

# America's Jews

*Highly Fragmented, Insufficiently Disputatious*

Jack Wertheimer

During the 1997–98 academic year five Orthodox Jews filed a lawsuit against Yale University, claiming Yale's policy requiring all freshman and sophomores to live in a mixed-sex dormitory was discriminatory because it forced them into an environment whose mores were sharply at odds with their strict religious and ethical sensibilities. The students requested either to be exempted from the requirement or to be housed in a single-sex residence "where rules against visitation by members of the opposite sex and against cohabitation are enforced."<sup>1</sup>

The response of the secular organized Jewish community to the lawsuit was telling. The community relations sector, the organizations whose primary responsibility is to improve relations between Jews and their neighbors, reacted with virtual silence. Jews engaged in the realm of public policy curtly rejected the lawsuit as baseless. Meanwhile, some non-Orthodox Jewish religious leaders condemned the undergraduates for seeking to establish a "ghetto Judaism" at Yale.

This little vignette dramatizes the current state of disputation within the organized Jewish community of the United States. The culture wars of the late twentieth century surely divided the Jewish community, as they did other groups in American life. After all, in suing Yale the Orthodox students were doing more than simply questioning the morality of campus housing arrangements. They were also challenging the reflexive universalism and liberalism of the larger Jewish community, which regards such arrangements as a nonissue. Much of the organized Jewish com-

munity, in turn, rebuffed the students, with the most stinging criticism coming from Jewish religious leaders of a different outlook.

To some observers, this disagreement may seem quite unremarkable. Don't Jews have a long history of disputation? If anything, divisiveness has been the hallmark of Jewish life historically. Indeed, one could enumerate a long list of schisms that have punctuated Jewish communal life stretching back to sectarian strife in first-century Palestine. Still, what is striking about the recent fragmentation is the virtual absence of serious *debate*: even as social barriers among Jews are rising ever higher and shrill invective has become all too common, there are fewer opportunities for a genuine *clash of ideas*. Jewish life in the United States in recent decades has come to resemble a startling sociological anomaly: fragmentation virtually unaccompanied by serious moral disputation.

Once again, the case of the Yale students illustrates the larger pattern: whereas the issue they raised—sexual morality on the campus—ought to have provoked some reflection in a community that sends a disproportionately high percentage of its youth to colleges and universities, Jewish communal leaders either dismissed the matter entirely or castigated the Yale students as parochial. Much like the talking heads who dominate cable television, Jewish communal leaders concerned themselves with the technical issues: did the students have a legal case? The larger moral and cultural issues elicited no sustained debate. Driven by a desire to be inclusive and universal, the organized Jewish community avoids debates over potentially divisive issues and marginalizes those who take exception.

This is not to suggest that Jews do not participate in the serious debates of our time. Individual Jews, to be sure, do engage in feisty argumentation on both sides of the cultural divide. But only rarely do these individuals speak as Jews. Thus, when a person of Jewish background publishes an op-ed article in a major newspaper on abortion or affirmative action or gun control, that writer does not speak for or specifically to the Jewish community. Similarly, when Jews in Hollywood produce films, they are not driven by a Jewish agenda any more than is a critic of Hollywood violence and pornography who criticizes those same movies in the name of Jewish values.

As for the institutions of the Jewish community—the subject of this essay—organizations that speak for Jews rarely engage in serious debate with one another.<sup>2</sup> To some extent this absence of sustained debate is inertial: during the middle decades of the twentieth century the Jewish community had achieved such wide agreement on key issues that it con-

tinues to act as if the earlier consensus is still strong. But on a deeper level many communal leaders fear debate, and they strive instead to paper over differences rather than bring genuine disagreement into the open. At a time of multicultural ferment, when gays, blacks, Latinos, women, fundamentalist Christians, and just about everybody else ebulliently promotes their own identities and interests in public, Jews are loathe to give credence to positions based on the particularistic traditions of Judaism. Much of the public policy agenda of the organized Jewish community is still rooted in a post-World War II conception of American civil religion that soft-pedals particularism. Because American society has changed in recent decades and many minority groups now unabashedly put forward their own demands, this approach warrants rethinking. It also warrants rethinking because—dare one say it?—it may not be all that “good for the Jews.”

#### THE FRAGMENTED WORLD OF AMERICAN JUDAISM

For much of the twentieth century Jewish institutional life was marked by a division of labor between “church” and state: institutions in the former category addressed religious issues, whereas the so-called secular organizations addressed a range of public-policy matters.<sup>3</sup> In sway to the model of American Protestantism, the religious sector of American Jewry has fragmented into several “denominations,” each presenting its own somewhat different version of Judaism.

In the closing decades of the century these denominations clashed sharply with one another. They no longer shared a common set of assumptions about the most basic questions of religious belief, as the once-taken-for-granted questions of “Who is a Jew?” and “Who decides?” dramatically illustrate. Jewish religious movements today act unilaterally and with no consultation.

Traditionally, Jewish identity consisted of a mixture of tribal and religious elements. As defined by the rabbis of the Talmudic period, a Jew was one who either had been born to a Jewish mother or had converted to the Jewish faith. (The latter was expected both to adopt Jewish religious norms *and* to identify with the historical experience of the Jewish people.) Until recently, Jews of different denominations, whatever their theological disagreements, could agree on who was a member of the Jewish community. Not only was the ancient rabbinic standard universally accepted, but the barriers to intermarriage created by internal Jewish

taboos, as well as by Gentile hostility, saw to it that the standard was fairly easily maintained. But with today's massive increase in exogamy the traditional definitions have come under attack.

The most obvious target has been the doctrine of matrilineal descent. Why, some ask, should a child with only one Jewish parent be treated differently by the official religious community if that parent happens to be the child's father rather than its mother? Should not community and synagogue alike embrace such children and thereby help "interfaith" families identify as Jews? Is it not self-destructive to risk the loss of hundreds of thousands of children solely to maintain a principle that, whatever may be said for it historically, no longer suits our circumstances?

In 1983 the Reform movement, the denomination with which the plurality of American Jews identify, formally adopted a resolution accepting any child of intermarriage as a Jew. No longer was descent from a Jewish mother a necessary condition. Nor, for that matter, was formal conversion to Judaism. Rather, the child's Jewish identity was redefined as an act of personal choice, the only proviso being that the "presumption" of Jewish status was "to be established through appropriate and timely public and formal acts of identification with the Jewish faith and people. The performance of these *mitzvot* [commandments] serves to commit those who participate in them, both parent and child, to Jewish life."<sup>4</sup>

The Reform resolution equally introduced a different conception of Jewish identity. No longer is Jewish descent sufficient; no longer is conversion necessary for a person not born to a Jewish mother. Rather, public acts of Jewish affirmation are necessary to substantiate the presumption of Jewish identity. In this way Jewish identity was transmuted from a matter of fate into one of faith; it is an act of personal choice rather than an obligation conferred through birth. Indeed, as the debate over this resolution unfolded, some even defended patrilineality as a means of *toughening* the requirements, given that under its stipulations the child of an interfaith family who was born to a Jewish mother would not be accepted as a Jew if that child never publicly demonstrated a commitment to the Jewish religion and people.

This ruling has been rejected by the Conservative and Orthodox movements of American Judaism, both of which maintain the traditional rabbinic position on Jewish identity.<sup>5</sup> They contend that the reasoning behind the original rabbinic definition remains unchanged: children are still most powerfully influenced by their mothers. And these movements re-

gard it as damaging to the morale of the Jewish community when boundaries are continually redefined to accommodate members who have broken a fundamental taboo by intermarrying.

Unlike other disagreements over matters of theology and religious practice, this question of personal status—and Jewish disagreement over it—has important social repercussions. The Internet forum of Reform rabbis has been buzzing with stories of Conservative rabbis who will not allow the teenagers in their synagogues to fraternize with their peers from local Reform temples on the grounds that this could lead to their dating young people not considered Jewish according to traditional criteria. Or consider the dilemma of a Conservative rabbi asked by a female congregant to officiate at her marriage to a young man who is Jewish only according to Reform's patrilineal dispensation. A rabbi who acquiesces will be committing an act punishable by expulsion from the organization of Conservative rabbis; a rabbi who declines will end up alienating at least two families on account of "intolerance." We are rapidly approaching the time, moreover, when there will be rabbis who are themselves offspring of interfaith families and who will not be recognized by their colleagues *as Jews*.

Conversion to Judaism, the recourse long available to those not born Jewish who want to join the Jewish group, now also divides American Jews of different denominations. The conversion process traditionally unfolds in a series of steps: a term of study leading to a commitment to Jewish religious observance and an identification with the Jewish people; the convening of a rabbinic court (*beit din*), which supervises the conversion; the actual conversion ceremony, in which the convert is immersed in the waters of a ritual bath (*mikveh*) and, if male, undergoes an actual or symbolic circumcision.

Each of the religious movements treats these phases differently. Many Orthodox rabbis in the United States do not accept conversions performed by their more liberal counterparts because such conversions do not bind the individual to Orthodox observance. Following the ruling of a leading decisor of the past generation, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, many Orthodox rabbis contend that non-Orthodox rabbis are by definition not qualified to constitute a religious court, so no conversion performed by non-Orthodox rabbis can ever be acceptable. Reform rabbis, by contrast, operate as they see fit: they offer educational programs of varying lengths, often perform conversions without a *beit din*, and do not necessarily require either circumcision or immersion. Caught in the middle are Conservative rabbis, who adhere to all three steps outlined above but

whose conversions are often not recognized by Orthodox rabbis, whereas they themselves are hard-pressed to accept conversions performed under Reform auspices. Reviewing recent Reform response on conversion, a Conservative rabbi concluded that “innocent children and their parents should be advised that without proper *halakhic* procedures [Jewish legal requirements, such as circumcision and immersion] . . . they may have problems later being accepted as a Jew by non-Reform movements. The child would grow up thinking he or she is Jewish and be surprised to find out it is only accepted by the Reform [movement].” It is an open secret that most Conservative rabbis recognize Reform conversions only on a case-by-case basis.

Despite the pluralism of American Jewry, then, its religious movements tend neither to accept each other's definitions of who is a Jew nor to accept each other's converts. At best, each operates independently, with little regard to the others' positions or values. At worst, each movement acts as if convinced that it alone will survive and so does not hesitate to take unilateral actions that have deleterious consequences for other Jews. In short, American Judaism is characterized by deep social and religious chasms but lacks the vocabulary and institutions—and perhaps the will—to bridge them.

#### THE CIVIL RELIGION OF ORGANIZED JEWISH LIFE

At first glance the external or “state” sphere of organized Jewish life operates differently and appears to be far more cohesive than the religious one. The organizations setting Jewish public policy work in tandem and annually issue “a joint program” (or, as it has been called more recently, “an agenda for public affairs”), a plan for concerted action. For several decades, however, this regime has come under fire from critics who have challenged the basic assumptions of the public policies of the organized Jewish community. Frustrated by the indifference of the policy establishment to their dissatisfaction, a growing number of organizations have opened offices in Washington, D.C., to lobby as they see fit. (Several Orthodox groups have set up shop, and both the Conservative and Reform movements support such offices in Washington.) With increasing frequency these Jewish lobbyists are taking positions diametrically opposed to the proclaimed positions of the organized Jewish community. Thus, despite its surface unity the public policy arm of the Jewish community is also fragmenting—with Jewish groups actively lobbying government leaders even as they ignore each other. To appreciate the seriousness of

the new divisions over public policy, we need to appreciate the historical context that shaped both the emergence and collapse of communal consensus.

That consensus was forged only gradually in the post-World War II years, after a half century of bitter internecine conflict on a wide range of ideological and social issues. In the first half of the twentieth century American Jewry divided as Uptown natives and Downtown “greenhorns” clashed over who should speak for American Jews and whether Jewish leaders should defend their people’s interests through dignified, behind-the-scenes negotiations or by mobilizing the masses to take to the streets. They quarreled perhaps most bitterly over the question of a Jewish homeland: was Zionism a threat to Jewish security in the United States? Underlying these conflicts were profound class and cultural differences between native and immigrant Jews and between political radicals and conservatives.

Under such circumstances it was virtually impossible to forge a consensus on communal priorities—even during the crisis years of the Holocaust. In the postwar era, by contrast, the community knitted together socially when second-generation East European Jews rapidly achieved social mobility and the influence of German Jewish leaders waned. As the postwar era unfolded, the Uptown/Downtown interethnic divisions gradually disappeared.

This new social cohesion facilitated the construction of a “functional consensus” regarding American Jewry’s communal agenda. In his insightful analysis of the postwar era the historian Arthur Goren identifies the dual components of the new agenda—“assuring Israel’s security and striving for a liberal America.”<sup>6</sup> Both were linked to America’s self-chosen role as the international guardian of democratic ideals and fair play: the American Jewish community insisted that the United States owed Israel strong support because the Jewish state was an embattled bastion of democracy surrounded by autocratic states. Which nation was more deserving of support from America, the defender of democracy around the world? On the domestic front American Jewish organizations after World War II busied themselves with civic affairs to insure that no group in America suffered unfair treatment; the defense of Jews was now understood as part of a larger campaign of social action rather than solely as a parochial cause. Jewish needs both at home and abroad were therefore explained in universal terms. Israel deserved support because it embodied what was best in America rather than because it was a separate country with special needs; anti-Semitism was fought not as an attack

on Jews but as a symptom of other prejudices that were a blight on America. Couched in these terms, the defense of Jewish interests facilitated *integration* into America rather than highlighted Jewish particularism. Thus, the Jewish agenda consisted of a campaign to encourage the United States to live up to its noblest ideals in its pursuit of democracy abroad and justice at home. An America that lived up to such ideals, it was believed, would offer the best protection to its Jews.

These twin goals energized Jewish organizations and committed them to a new activism in both foreign affairs and domestic policy. Each of the major religious denominations of American Judaism, for example, formed social action commissions in the early postwar years. Throughout the 1950s rabbinic organizations issued resolutions supporting union workers—despite the fact that most Jews were no longer in working-class occupations. Organizations of the Reform movement routinely called for government-funded housing and medical care for the poor; Conservative rabbis rejoiced when the Supreme Court handed down its school desegregation decision in 1954, and the Rabbinical Council of America, the largest organization of Orthodox rabbis, approved resolutions at its 1951 convention supporting price and rent controls.

The defense agencies of American Jewry also reoriented themselves. Whereas formerly they had concentrated on fighting anti-Semitism, they broadened their agenda to encompass all forms of social action. They supported legislation to end racial discrimination and to strengthen unions; they urged the government in Washington to embrace an internationalist policy that included foreign aid to democratic nations (such as Israel); and they favored social welfare programs. In 1945 the American Jewish Congress created a Commission on Law and Social Action dedicated to the twin tasks of “focus[ing] attention . . . on [social] abuses which must be ended, and promot[ing] . . . public policies which will make discrimination illegal and assure democratic rights for all racial and religious minorities.”<sup>7</sup> A year later the American Jewish Committee’s executive committee, noting “the closest relation between the protection of the civil rights” of all citizens and the members of particular groups, resolved to broaden its agency’s mandate beyond the battle against anti-Semitism to “join with other groups in the protection of the civil rights of the members of all groups irrespective of race, religion, color or national origin.”<sup>8</sup>

By 1953 the *Joint Program Plan* of the National Community Relations Advisory Council (NACRAC, later renamed NJCRAC when the word Jewish was added in 1971), the coordinator of most Jewish com-



munity relations agencies in the country, set forth a similar rationale for its involvement in social policy matters: “The overall objectives of Jewish community relations are to protect and promote equal rights and opportunities and to create conditions that contribute to the vitality of Jewish living. . . . These opportunities can be realized in a society in which all persons are secure, whatever their religion, race or origin.”<sup>9</sup> Based on this latter premise, the NJCRAC (recently renamed the Jewish Council for Public Affairs) would develop liberal policy positions on a wide range of social questions that had little direct bearing on relations between Jews and their neighbors.

### CRACKS IN THE CONSENSUS

During the late 1960s and early 1970s this consensus in organized Jewish life came under attack by small fringe groups. In keeping with the general mood of disenchantment with “establishments,” groups on the left and the right challenged the Jewish establishment. To an extent these critics borrowed arguments and tactics from the civil rights movement and feminists on one side of the ideological spectrum and from the emerging Christian right on the other. Groups on the Jewish left, for example, challenged Jewish organizations for offering unqualified support to Israeli government policies after the Six Day War—and especially after the Yom Kippur War of 1973. It was the view of the generally young critics who joined these left-wing groups that the established leadership had demonstrated its moral bankruptcy and inability to lead by failing to criticize the Israeli government.

Almost simultaneously, small groups on the right of the spectrum mounted their own attacks on the consensus positions of the Jewish community. First came the Jewish Defense League and Soviet Jewry activists who twitted the established leaders for their timidity in the face of anti-Semitic thugs at home and abroad. Moreover, conservative critics broke ranks with the community over the ever more liberal agenda on social issues.

By the late 1960s Jewish neoconservatives associated with *Commentary* magazine challenged other assumptions of the postwar consensus. In a far-reaching manifesto for change Murray Friedman urged “a new direction for American Jews.” First on his list of priorities was a strong American national defense because it was the guarantor of Israel’s security. He also called for reversing the Jewish “ideological bias [which] systematically favors governmental over private-sector solutions, and sys-

tematically discounts what people can do to solve their problems by dint of their own struggle." Friedman singled out the annual *Joint Program Plan* of the NJCRAC as the prime expression of the "old and now largely discredited liberal agenda." In the same spirit he called for a break "with the formulas of the past"—including support for Great Society programs and "excessive reliance of agencies on government grants."<sup>10</sup>

Most globally, the coalition of right-wing forces urged the Jewish community to reassess the wisdom of its political alliances. In 1971 Norman Podhoretz, then editor of *Commentary*, announced the shift in thinking that led to his journal's turn to neoconservatism: "whatever the case may have been yesterday, and whatever the case may be tomorrow, the case today is that the most active enemies of the Jews are located not in the precincts of the ideological Right, but in the ideological precincts of the radical Left. . . . Jews should recognize the ideology of the radical Left for what it is: an enemy of liberal values and a threat to the Jewish position."<sup>11</sup>

Around the same time, Orthodox Jews who associated with the religiously right-wing Agudath Israel movement also broke ranks with the liberal consensus of the Jewish community. Beginning in the mid-1960s, this group targeted the most sacrosanct of American Jewish principles—the separationist doctrine. From the very beginning of the republic, historian Naomi W. Cohen has demonstrated, "Jewish spokesmen set themselves up as guardians of the 'authentic' American tradition, often urging conformity with the 'spirit' of the national, religion-blind Constitution."<sup>12</sup> In the years after World War II Jewish organizations worked unceasingly to shore up the wall separating church and state, believing that anything short of strict separation endangered Jewish security and opened the floodgates to the forces bent on Christianizing America.

Early in the 1960s the consensus position was challenged by Orthodox Jews who came out in favor of state aid to parochial schools. Marvin Schick, a leading partisan of the Orthodox campaign, observed that for countless Protestants and Catholics, from public-school officials to teachers to politicians, the issue of state aid was a practical matter about which "reasonable men might differ." By contrast, "the bulk of the organized and articulate Jewish community, robot-like invoked the holiness and oneness of the First Amendment and proclaimed their opposition to any 'breach in the wall separating church and state.' This idol worship, however, did not paralyze the thought processes of Orthodox leaders who were . . . [starting to think] it might be a good thing for the state to do something which might help the Hebrew Day School."<sup>13</sup>

By the 1970s and 1980s, religiously Orthodox and politically conservative Jews had moved the discussion beyond aid to parochial schools. They now were wondering whether America might be a better country if prayer had a place in the public school and religious symbols were displayed in the public square. Rather than promote the “no establishment” clause of the First Amendment, this coalition emphasized the “free exercise” of religion so that religiously observant Americans, including Jews, could practice their religion unencumbered. “To their thinking,” writes the historian Jonathan Sarna, “the threat posed by rampant secularism was far more imminent and serious than any residual threat from forces of militant Christianity.”<sup>14</sup>

#### THE CURRENT CIVIL RELIGIOUS REGIME

Judging from the annual pronouncements of Jewish community relations specialists, these criticisms have had scant impact. True, the *Joint Program Plan* and its successors, the *Agendas for Public Affairs*, include statements of demurral by member organizations on specific policy recommendations. But on balance the Jewish community continues to embrace its historic liberalism. In recent years the *Joint Program Plan* has endorsed public-school education, coupled with unwavering opposition to any aid to parochial schools; complete opposition to capital punishment; a statement on AIDS that instructs the Department of Health and Human Services to remove “the HIV virus from the list of ‘dangerous and contagious diseases’ for which aliens are excluded from this country.”; and a strong endorsement of environmental programs, including a call for the “elevation of the Environmental Protection Agency to Cabinet status.”

Surely one might debate whether these policy positions offer the best solution to contemporary problems in the United States. But on what basis have they been enunciated in the name of the American Jewish community? And why should that community invest its moral and political capital in support of policies that do not affect Jews as a group and about which American Jews as individual citizens undoubtedly hold a variety of opinions?

Over the years a number of explanations have been offered to justify these forays into the public policy arena. Perhaps the major one is that the Jewish tradition itself *commands* political activism. In the words of one *Joint Program Plan*: “American Jewish activism reflects the essence of the Judaic concept of ‘mitzvot,’ to act upon commandments.”

This, however, only begs the question of how particular command-

ments within the tradition translate into *specific policies*. It is precisely over the application of general principles of justice and compassion that decent people disagree. Is the death penalty clearly an act of social evil? The Torah commands capital punishment. If we call for strict gun control, are we protecting the innocent or depriving them of the means to defend themselves against criminals? Once again, the Torah calls for such self-defense. Is the American welfare system supported by the Jewish policy establishment congruent with Jewish teachings of *tzedakah* (justice, charity)? Traditionally the preferred form of Jewish giving has been one that safeguards the dignity of the recipient. The *Joint Program Plan's* response—enveloping all of its stances in the mantle of some amorphous “Jewish tradition”—is evasive. Such a romance of “tradition” does more than trivialize that tradition, stretching it elastically beyond recognition. By obscuring the real grounds of its positions, the “agenda for public affairs” itself is inimical to the tradition of honest democratic debate.

A second rationale—namely that most American Jews do, in fact, concur with the public policy positions taken by their “spokesmen”—is not implausible on the face of it. Jewish leaders, it is argued, reflect the will of American Jews. There is some truth to this claim. But if Jews are generally to the left of Protestants and Catholics, all things being equal, it is also true, as survey research indicates, that activists are considerably further to the left than the communities they claim to represent. Moreover, the very process by which individuals rise to leadership in the community-relations agencies strongly favors those who hold liberal views: such lay and professional leaders are not randomly selected but gravitate to the field because they are social activists. Individuals who dissent from the party line are marginalized. Finally, organizations tend to pick their battles carefully, and Jewish ones are no different; on matters that do not concern them directly many Jewish organizations defer to coordinating bodies. (Indeed, a perusal of the actual policy positions of national agencies represented in the Jewish Council for Public Affairs demonstrates that organizations as diverse as the American Jewish Committee and the Women's League for Conservative Judaism actually take positions far more nuanced than those put forth in their name by the “agenda for public affairs.”) It is therefore questionable whether the will of the people is fairly represented by the public policy arm of the Jewish community.

A third justification for Jewish activism is that it serves the group interests of Jews to encourage those forces in society that are tolerant and socially “conscious.” Certainly, this was a major lesson that Jewish pol-

icy organizations derived from the horrors of the Holocaust. The destruction of European Jewry convinced many that the fate of Jews was directly linked to the welfare of society at large and necessitated a more cosmopolitan concern for the weak and needy. And throughout the nineteenth century many European Jews saw Jewish survival as linked to the Enlightenment tradition and the universalism of the democratic revolution. In recent decades, however, this concern has progressively extended its reach to absurd lengths. It is not hard to glimpse the connection between ending discrimination and the fate of Jews. But precisely how *tikkun olam*, the repair of the world, requires *specific policies* of environmental regulation, say, is less obvious.

In the end the most plausible justification for the positions espoused by the community is a frankly political version of the above logic of group interest. As a small minority, the argument goes, the Jewish community must forge links with coalition partners in the hope that these partners will speak for Jewish interests. Here, at last, is a rationale that lends itself to hard-nosed evaluation. Specifically, we can ask if the Jewish community's coalition partners have "delivered" in return for Jewish support of *their* agendas. For example, has Jewish cooperation with other minority groups on racial or urban matters been rewarded with support for Israel or a strong effort by these groups to root out anti-Semitism in their own ranks? Have efforts to form coalitions with one set of partners foreclosed the possibility of joint action with other groups? And has the strong tilt of the Jewish community toward the social program long advocated by the left wing of the Democratic Party impeded coalition building with those in the center and those on the right of the political spectrum? Unfortunately, these important questions are rarely debated by organizations most directly engaged in setting the public-policy agenda for the Jewish community.

#### TOWARD PARTICULARISM:

#### WHAT ARE JEWISH INTERESTS AND VALUES?

Perhaps the divided world of American Jewry cannot be made whole. But as we look to the future, we may reasonably ask whether it might not prove quite salutary to expose the divisions in American Jewish life so that a healthy public debate might ensue.

Circumstances have changed radically since the terms of discussion in the Jewish community were set in the immediate postwar period. Simply put, American Jews have achieved virtually everything that the post-

war generation dreamed of: unfettered socioeconomic mobility, entrée into all sectors of society, and respectability for Judaism and things Jewish. Although Jews must remain ever vigilant, levels of anti-Semitism remain relatively low by historical standards. Overt discrimination and physical violence are the exceptions, but when they do occur, government leaders have responded forcefully and unequivocally to protect Jews. For some Jews these measures of security and success confirm the sagacity of the communal agenda. Accordingly, they urge the community to stay the course and advocate for more of the same.

But this myopic nonchalance neglects the critical feature of today's circumstances. Only the character—and not the condition—of threat facing Jews has changed. Today internal Jewish weakness is a far greater present danger than anti-Semitism. The community is losing large numbers of members to the twin processes of assimilation and intermarriage. The very Jewish population that is succeeding so well in integrating into American society is simultaneously almost devoid of a strong sense of distinctiveness. And the organized Jewish community lacks the sharp boundaries that would confidently clarify to its members who is a Jew or what is Judaism. In sum, the current Jewish communal "agenda for public affairs" is preoccupied with fighting the last war and is disregarding the present crisis.

Conditions in contemporary culture are only intensifying this dilemma. These include the growing inability of most American families to transmit their religion and culture intact to the next generation; "religious switching" is endemic in American society, and ethnicity is rapidly melting away. More generally, families are hard-pressed to serve as vehicles for the transmission of a strong identity as they are buffeted by massive dislocation and social change. Extended families tend to scatter widely. And even the nuclear family is under great strain because of high divorce rates, the multiple pressures faced by families with two wage earners, and a popular culture that is hostile to traditional family life and to the concept of religious obligation. The result is a growing "culture of disbelief" subversive to Judaism no less than to other religions.

As a result the public policies favored by the Jewish community may actually contribute to subverting Jewish survival. Certainly, it is no longer clear that the particularistic values of Judaism and the long-term interests of the Jewish community neatly coincide with liberal universalism. All this increases the urgency for a rethinking process in the Jewish community and a reassessment of the terms of discussion of the postwar public-policy consensus.

Fortunately, the mood in the Jewish community has been shifting, and there is now a new openness in a number of quarters to such reconsideration. As we go forward, several policy areas will warrant further scrutiny: First, Jews need to reexamine their embrace of American individualism, which in our time is increasingly untempered by countervailing values of altruism and voluntarism. A Jewish community preoccupied with individual self-advancement will look favorably on individualism, but that ethos is hostile to the maintenance of Jewish identity. American individualism, for example, frowns on young people who accept their parents' values uncritically and favors the collapse of ethnic and religious boundaries. Similarly, religious syncretism, unbounded choices, and constant self-invention render the task of teaching basic Jewish techniques for group survival far more difficult.

Second, the Jewish community must reconsider its reflexive fear of any potential breach in the wall of separation between church and state. Communal leaders have justified such an approach by citing, often incorrectly, historical precedent and by arguing that only an impenetrable wall of separation will guarantee Jewish rights and interests. But here too, much depends on one's definition of Jewish interests. It is not "good for the Jews" to keep religion out of the public square when religion—including Judaism—has something important to teach about morality and civilized behavior. It is not a Jewish interest to deprive parochial schools of government funding or to fight voucher programs when Jewish day schools, a critical vehicle for strengthening Jewish life, are starved of funds.

Third, the Jewish community must reassess its historical fear of asserting Jewish perspectives and interests in an unembarrassed fashion. The old habit of homogenizing Jewish teachings to blend smoothly with prevailing mores needs to be reconsidered. Under the bland banner of *tikkun olam*, the repair of the world, the Jewish community has taken positions in favor of a host of policies that cannot be squared with a fair reading of traditional Jewish texts. A more rigorous reading of those texts would force the community to reexamine its policy positions on what truly constitutes social justice, philanthropy, proper family structures, and sexual morality.

Such a reassessment of fundamental issues will not reknit the Jewish community into a unified body. Strong differences in outlook undoubtedly will remain on how to read, let alone apply, specific texts. At the least, however, the shibboleths that have so long dominated communal discourse will come under scrutiny—and the underlying disagreements

will be exposed. At best, Jews may become far better informed about the particularity of their tradition and clarify for themselves where boundaries need to be established between Judaism and other religions, between Jews and Gentiles, between the Jewish community and other ethnic groups. The Jewish community then may also contribute a more nuanced set of positions on the great issues that divide all Americans today. In the process, it may even make new friends.

## NOTES

Sections of this essay have appeared in different forms in *Commentary* and the *American Jewish Yearbook*. My thanks to the editors of those publications for their help.

1. For a detailed discussion of the Yale Five and their case see Samuel G. Freedman, *Jew vs. Jew: The Struggle for the Soul of American Jewry* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), chap. 5.

2. The major exception to this generalization is the periodic eruption of communal debate over the policies of the state of Israel. Going back to the early 1970s, with the emergence of the dovish "Breira" organization, American Jews have fiercely contended with one another over what Israelis ought to be doing. One could speculate as to the psychological roots of this displacement: do American Jews need their Israeli brothers and sisters to play some kind of surrogate role, or are American Jews acting out their sibling rivalry? However we regard the decades-long engagement of American Jews in telling Israelis how to manage their Arab neighbors, it is nonetheless striking how little American Jewish groups debate each other over how their own members ought to live in the United States.

3. Most denominational organizations, in fact, take positions on a range of public-policy questions, but this is not their primary work.

4. Walter Jacob, ed., *American Reform Responsa: Collected Responsa of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1889-1983* (New York: CCAR, 1983), 550.

5. The Reconstructionist movement, with which approximately 1 percent of American Jews identify, adopted a version of this position already in 1968.

6. Arthur A. Goren, "A 'Golden Decade' for American Jews: 1945-1955," *Studies in Contemporary Jewry* 8 (1992): 4-8.

7. Commission on Law and Social Action of the American Jewish Congress to Jewish community leaders and workers, memorandum, n.d., Blaustein Library of the American Jewish Committee.

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