

Where Are We? The Inner Life of America's Jews

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In considering our last 100 years in this land and the tomorrow of the Jewish people, which of our myriad stories shall we tell? How can we say where we have been when we have been to so many different places? There are so many ways to tell these stories, and there is no obvious master narrative into which all the messy details of Jewish life in America during this past century can neatly be tucked.

Shall we tell the broad story that begins not a century ago, but a century and a half ago, in 1852, when Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, visiting the cemetery of the synagogue in Newport—a cemetery that had been purchased in 1677, was the oldest Jewish burial ground in North America, and was attached to a synagogue that by the time of the poet's visit could no longer assemble a minyan—was inspired to write these lines: "How strange it seems! These Hebrews in their graves.../ but ah! what once has been shall be no more! / the groaning earth in travail and in pain / brings forth its races but does not restore, / and the dead nations never rise again." We begin with Longfellow and we end triumphantly with Joseph Lieberman: Take that, Henry! The Jewish story as the story of obituaries has been proven premature, dismal expectations defied.

Another version of our story comes in endless forms: the Jews and Hollywood, the Jews and investment banking, the Jews and comedy. My favorite? Almost exactly 100 years ago, the kosher butchers of New York's Lower East Side raised the price of their meat from \$.12 a pound to \$.18 a pound. Jewish women immediately organized themselves into the Ladies' Anti-Beef Trust Association and called for a boycott of the butchers, not only refusing to buy the pricey meat but actually entering some of the shops late at night to douse the meat with kerosene, rendering it—one hopes—unsuitable for sale. Within three weeks, the butchers rolled back the price increase. There followed frequent rent strikes. And then, in 1909, in a strike that would have major implications for trade unionism in general, 20,000 shirtwaist-makers, mostly women between the ages of 16 and 25, went out on strike, the largest strike by women up to that time in American history. That strike made the International Ladies Garment Workers Union into a major force in the labor movement.

Energized by the shirtwaist-makers strike, a year later 65,000 men, chiefly cloak and suit workers, left their jobs and went on strike, demanding, among other things, a closed shop. The uptown Jews sought to intervene, for they were horrified at the spectacle of Jewish workers

striking against Jewish employers. Their efforts at mediation finally were successful when they invited a Boston lawyer by the name of Louis Brandeis to handle the matter. When Brandeis successfully negotiated what was called the "protocol of peace," which endorsed the union shop, again a pattern was set: three weeks after the New York strike was settled, the workers at Chicago's Hart, Schaffner went on strike, to be joined very soon by another 35,000 Chicago workers in the garment trades striking 50 different manufacturers. Out of that strike was born the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, a signal chapter in the story of Jews and the American labor movement.

More broadly, it is the story of Jews as activists who changed the face of America. It was Abba Eban who once proposed that we Jews are a people that cannot take "yes" for an answer—but here in America, it is as if a people so used to hearing only "no" finally heard "yes" and surged to respond, all the pent-up energies of centuries of oppression and restriction now released in this new Jerusalem. Once can hardly imagine how America would look if no Jew had ever come, how sharply different the streets and schools, the courthouses and laboratories, the concert halls and department stores would be.

Where have we been in America these last 100 years? Everywhere, from country clubs to county jails, from Nobel ceremonies to nursing homes, from the sacred to the profane, and from the sublime to the ridiculous. On the whole, however, we have a remarkable record of contribution and achievement.

Or, shall we prefer the rather more complex and surely more downbeat story of the Lazarus sisters? In 1883, a young Jewish poet from New York named Emma Lazarus was the unanimous choice of a government commission to write the poem, "The New Colossus" for the pedestal of the Statute of Liberty. Written in 1883, the words of that poem, that extraordinary celebration of America's hospitality—"Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free"—surely reflected the general Jewish view of what this country and its freedom even then had come to mean to Jews. I set aside for the moment the rarely asked question of how this gifted woman, herself a proud Jew, an ardent advocate of Jewish learning and of Jewish affirmation, could refer to the immigrants as "the wretched refuse of Europe's teeming shore." How could she describe my parents and the parents and grandparents of millions of us as "wretched refuse," as garbage? Does the fact that she did offer us a clue as to the complexities of being Jewish in this free and welcoming country? Emma's sister Josephine, writing in 1895, is a *de facto* Jew for Jesus as she writes, "We do not say to these bewildered and belated wanderers from other climes and times: 'keep your jargon and your uncouth ways and customs...on the contrary, we bid them welcome only on

condition...that they shall become Americans as we are...we cannot expect to become citizens of the world while we remain citizens of Judaea." Radical assimilation was her solution to what was beginning then to be seen, with the hordes of newcomers, as "the Jewish problem." And then there was Emma's sister Annie, who owned the copyright to Emma's works and refused to allow a publisher of Emma's poems to include any with Jewish reference. That was no great surprise: by then Annie had become a devout Catholic.

One family, three options—from affirmation through assimilation to apostasy—and plenty of takers for all three. At century's end, one might still have thought Longfellow would prove right in his elegy for a dead Jewry. And the question, of course, remains open, as it has been since the dawn of the Enlightenment. We still do not know whether Longfellow actually was wrong or merely premature in his conclusions about the fate of the Jews in this land of glorious freedom and profound spiritual peril, where the Jew as individual would be safe at last but where the safety of Judaism as faith and as peoplehood would remain an enduring challenge.

Gone, then, is the triumphalism, replaced with an endless series of questions. These questions mainly cluster around the question of identity, and it is to that question that I now shall turn. Of all the stories we might tell of where we have been—and of the hopes and fears we have regarding where we are going—none seems to me so compelling as the story of the shaping and re-shaping of Jewish identity.

That is not to say that identity is the only variable worth examining. If the question is "Where are we going?" then it is worth looking at a whole variety of issues, from the financial costs of being Jewish to the status of women in our community, from straightforward demographic measures to the subtle transfer of authority in our communities from federations to mega-wealthy family foundations. Here, however, we will focus on identity.

Surely the most radical revolution in the Jewish condition these last 100 years or so has been in the transformation of Judaism as it is experienced by the individual into a variable. It has been transformed from a condition into a commitment, from an issue of descent into an issue of consent. But if Judaism is now a matter of consent and commitment, the obvious question becomes: To what is it that the Jew consents? What is the content of the commitment?

Over the years, there's been little consensus regarding that question, save for two largely external variables. I mean, of course, that there scarcely can be a Jew who does not know that Jewish consent includes remembering the Holocaust and defending Israel. Leave aside the question of what lessons we are meant to derive from remembering the Holocaust—whether "Never again" is the whole of it and, for that

matter, just what that phrase means. Does it mean intervention in Rwanda, in Bosnia, in Sudan? Does it mean "Never again genocide," or only "Never again anti-Semitism." Leave aside, too, the question of what defending Israel means—whether Ariel Sharon's vision or Yossi Beilin's, whether President Bush's policy last week or this week. Consider only the great fortune of a people cast free from Judaism-as-condition, set loose in a country that celebrates individual autonomy, that says to us "Just do it" almost no matter what the "it" is. Consider the search for a simple banner under which all Jews might comfortably fit, a slogan to which all Jews might readily accede. There is not one but two such banners, each in flaming letters 10 feet high: Who is a Jew? A vicarious victim of history's most outrageous crime. What is a Jew? A vicarious victor in history's most astonishing example of national resurrection. Who could ask for anything more?

Well, it turns out that any number of us could ask, and have asked, for more. It is not in any way to make light of the enduring power of the Holocaust and the Jewish state. Both are real, and the fact that here and there we find them used as manipulative devices detracts from those who exploit them and not from the things themselves. The consent to both that generally is required of us is entirely appropriate, even if the meaning of that consent remains murky.

But surely these do not exhaust the expectation, the terms of agreement of being Jewish. "Never again" tells us what to avoid; it says nothing of what we are to embrace. Standing with and for Israel renders us hostage to distant events over which we have limited influence. Surely there must be more, closer chronologically to our own experience and closer geographically. It cannot be entirely incidental that we are citizens of the United States at the dawn of the 21st century.

But we are painfully divided regarding what that more is or ought to be. For those of us who live our lives within the Jewish framework, who can cross more or less comfortably from one sector of this debate to another, from one understanding to another, the divisions we experience are not especially critical.

But I am not at all sure that the Jews of the new generation, witnessing our internal debates, see the rich diversity we see. I fear they see chaos. Here we have theology, there we have politics; here we have folkways, there we have law; here we have the literal, there the metaphoric; here the philanthropic and there the ethnic. Say to those who seek to enter that there is no right door, that in their parents' house there are many rooms, and the confusion is extended and compounded. Or speak to them simply of the imperative of Jewish survival, and some will blink uncomprehendingly. They will ask why so weighty a historic burden should be placed on their inadequate shoulders, and what conceivable difference save crudely biological their acceptance of the

burden might make. The best of them will ask to know the purpose of the survival of the Jewish people.

They are not stupid. They know that what comes with being Jewish is not just pride but pain, not only celebration but also sorrow, not only blessing but also burden. What, save inertia or a sense of transcendent purpose, warrants the effort?

I point out these things as a preamble for consideration of our second question: where we are headed. When it comes to the future, I shall not extrapolate from current trends or prophesy on the basis of statistical or other projections. That kind of futurology has its place, but the kind of futurology I vastly prefer begins with a statement of our present condition and then asks what we can do to improve and, as necessary, repair that condition. The central element of that current condition is the problem of Jewish purpose—what it is we've consented to now that the very act of being Jewish is no longer a fixed condition. What words are written on the statement of informed consent that we ask each new generation to sign?

I must note here as I introduce the term "informed consent" that there is a very different way of understanding the Jewish present and projecting the Jewish future. Perhaps nothing so formal as consent or commitment is needed. Perhaps there is a way of growing up Jewish that is about connections rather than consent. For those who have a richly Jewish home, Jewish summer camping, day school education, travel to Israel, and the encouragement of Jewish friendships, being Jewish becomes the default category without any explanation or ideology required. This is the *na'asaeh v'nishma* school of Jewish continuity; it focuses on the "how" of being Jewish rather than on the "why." In this scenario, a genuinely literate Jew—the kind who not only reads Jewish books but who whistles Jewish songs in the shower—may never reach or need to reach the "why." He or she is Jewish in the same way that he or she is a man or woman. That is, we have evaded the consent question entirely and returned to Judaism as condition.

It can happen that way, and it does, but for most Jews it is happening that way less and less. In 1990, the National Jewish Population Survey reported that 45 percent of the Jewish-by-religion respondents described their friendship network as "all or mostly Jewish." By 1997, however, Steven M. Cohen reported that while 60 percent of Jews in the 55-64 age cohort reported that all or most of their friends were Jewish, only 34 percent of those in the 34-44 age cohort did. A later study, the American Jewish Identity Survey 2001, put the overall number at roughly 20 percent.¹

For all that we have done, the circle of "na'asaeh" Jews seems to be shrinking despite the recent surge in day-school enrollment and the growing waiting lists for Jewish summer camps. Why has the

community failed in this regard in the midst of what some hail as a Jewish renaissance? Judaism-as-connection may be effective when it happens, but it appears that it isn't happening.

What's missing is reason, purpose, mandate, mission. What's missing is some way of stating the Jewish case that will compel the attention of the Jews.

Thoughtful observers might be puzzled by this. "Judaism is one of the great religions," the observer might say. "What can you mean by searching for a purpose? Is not God your purpose?"

But God, as we know, not only isn't self-defining; as far as Jews are concerned, God actually is somewhat problematic. More than half of America's Jews describe themselves as "secular" or "somewhat secular," compared to just 16 percent of Americans in general.² It is important to note that even among those who profess to be secular, a majority agree that God exists, and even more agree that God hears prayers. Here I might add my own observation that even the Jewish atheist knows quite precisely what the God in whom he does not believe expects of him. Jewish secularism is not exactly the same as secular secularism. More precisely, very many Jews are secular, but very, very few Jews are secularists. The secular ideology that once was so much in vogue has resonance today only in tiny precincts of our community.

In one sense, that's a useful development. America always has understood the Jews best as members of a faith community, and it is as a faith community that we have achieved the remarkable miracle, no less wondrous than the miracle of the loaves and fishes, of converting our paltry 2.7 percent or so of America's population to a full one-third in the Protestant, Catholic, Jew formulation (or, with the rise in numbers and recognition of Muslim America, one quarter of a contemporary formulation). There is growing support for the synagogue—financial and ideological—and there is widespread acceptance of the notion that the synagogue is the central institution of the Jewish community. Even our most secular organizations now begin their meetings with a *d'var Torah*, and some of them now conclude their meetings with *birkat hamazon*, the grace after meals. Add to that the growing prominence in the Jewish community of Jews-by-choice, people who have entered Judaism through its religious door, and you have a strong case for Judaism-as-faith.

But here's the problem: A few years back, I participated in a *yom iyun*, a day of study sponsored by a large city federation for staff members of the federation and other associated community agencies. Some 250 people attended, all of whom received a packet of materials that included a list of basic books for those interested in building a Jewish library. Eighteen books were included in the bibliography. With two very marginal exceptions, all were about Judaism-as-faith. They

ranged from the first and third Jewish catalogues, to three books by Hayim Donin (guides to observance, prayer, and child-rearing), to a volume on Judaism and ecology. I counted 11 that dealt explicitly with what Jews believe or with Jewish tradition and religious practice. Not one presented a straightforward history of the Jewish people. There was no book on Jewish music, Jewish literature, or any other aspect of the Jewish experience as lived by real people.

That, I urgently suggest, is a profound distortion of who we are and what we are about. The history of the Jewish people is not merely a history of its religious literature, and Jewish literacy cannot—or at least should not—be defined solely as mastery over that literature any more than Jewish identity should be defined solely in terms of the practice of traditional customs and ceremonies. The dreams of interest to us are not only the dreams of Isaac and Joseph, but also the dreams of Theodor Herzl, Amos Oz, Michael Schwerner, Lori Berenson, Steven Spielberg, David Dubinsky, Aaron Lansky, Philip Roth, and Aaron Sorkin.

Ethnicity may well be on the wane, but we ought ask how we might slow and perhaps even reverse that waning. Perhaps Yossi Beilin is right when he urges a way of converting to Jewish peoplehood that is independent of rabbinic authority or professed religious conviction. It is, after all, anomalous that the only door through which one may enter Judaism today is a door that very many Jews would themselves be most reluctant to walk through. But better than Beilin's proposal, and surely less controversial, would be to understand that there is no need to choose between Judaism and Jewishness, between faith and peoplehood, between belief and belonging. Over the millennia, the two have not merely coexisted but come each to enrich the other, a classic instance of *eilu v'eilu*, of these and those as the ways of the Jewish people. So it has been and so, if we will it, it might yet be.

Where are we headed? Not only to a Jewish community of shrunken numbers, but also—unless we act to reverse the gathering tide—to a Judaism of shrunken definition, a Judaism shorn of Jewish peoplehood.

Peoplehood is not principally a concept taught and learned, nor is it centrally a matter of historical record; it is a concept lived and experienced. Its growth is perhaps most effectively stimulated by recognition of a common enemy, by a serious crisis. It is in that sense that anti-Semitism evokes Jewish peoplehood. But in an America fundamentally free of significant anti-Semitism, it is neither to blood nor to tears that we ought look for a common bond. It is, instead, to the other two items in Winston Churchill's classic phrase—it is to toil and sweat, to collective achievement. A people are not just about culinary fashion; they are about choral singing and book clubs, about projects to feed the hungry and clothe the naked, about the bonding that takes place

on a Birthright Israel trip, or in a march on behalf of a living wage, or where we gather to protest a President who plans to go to Bitburg, or when we build a Habitat for Humanity house.

I would not deign to suggest that our future is entirely what we make of it. Much will depend on events we cannot control and developments we cannot foresee. But neither am I so passive as to suppose that our future is something that will happen to us independent of the choices we make. In helping us make those choices wisely, and in plotting out the direction we think best over the course of the next 20 years, we need to examine the structure of our community.

I have strong convictions about the Jewish purpose. I come to those convictions not only as a matter of personal predilection, but also based on a continuing effort to discern what, if anything, all the Jews who ever lived and who are alive today might agree upon. On matters theological, the only consensual statement would be something like, "*If there is one, there is only one.*" Even though that statement is rather more meaningful than at first it seems, it is hardly sufficient to inspire a people. I am convinced that there is only one statement that meets the test, that all of us know as truth: This world is not working the way it was supposed to. And very many of us accept as well the corollary statement: To be a Jew is to know that you are bound, somehow, to help repair this world.

Where, then, are we headed? If we so choose, we may stand where at our best we always have stood: as a people that always speaks truth to power, a stiff-necked people that may strive to be rich but refuses to be comfortable, a people with a low threshold for hype and sham, a people of zealous fealty to the pursuit of justice, to the love of goodness, and to modesty as we walk with God.

NOTES

¹ American Jewish Identity Survey 2001, Egon Mayer, Barry Kosmin and Ariela Keysar, p. 47. (The Graduate Center of the City University of New York, 2002).

² Ibid, p. 38.