

THE AMERICANIZATION OF THE JEWS

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American Jewry in the Twenty-First Century: Strategies of Faith

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I am not quite sure just how prophetic I am meant to be. The twenty-first century, after all, is almost upon us, and we can presumably hang on tight in the nineties; the end of the next century, especially given the enormous changes that have overtaken us in this one, seems far away indeed—and certainly beyond my meager powers of imagination. With God, for God, concerning God, all things are possible—so how is one possibly to predict them? I have decided to focus on faith and, as a Conservative Jew ever in search of elusive middle ground, I will direct my attention halfway between the immediate and the far off, the forecast that is doable and that which might be interesting. I will draw upon recent research into the state of American Judaism during the past few decades in order to guess at what may lie ahead in the next few. I am far from alarmed about our prospects, as you will soon see, but neither do I discern much cause for celebration.

Let me begin by noting that our theme is *American* Judaism rather than Judaism in general. I see little hope of convergence with patterns of faith in either Europe or Israel, even if I agree with Charles Liebman and Steve Cohen that it is premature, even silly, to speak of Israeli Judaism as a separate entity altogether.¹ If Max Weber had anything at all to teach us, it is that the shape of a society and polity impinges heavily on the configuration of its faiths. The State of Israel—soon to possess a majority of world

Jewry, perhaps, and certainly more Jews than America—will continue to develop the holiness of space, while we insist that Jews sanctify only time. Messianism will continue to agitate hearts and minds there, and only terrify us from afar. The attempt to have the social order directed in some way by Torah, even if it be through the notion of *mishpat ivri*² rather than halakhah per se, will remain high on their religious agenda and be kept off ours by the commitment to separate church and state. Finally, the denominational dynamics of the two Jewries will likely remain distinct, and the theological developments that I am about to predict for America will likely not appear among Israeli Jews, or hardly faze them. Having said that, let me add at once that Israeli and American Orthodox Jews especially will still have much in common, that the Reform and Conservative footholds in Israel will likely remain, and that Israel will no doubt continue to be existentially crucial to committed American Jews—even as it grows more problematic politically and more distant culturally. We are set upon distinct but intersecting paths, in religion as in so much else.

I take it, second, that we in America have already emerged from the period in which Jewish thought was dominated by the two themes that have preoccupied it for most of the post-1967 period: covenant theology and confrontation with the Holocaust.³ A new generation of theologians is already upon the scene, declaring, like the previous one, its intention to reorient theological discourse substantially. Covenant, for reasons I have discussed elsewhere,⁴ has proven a difficult vehicle for theology in a community disinclined to submit to the “yoke of Torah,” however liberally defined, and bereft of any satisfactory notion of revelation, particularly “after Auschwitz.” The theologians who have made the Holocaust central, meanwhile—Emil Fackenheim, Irving Greenberg, Arthur Cohen—have themselves urged the move from or through encounter with the “rupture” or “caesura” of “Auschwitz” to *tikkun*: renewed Jewish commitment, “the Jewish way.”⁵ The question becomes what sort of commitment—and, increasingly, the nature of Jewish community. Two examples of recent thought illustrate the point rather nicely.

Arthur Green, a student of Abraham Heschel and expert on Hasidism who assumed the mantle of Mordecai Kaplan as president of

the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, is working on a synthesis that puts the emphasis upon personal religious experience or "awareness." Jews must admit the gap that separates them from traditional symbols and beliefs, but they can, like countless generations of their predecessors, particularly the Hasidim, seek "spiritual wakefulness and awareness, . . . cultivation of the inner life." Judaism demands intensity of vision, searchings of the soul. *Mitzvot* are the way Jews live a life "in constant striving for . . . relation to the transcendent and in response to the demands made by it." The search is undertaken with others of similar commitment—in other words, in Jewish communities.⁶

For Judith Plaskow, author of a groundbreaking effort to formulate a feminist Judaism, the way around the tradition's general exclusion of women's concerns and consciousness is for contemporary Jewish women to "stand on the ground of our experience, on the certainty of our membership in our own people." Note that authority rests with the experience of a particular community, and its "God-wrestling." Feminist history, midrash, and ritual must be created to provide forms and content for that search. The effort is revolutionary, Plaskow argues, but so was the transformation of biblical Judaism accomplished by the rabbis of old following the cataclysmic destruction of the Second Temple.⁷

This is not the place for a detailed review of either thinker's work. I only want to suggest that the trends that the two represent—experiential, communal, spiritual, feminist—will be long-lasting if the atomization of our communities, our liberal suspicion of authority, our search for individual meaning, and the successes of the women's movement in recent decades prove enduring. Feminist reinterpretation of the tradition is part and parcel of modern revision more generally, and even attacks on "patriarchalism" seem tied to the democratization of "god-talk" evident throughout the modern period, never more so than in America in recent decades. Tocqueville would hardly have been surprised by these developments, and neither should we be.⁸ Our theological directions will keep pace with the social changes that underlie them.

In a sense, these directions provide a framework rather than specific content. They describe a kind of thinking, an approach to thought, rather than supplying hard-and-firm answers to questions

about God and God's plans for the world. American Jews have never seemed particularly interested in theology, and not much systematic Jewish religious thought has been produced here—a trend likely to continue. Consider the various strategies of faith that predominate among us: (1) “compartmentalization,” which thrives by separating issues of faith from daily life and the scientific perspective that organizes it; (2) the parallel division of faith from reason as Martin Buber's I-Thou is divided from I-It, as Abraham Heschel's realm of wonder and mystery is divided from the world in which we “measure and weigh,” and as Joseph Soloveitchik's “covenantal man” Adam the Second is divided from his Adam the First of mastery and honor;⁹ (3) translation of traditional concepts such as Jewish chosenness into images that move us not by the logic of belief but by the pictures they present to the mind and heart; and (4) most prevalent of all, the move from questions of what is true to considerations of what is meaningful, which I call the strategy of tradition. We feel free to participate in rituals and textual study without feeling compelled to give assent to the words we utter. “Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who has commanded us” need not deter those who do not believe in a commanding God, or in God's ordinance of this particular observance, so long as they can supply an interpretation to their behavior that seems both meaningful and authentic.

I take this to be the most widely practiced strategy of faith in current employ, outside of traditional Orthodoxy, and it—even more than the other strategies just named—sets theological questions aside in favor of the experience of transcendence, profundity, and community. It will likely remain such. The elites of the various movements seem disinclined to focus on age-old questions of belief, let alone resolve them with any consensus, while Jewish laypeople seem quite happy with the notion that tradition is a legacy for them to use as they see fit, even piecemeal, rather than a coherent and binding set of obligations—let alone a belief system to which they must assent. I would be willing to bet that this emphasis on the flexibility and pluralism of tradition and the de facto autonomy of the individual Jew will grow in coming decades. A community with our intermarriage rate, our internalized concern with the good opinion of certain highly secularized gentile Americans, our desire

to balance particularist “survival” with harmony and integration and not, God forbid, to go too far in either direction—this is not a community about to undertake a theological move to the “right.” Even inside modern Orthodoxy, where the behavioral norms seem ever more demanding, Jewish belief coexists precariously with the demands of the world beyond and inside the walls. The sources of strain in that situation, and in American Judaism generally, are far more evident than any tendency to abandon secular America wholesale—or adapt it in a new and convincing Maimonidean synthesis.

There is perhaps one exception to this rule: we may well find Jewish mysticism ever more appealing in coming decades, both because people are more and more comfortable with myth, having learned to read it in a way that does not make literal claims about what is true, and because the science of the coming century may converge decisively with the most mythic, least rational elements of our tradition. One reads Stephen Hawking’s *Brief History of Time*, perhaps a sign of things to come, and the affinities with Kabbalah are striking. There is little room anymore for Mordecai Kaplan’s judgment of our inheritance by a rationalist, scientific standard. The scientists themselves increasingly have recourse to mythic language (e.g., the big bang), and the belief that science can master nature, let alone harness it for the benefit of the species, seems at century’s end naive at best and at worst a cruel delusion. Theological symbols that have cosmic rather than social reference, spiritual rather than political implications, may experience a renaissance of meaning. In this respect, we may have license to think boldly. Our grandchildren may look back at us as having inhabited a time of conflict between religion and science that they no longer know. They may have the luxury of other problems.

In conclusion, I cannot escape noticing that we met to discuss the American Jewish future in the relatively humdrum week of *Tazri’a-Metzora*, interposed between the eternally terrifying drama of the deaths of Nadav and Avihu in *Shemini* (a *parasha* that always coincides with *Yom ha-Shoah*) and the eternal challenges of *Aharei-Mot* and *Kedoshim*. One must choose a standpoint, in faith as in sociology. I find that these weekly Torah readings from Leviticus provide me with a landmark of sorts from which to view

our present—indeed, any Jewish present. They tell me where I am and have been (like Aaron, relatively “silent” about the awful events just behind us, and mainly concerned to get on with the job of being a holy people). They remind me, too, where we as a community need to go, even if none of us ever gets there entirely and many of us do not get there at all. It is also extremely comforting, when doing Jewish futurology a mere forty-six years after the Holocaust, to have no fear for the survival of the Jewish people; and, forty-three years after the creation of the Jewish state, to have no fear for the existence of Israel; and, after decades of predictions about the imminent demise of American Jewry, to worry not a bit that our descendants will not be able to convene in scholarly conferences a hundred years from now and worry about *their* descendants. A few decades ago, I could hardly have been this optimistic. Perhaps, then, we should conclude each rehearsal of anxiety for what might come in a tone of blessing for what is already here and has not been lost.

Notes

1. Charles S. Liebman and Steven M. Cohen, *Two Worlds of Judaism: The Israeli and American Experience* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1990). See in particular chapter 7.
2. Literally, “Hebrew law”—i.e., the entire history of Jewish legal practice, now the name of a movement to align current Israeli legislation with that precedent.
3. I draw here upon my survey, “Jewish Theology in North America: Notes on Two Decades,” *American Jewish Year Book* (1991): 3–33.
4. *Ibid.*
5. “Tikkun” is Fackenheim’s phrase; see Emil Fackenheim, *To Mend the World* (New York: Schocken, 1982). *The Jewish Way* is the title of a volume by Irving Greenberg (New York: Summit, 1988).
6. Arthur Green, “Rethinking Theology: Language, Experience, and Reality,” *Reconstructionist* (September 1988): 8–11. See also his book *Seek My Face, Speak My Name* (Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson, 1992).
7. Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990). I have cited an article that serves as a précis of the book: Judith Plaskow, “Standing Again at Sinai: Jewish Memory from a Feminist Perspective,” *Tikkun* 1, no. 2 (1986): 28.

8. I refer of course to the great nineteenth-century survey of American mores and institutions: Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 2 vols. (New York: Schocken, 1961).
9. See Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Scribner's, 1970); Abraham Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1966); and Joseph Soloveitchik, "The Lonely Man of Faith," *Tradition* (Summer 1965): 5-67.