

A Response

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Egon Mayer's carefully constructed essay leaves little room for comment in the traditional sense. He manages not only to suggest future trends but to reflect upon his suggestions and to indicate some of the pitfalls of soothsaying. The essay is at once theme and response, elegantly knit together. I will try to be "bold" as urged by the editor and use Mayer's paper as a departure point for some additional reflections rather than response in the strict sense.

Mayer begins, quite properly, with demography. Who are American Jews today, and who will be American Jews tomorrow? These questions quite naturally make me think of my own sons, for they are in fact the future Jewish adults of America. Though it is rash for any parent to predict what her children will do, I can at least say with confidence that they have been given the tools—the family life, the knowledge, the connections with a larger Jewish community—to live as Jews. When I compare their Jewish upbringing to my own (I was raised as a Reconstructionist) the largest single difference I can see is the importance of Israel in their lives as compared to mine. For a child growing up in the 1950s, Israel was a dreamland, a place of wonderful fantasies. For my children, Israel is a very real country, a land of cities and farms, buses and movies, schools and stores. It is a country they know from their own experience and about which they have few fantasies. The matter-of-factness of Israel—or potential matter-of-factness—is an issue I will return to. But thinking of my children also prompted me to contemplate my friends' children—or rather the absence of my friends' children. Most of these children are growing up in environments substantially different from that of their parents—in small towns rather than in large cities; in day schools and private schools rather than in public schools; as non-Jews rather than as Jews; as upper-class rather than as lower-middle-class; as nuclear families rather than as extended families. The changing character of American Jewry is astounding, and the rate of intermarriage Mayer mentions is in many ways only the most visible sign of change.

Let me suggest two additional demographic features to consider in imagining future patterns of affiliation for American Jews. The first derives from migration patterns of Jews and the second stems directly from immigration. As Jews have grown to resemble other Americans socially and culturally, they have picked up the American penchant for moving. The United States is an

extraordinarily mobile society, with one out of five persons moving every five years. Jews now also move around the country in impressive numbers, and their migrations have encouraged the reemergence of a communal pattern of affiliation initially associated with immigrants to the United States. This type of affiliation draws upon the peer group and emphasizes common values and shared experiences. Unlike the intergenerational model of family-based affiliation, the peer group model unites Jews of roughly the same age and social situation. The growth of *havurot* reflects the popularity of peer group association, which offers an alternative to family and neighborhood. This pattern can accompany the inviolable Jewishness Mayer describes because it assumes the individualistic and portable character of Jewish identity. I think that the future of the American Jewish community is going to see the intergenerational and the peer-group patterns of associations coexisting in virtually every settlement large enough to have more than one Jewish institution. If I am correct, then Jewish organizations will have to learn how to speak simultaneously to these very different types of affiliation.

Mayer mentions the unpredictability of the future and cites his own family's situation 50 years ago. I would extend his observations by venturing to predict that immigration will reappear as a significant aspect of American Jewish life. I expect that the future will bring more Jewish immigrants to the U.S.—from the countries of Latin America, from South Africa, from the Soviet Union, from Israel—and that these immigrants will leave their mark upon American Jewry much as did the survivors, especially the Orthodox and Hasidic refugees, of the World War II era. When one combines the estimated 500,000 recent Jewish immigrants to the U.S. with the numbers of intermarried, the conclusion is that over a third of American Jewry will be new to the majority experiences of three and four generations of American Jews of Eastern European background. I was struck one November day a few years ago by a small aspect of this change as I left YIVO Institute in New York. I walked out of the building with one immigrant from Canada, one immigrant from Israel, one immigrant from Poland, and the son of survivors. Of the five of us, I was the only one planning to celebrate Thanksgiving. The rest looked at the day as at best a holiday on Thursday or at worst an anti-Judaism holiday. One of the few genuinely American holidays that can be celebrated by individuals of all faiths and backgrounds meant nothing to these American Jews. They are not alone. A quick, unscientific check among my son's Asian friends indicated that few, if any, celebrated Thanksgiving. The character of Americanization has clearly changed in the last 40 years, and we would do well to reexamine what it means to be a Jewish immigrant to the United States of the 1980s. The future of at least a tenth of our current population is intimately linked to that experience. Perhaps it is time to rethink the *Faith of America*—not just the concept but also the volume of ritual by that name devised by Kaplan, Kohn, and Williams in the late 1940s.

The consensus that American Jews once shared on religio-political issues is quietly crumbling. What is the prevailing point of view on public schools and their relationship to democratic and Jewish education? Do parents who send their children to parochial or private schools disavow the once nearly universal Jewish support for public education? What is the prevailing view on separation of church and state? Do the large public menorahs, often sponsored by the Lubavitch, indicate that a new Jewish consensus is emerging? These issues, like the more explosive question of patrilineal descent, require consideration for anyone who wishes to image the future. They are often the bread and butter of many of our national secular American Jewish organizations.

I can only second Mayer's observations about women. Enormous changes will spring from their Jewish enfranchisement. Not only will there be innovations in ritual, but the issues animating the leadership of American Jewry will change as that leadership includes more women. The different methods of rearing Jewish daughters as compared to sons will affect the public sphere. We know too little about how Jewish daughters are brought up to be able to predict what the impact will be. However, I suspect that less competition and more cooperation are encouraged among daughters than among sons. I would urge that cooperative activities come to greater prominence in Jewish communal endeavors—in synagogues and in secular organizations—and that the system of acquiring *koved* through competition be replaced by cooperation. To get some idea of how women might shape the future, we can look at how one of the most successful American Jewish women's organizations, Hadassah, is coping with the new Jewish women, whom they are recruiting successfully into membership. Though Hadassah does not carry much weight with either Jewish intellectuals or religious leaders, it does represent an authentic voice and organization of American Jewish women and as such deserves more thoughtful scrutiny than it has so far received.

I promised to return to the subject of Israel with a programmatic statement. Israel, as I have urged privately for some time, needs to become more of a lived reality for American Jews. The recognition of Israel's importance for American Jewish religious leaders, expressed in the year of residency and training required there, should be extended not only to secular leaders but to all American Jews. It would be valuable for all to live in Israel for a minimum of six months; an entire year would be even better.

A year in Israel should be a part of all American Jews' education, one of the things that is accepted as "normal," like going to college. It should not be tied, as the Israelis would prefer, to aliyah, but should be linked to a sense of informed Jewish citizenship. It is dangerous for Israel to exist only as fantasy, or not to exist at all, in the minds of American Jews. By contrast, it is vital for Israel to exist as matter-of-fact reality, to be assimilated into the invisible Jewishness Mayer describes, consciously chosen by each American Jew when

defining a Jewish identity. This means that we must develop new modes of relating to Israel and to Israelis.

Israel cannot just represent “homeland” for American Jews. It must be part of their world, a place peopled with friends and relatives, a society that is understood, a language spoken and a culture shared. Although this proposal may seem utopian, American Jews now have the resources to do it. Furthermore, the distance separating American Jews and Israelis is not so great that it cannot be overcome, especially if the value in overcoming the distance is made clear. Israel represents a genuinely Jewish civilization, and Jews—especially American Jews, who have become exceptionally adept at living in two civilizations—should welcome the opportunity to live in a Jewish civilization for at least some sustained period of their lives.

This brings me to my final comment: We must remain aware of what the future holds for America because our fate as American Jews is now intimately linked to the United States. These reflections on the future are taking place after several decades of what has been dubbed “the American century.” The position of the United States in the world and the situation of American society will impinge upon any future we can imagine. If the United States is becoming a more conservative society, if it is inclining toward a revival of fundamentalism, if it is a less racist and more permissive society, if it is becoming more egalitarian—then American Jews will be swept along in these changes. We must consider two questions: What is the American condition? And where is America going? Is the gloomy assessment of the condition of community in America made by Robert Bellah in his *Habits of the Heart* an accurate one? Is this a society where individualism rules, untempered by the constraints of conformity or the impulse to join others in volunteer activities? Jews rarely swim against the tide in America, though they may often be found riding the first waves into shore. The enormous impact of the women’s movement on American Jews should remind us of the significance of American civilization for our own American Jewish synthesis. And here, I confess, I have a great difficulty imagining where America will be 20 or 30 years hence, in part because the literature on American character is so contradictory that it is difficult to know where to place one’s bets. However, to expect continuities seems reasonable, and this means certainly the continued dominance of individualism in public and private life and probably the continuation of its corollaries of conformism and voluntarism.