to come he will be a white-collar worker, preferably self-employed; frequently a successful professional practitioner. In pursuit of his business he will mix intimately with his Gentile associates with whom he will make a living.

American Jewry has been able to send over a thousand million dollars of their savings to aid their fellow-Jews in foreign lands; that money has been made through doing business with their non-Jewish fellow-citizens. The slightly more than three per cent of Americans who are Jews do not live off each other.

At five o'clock, our Jew of tomorrow will leave his shop or office, pull out his politically liberal newspaper, and go home to suburbia.

When he descends from the train at six o'clock, he enters into a spiritual, cultural, and social world all his own, a world in which his evening relations with his Gentile neighbor are cordial but limited. A new life, certainly a different life, begins for him in the home, in the synagogue, and in his town or country club. This specific Jewish world of his own we call the Jewish community.

The emerging American Jewish community is the unnatural child of philanthropy and anti-Semitism. Prejudice both here and abroad has compelled American Jewry to draw together to create the instrumentalities to save European Jewry, to rebuild Zion as a haven, and to erect barriers against the forces of discrimination on these shores. The natural desire of Jews to be with one another has added impetus to the fashioning of the present-day integrated Jewish community. In recent years it has been hammered into shape by the Jewish Welfare Fund, the Community Relations Committee, and the Jewish Community Council.

Since World War II, common tasks are creating a tightly interwoven Jewish community life. Jewish city-wide social welfare agencies are offering relief, and medical and psychiatric services to the family, and especially to the aged and chronically ill. The un-employed turn to the Jewish Vocational Bureau; Jewish Centers hold out many opportunities for education and recreation.

In the suburban districts of tomorrow, with their wide-rolling acres, these centers are destined to become clubs for the middle class, and in the smaller towns of the next century, the country club will emerge as a community agency.

Jewish education tomorrow, as today, will continue to engage the attention of the congregations and the local bureaus. Even the denominational synagogue of the Reform, the Conservative, and the Orthodox will feel the impact of a growing, homogeneous community.

A new fusion type of religion may well be in the making. Even today there are various forms of religious amalgamation in the smaller cities. There is a Michigan town where the synagogue is sufficiently hospitable to include among its members the most Orthodox partisans and the most radical of Reformers. In another city, in Iowa, the rabbi has held Reform and Conservative services on alternate weeks.

Although there is much naïvete in some of these attempts, they are nevertheless symptomatic. Services will tend more closely to approximate one another; the typical American Synagogue of the future will divide the liturgy between the Hebrew and the English; the organ, the family pew, and the vernacular sermon will be characteristic of nearly all houses of worship. But people will continue to fight about hats-off and hats-on.

Most Jews will be members of a religious society, for that is part of our American concept of respectability, and who are we to set ourselves up against our Christian neighbors?

By the year 2000 some communities will introduce a form of overall taxation to include even membership in the synagogue.

The Yiddish newspaper will have ceased to be, but its place will be taken by an Anglo-Jewish one. And after supper the learned Jew will be able to read an American daily Hebrew newspaper.

This new community will conceive of all Jewish life as a whole. It will find a place within its capacious arms for any person who states that he is a Jew. There will be room in this

latitudinarian world of tomorrow for the Orthodox *hosid* and for that board member of the Jewish hospital who is too broadminded to insist on putting a Hanukkah Menorah in the lobby, but as a tolerant American is quite ready to prompt the nurses to sing carols around the Christmas tree in the lobby of the non-sectarian Jewish hospital.

This tight Jewish community will have come into being, not because we will have wanted it, but because of compulsive historic forces of kinship and rejection. This community, this commonality, will come because it is already here. We can suffer it because as objects of history we have no choice, or else we can bend it to our purposes and become the subjects of history. I suggest that we make history.

Because this community, whether it be the local or the national, requires enlightened direction, there will be some who tell us to turn for guidance to the new Israel. Can we accept leadership from abroad? I doubt that they have much to offer us today. The intellectual *niveau* of American culture is higher than that of present-day Israel; there are as many, if not more distinguished scholars in the field of the Science of Judaism here in the United States than there are in the new Jewish republic.

No people can live another people's life. The Israelis are developing their own national psyche. It is inevitable, by all the laws of history, that in an independent land they will differ from us nationally, culturally, and spiritually. The relations between the two should be amicable and helpful, and could be most productive of good if both Jewries were animated by a sense of deliberate spiritual rivalry, by a desire to attain goals that are common, not only to them, but to all Jewries.

That ultimate higher goal toward which we all strive is not the terrestrial but the celestial Zion. And that Zion, as I inter-

pret it, is our highest Jewish self in projection. What we seek is the fulfillment of the finest in ourselves and in our traditions. That goal is never reached in any land; it is the dream of a reality that lies beyond any horizon. We are conscious, and always will be, I trust, of our moral obligation to every segment of world Jewry, but because we have no sensible alternative, we believe in the primacy of American Jewish life for the American Jew.

We know who these American Jews will be. Though molded within the confines of a partially secluded community, their prime characteristic will be diversity. They will be composed of differing groups, clustered around congregations, Jewish Welfare Funds, health, philanthropic, and civic defense agencies, cultural, social, and recreational clubs, centers, and lodges. Some will be Zionists of various shades; others Diaspora “nationalists,” for they frown both upon Israel and the synagogue, and yet they denominate themselves Jews. Some will be secularists, and many more will be religionists.

All of them will have their leaders, and it is these leaders who are already of increasing importance in our lives. Many of them are professionals. They are the new managerial class, the civil servants who are to determine what we are to be in the future.

Some of them hold office because of their administrative skills and their capacity to raise funds. It is a striking commentary on our present-day life that at the recent climactic tercentennial meeting, American Jewry, after 300 years of distinguished achievement, was represented by men who up to that moment had shown little or no interest in the cultural and spiritual leadership of American Jewry.

Returning to the civil servants who head our local and national Jewish agencies, and to whom we have entrusted our

future, I do not protest against them as a class, even as I would not protest against rabbis. But it is important that they be Jewishly literate. What a commentary on American life is the reflection that we have sent millions across the seas in this post-war period, but could not find the paltry sums necessary to keep alive the Training Bureau for Jewish Communal Service.

We must always be mindful that some of our national American Jewish agencies have tremendous influence. They represent us for better or for worse. Our spiritual and cultural fate is largely in their hands. And it is truly unfortunate that some of those leaders cannot competently guide us. It is not within some of them to give intelligent Jewish direction. Men without Jewish roots, extemporizing from job to job, from crisis to crisis, do not truly represent us.

It is not enough merely to survive; we must proudly survive as dignified and self-respecting Jews. It is imperative that our leaders be well-trained Jews. They must have a deep and sympathetic knowledge of Jewish life, literature, and history, even though their learning is derived from secondary sources.

If they are to understand the institutions which they lead, and would give them intelligent direction, they must know the rock whence they have been hewn. No great Jewish agency began in a vacuum; to understand it and lead it one must be deeply rooted in the past which gave birth to that institution. Without historical perspective no Jew who presumes to lead a segment of his people can know his place in the scheme of things. Still less can he comprehend his duty and the duty of his organization to the totality of Jewry.

Mere power is never an end in itself. If Jewry is to live meaningfully, its leaders must have an educational philosophy and a program to implement it. Otherwise, there would be no significant future for us. No people can rise higher than the

spiritual level of its civil service. The prime criterion for every program must be the recognition that its goals are good for all Jews, not merely for a specific group. The common good must take precedence over the welfare of a particular group.

We shall survive as a Jewish community. But why should we survive? Is survival an end in itself? Surely it is not wrong to live, to maintain hallowed and beloved traditions. But I would like to believe that if we retain group identity within a larger context, then that separatism must be inspired by moral considerations. I would like to believe that if I walk my own way, it is because I have a purpose, because I have something to give.

We have come upon sorry times. The long liberal century that began in 1789 with the French Revolution died catastrophically at its height in 1919 when the Versailles Peace Treaty was signed. We are in the midst of a world of gathering clouds and impending tragedy. Christianity is on the decline; paganism, brutality, callous hard cruelty are in the ascendant. We are living in a world that is insensible to kindness, to love, and to human decencies. It is this situation that rises to challenge the Jew to survive purposefully, to justify his separatism.

Let us survive to the end that we shall strive to create a universal society where men are tolerant of one another, where nationalism is not the highest good, and where world peace is not a hollow mockery, but a sacred and cherished ideal.

Surely the time has come for a new categorical imperative to teach nations to act toward one another according to the same spiritual standard that determines the relations of one moral individual to another. Is this not after all the sum total of all prophetic teaching? Is this not why we call ourselves Jews? If it is not to preserve these great truths, then why have we writhed in agony in the fiery crucible for over two thousand years?

The only salvation for all of us lies in a moral society. Let us work toward that end. When all is said and done: “The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom.”