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CHANGING CONCEPTIONS OF POLITICAL LIFE AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR AMERICAN JUDAISM

In the most celebrated of all his essays, Sir Isaiah Berlin credits Tolstoy with first formulating the accusation which Virginia Woolf later leveled against the “public prophets” of her generation. She accused them of being:

... blind materialists who did not begin to understand what it is that life truly consists of, who mistook its outer accidents, the unimportant aspects which lie outside the individual soul — the so-called social, economic, political realities — for that which alone is genuine, the individual experience, the specific relation of individuals to one another, the colours, smells, tastes, sounds, and movements, the jealousies, moments, the ordinary day-to-day succession of private data which constitute all there is — which are reality.¹

This attitude of Tolstoy or Virginia Woolf is shared today by great masses of people. Indeed, Peter Berger associates it with modern consciousness² and Richard Sennett believes that it is the heritage of the present century.³ Sennett marshalls his evidence with such erudition that I'm afraid to dispute his conclusions. I can only testify that in my own experience and my own observations of middle class New York Jews, the virtual withdrawal from public life and impersonal roles, the transmutation of political categories into psychological ones, the search for personal meanings in impersonal situations, and the escape to private realms in order to find principles of order

- 1 Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy's View of History* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1967), p. 20.
- 2 Peter Berger, Brigitte Berger and Hansfried Kellner, *The Homeless Mind* (New York: Random House, 1973).
- 3 Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974).

that appear to be absent in public life is a recent phenomenon characterizing a particular age and generational groups of Jews.

Perhaps my observation is only a quibble — a matter of relative emphasis. Sennett may be quite accurate about general tendencies over the last four generations and I may also be correct that this process has been vastly accelerated in the last ten years; Jews may have been hold-outs against the very tendencies which Sennett describes. My quibble, however, is of consequence to this essay because I want to argue that dramatic changes have occurred among Jews with enormous potential consequence for the structure of American Jewish life.

My own thoughts on the subject were crystalized by an assignment to study and report on the structure and programs of a national Jewish organization, hereafter referred to as NJO. NJO's extended governing body consists of several hundred members. My survey of that body indicated that it is comprised overwhelmingly of second generation American Jews (children of immigrants) in their fifties, sixties and seventies with a voracious interest in politics — foreign and domestic. The policies this body adopts are militantly liberal; left-of-center on virtually every issue except strong support for Israel. But despite the fact that this group believes itself to be in accord with almost all those political positions associated with the New Left and/or the counter-culture of the late 1960's and 1970's, and despite serious efforts to recruit representatives of these groups into their ranks, NJO has been singularly unsuccessful. Their efforts to reach out to young Jews whom they feel share their political orientations have been ignored. Significantly, however, the artistic programs which they sponsor, their efforts to encourage creative Jewish artistic expression in a variety of media has been warmly received.

My own explanation is that NJO leaders and young American Jews, even those who are ostensibly liberal and Jewishly committed, have radically different perceptions of reality that prevent any extended cooperation. By perceptions of reality I refer to notions about what is really important; about what constitutes, in an ultimate sense, the basis of existence. These differences of perception, I believe, characterize the two major age and generational groupings which comprise American Jewry.

According to the National Jewish Population Study data of 1970, 58 per cent of American Jews are second generation Americans and 19 percent are third generation or more. Among heads of households under 30, a majority are third generation. Among heads of household age 30 to 70, the majority are second generation and most of the remainder are first generation. Clearly,

age and generation are associated though both, I believe, are of independent importance.

Second generation American Jews — urban, upwardly mobile, middle class, well educated, thoroughly secular in their orientations (even if they belong to a synagogue), particularly those aged fifty or above — have a particular conception of reality and this conception has a strong political component. They view the real world as having existence and meaning outside of and independent of themselves, but amenable to human control. Political issues are expressed in choices and options through which, they believe, man controls his world. Their vision of the world — peace, individual freedom and social justice — is attainable through the application of intelligence, effort and appropriate values. Many of them believe that Jews are uniquely suited to realizing the vision because they possess a disproportionate amount of education, a willingness to work and a tradition which emphasizes values of peace, freedom and social justice. Indeed, it is in this sense, and probably this sense alone that the group of Jews whom I am describing believe they are indeed a “chosen people.”

These assumptions coincide with the life experience of first and second generation American Jews and of conceptions within the Jewish religious tradition to which both these generations, the first indirectly and the second directly, are heir. First and second generation American Jews worked hard at their employment. Although only the second generation achieved striking economic success their immigrant parents experienced this success vicariously and, in some respects, with no less gratification. Success confirmed their conceptions of the world as an arena in which with enough imagination, intelligence, skill, some luck, but above all hard work, the individual would enjoy financial rewards. Indeed, the dominant myth of American Jewish life, the paradigm for America and the Jews’ relationship to America is the story of the Jewish experience in the early decades of the century on New York’s lower east side. The East Side myth, like all social myths, functions to transmit social values. Like all successful myths it is subject to a variety of interpretations and encapsulates different levels of meaning. But surely the primary message of the East Side myth is that when Jews came to the U.S. they lived under conditions of terrible hardship but through sustained effort they improved their condition. I am not at all concerned with the truth content of the myth though I suspect it may be more accurate than most social myths. My point is that one reason the East Side myth continues to be cherished is because it validates what Jews believe to be true about the American environment and their relationship to that environment.

First and second generation American Jews also share similar experiences about the objective existence of political life and its amenability to change. Indeed, the East Side myth also has a strong political component which includes Jewish trade union activity, the role of Jewish socialism, and political pressures for public housing, minimum wages, safer working conditions, etc. The East Side myth really culminates with FDR and the New Deal — not only is Jewish political effort rewarded, but Jews are among the executors of the great social welfare programs which benefit all Americans.

First and second generation American Jews are self-conscious about their achievements on behalf of a welfare oriented society, of their political success in support of anti-discriminatory legislation from which Jews as well as Blacks benefited, and of their political achievements on behalf of Israel. Their perceptions of their own experience reinforces a sense that there is a dimension to public life which exists independently of their inner life, which is of importance to themselves and to others and is amenable to reform and improvement. This conception of reality is entirely consistent with the Jewish historical experience as it was filtered through the perceptions of the major line of rabbinical authorities and Jewish thinkers. Certainly, the Jews of Eastern Europe from whom the bulk of American Jews are descended, sharply distinguished the external non-Jewish secular world from the inner, sacred Jewish world. But the secular world was of importance. Expressive needs of Jews could only be met in their inner world and in their intimate relationships which were confined to other Jews. But forces within the wider Gentile environment were critical in fulfilling Jewish instrumental needs — needs which the Jewish religious tradition recognized as legitimate and conceived of in theological and legalistic categories which gave them the same reality as the inner Jewish world. It was true that the public non-Jewish environment was an arena where one restrained one's expressive self and related as far as one possibly could in terms of emotionally neutral, rational, and universal categories. Confusion of the particular (the inner Jewish self) with the universal could be terribly dangerous for Jews. Jews appealed to Gentiles in terms of law, of contract, of universally binding ethical categories, and all too often in terms of the services they could perform but not in terms of their spiritual self, their personal needs, their conceptions of the sacred, or their right to self-fulfillment. But this hardly made the Gentile world any less real or any less important. It did suggest a dichotomy of public and private, each with its own standards of conduct and each with its own role structures.

The set of assumptions about reality which characterize third generation

American Jews in their twenties, thirties and perhaps into their forties is quite different. These Jews live in an environment which might best be labeled a "therapy culture." Not every Jew under thirty-five has been in therapy, but it is unlikely that s/he does not have a peer who has been in therapy and unlikely that s/he has been unaffected by the cultural images and reality perceptions which are part of the therapy culture. Jews in their fifties and older have more firmly fixed notions of reality and are less likely to have been influenced by the new culture. The economic and political struggles of first and second generation American Jews compared to the relative ease with which the third generation of American Jews acquired their education, their position, and their wealth, cannot help but dictate different images and perceptions of the world.

Reality, to young, third generation American Jews is a projection of self. The really real and true is what they sense and feel. That which might exist independently of oneself is trivial and irrelevant. The measure of reality is how they feel, and their obligation is to guard their sense of self and "work out" the guilt which previous generations instilled in them. A sense of self is also formulated and may well be measured in part by interrelationships. But, what counts are the *personal* interrelationships with others.

Political issues are, in a sense, phony issues. They suggest an objectified reality that exists independently of a person, yet subject, in some sense to personal control. This is in part untrue — things outside one are not subject to one's control — and in another sense trivial, because political issues don't relate to concern with self. This doesn't mean that one doesn't participate in Jewish events or is not involved in Jewish life. Indeed, participation in events or happenings like a seder, or Soviet Solidarity Day, even regular prayer, can be a moving and meaningful experience. It can "talk to me" and my needs, "turn me on", help me "get it all together," and "I can be comfortable with it" since it is a part of my "lifestyle." It can "put me in touch with myself." This is one reason, I believe, for the explosive popularity and success of Jewish art and culture of all kinds in the last decade.

But the political world and political issues are not interesting or relevant. That is, there is a sense that sustained efforts in political participation are pointless because they involve one in relationships with things, not people. Indeed, for that reason, formal organizations are particularly suspect because they conceal the personal behind the seemingly objective impersonal institution. To the extent that one relates to an objectified world he is overwhelmed by its complexity. It is not amenable to human control, not subject to human will. It is not political liberalism that seems trivial to large numbers of third generation and/or younger American Jews, and I would add to older Jews

who have been influenced by the same culture, but rather, the absorption in political issues of any type.

Paradoxically, hints of these orientations are already present among the student radicals of the sixties — groups of young people, predominantly third generation products of middle and upper middle class urban Jewish families who were ostensibly far more politicized than the preceding generation of college students. They were indeed, more politically concerned, aware and active than even the college leaders of the fifties. But they shared other characteristics of their age and generational peers which found wider expression in the seventies. Richard Flacks, for example, noted their low concern with:

... the importance of strictly controlling personal impulses — opposition to impulsive or spontaneous behavior — value on keeping tight control over emotions — adherence to conventional authority ... value on diligence, entrepreneurship, task orientation, ambition.⁴

Elsewhere I have noted that this was consistent with the transformation of third generation Jewish orientations toward authority and duty.⁵ Work as a means to sanctity was transformed into work as a means to pleasure, and self-gratification became a legitimate pursuit for the acculturated Jew. The failure to distinguish between a Jewish and non-Jewish world as the proper forum for different types of activity was related to an even grosser distinction that third generation Jews in general, and the student activist leaders of the sixties in particular, failed to make — the distinction between family and nonfamily.

The sense of the permissive, nourishing, all-giving family was easily transferred to the elementary and high schools in the upper-middle class, heavily Jewish suburbs which produced so many of the kinds of Jews whom we are discussing. And this transference continued at the University. In the students' minds, they had explained to the family-university or to the father-president that what the school was doing was wrong. They were convinced that limitations on free speech, not giving students a greater voice in policy-making, not recruiting more Blacks, not opposing the war in Vietnam, were immoral. For they were immoral by commonly accepted urban, intellectual, middle class

4 Richard Flacks, "The Liberated Generation: An Exploration of the Roots of Student Protest," *The Journal of Social Issues*, 23 (July 1967), p. 70.

5 Charles S. Liebman, *The Ambivalent American Jew: Politics, Religion and Family In American Jewish Life* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1973), pp. 160-173.

(Jewish) standards of the sixties. When the family-university refused to change its policies, the students felt a moral obligation to escalate the struggle.

But, if I am correct, then the Jewish student radicals never believed they were really risking very much in their subsequent demonstrations and sit-ins. The stakes would have been no higher than those involved in a confrontation with one's parents. In a survey of the most activist members of the Free Speech movement at Berkeley, at a time when students prevented the police from making an arrest, Glen Lyonns found that only seven percent of the respondents thought they would be expelled for their activity. Twenty-two percent thought there was a fair chance.⁶ This same attitude explains the students' shock at the behavior of the police at Columbia University. True the police shoved, clubbed, kicked and even beat some students, their faculty supporters and a number of bystanders. But why did this surprise the students given their rhetoric of radicalism and their accusations against the brutality of the Establishment? The very real shock which so many students experienced at the way they were treated suggests that their condemnation of the university as an instrument of a corrupt Establishment was indeed largely rhetoric. The students were shocked when Columbia called the police because middle-class families don't appeal to outside agencies to solve domestic problems. Black demonstrators, who segregated themselves from the whites, anticipated police violence and were careful to avoid provoking them. The predominantly Jewish whites, however, were shocked when the police handled them impersonally (not at all the way bright middle-class young men and women should be handled) because their own relationship to the total society, their "real" identity was challenged.

The consequences of the student activism of a decade ago was not a long-term political radicalization of the students. With the perspective of half a decade and more it is safe to say that they retreated from further large scale political efforts. Some have credited this to their success in their single most important effort — opposition to American intervention in Vietnam. It seems to me that this is only part of the truth. Rather, it was recognition of the fact that neither American withdrawal or such other political victories as open enrollment, or greater privileges for Blacks and other minorities really "turned the world around." None of these political successes made much of a difference to the spokesmen of the counter-culture who now discovered that political achievements were devoid of real significance and politics, therefore, an inappropriate realm for behavior.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 170 for the relevant citations.

The activists, not to mention their mass of sympathisers, retreated from political activity because their basic orientations, their basic conceptions of reality, their basic notions of what is really important, were related to the inner person, human relationships, self awareness. Politics became irrelevant except to those among them who interpreted public personalities and political issues in symbols which referred to their own inner world of identity, personality, and personal meaning. This does not preclude occasional forays into the political arena on specific issues but it does suggest a political style on the one hand, and a political vision, or lack thereof, on the other. It is an orientation which encourages single issue politics since there is no larger conception of the public order which is envisioned. Moreover, given general political indifference, there is no fear about the consequences and implications which activity in one sphere or on one issue will have on the content and structure of the political system in general.

The kind of political candidate who responds to this type of political orientation, the kind of expectations and demands it evokes from the political system have been well described by Sennett. I would like to turn to its implications for American Jewish life.

One might argue that it will have no direct effect except to alienate younger Jews from Judaism. The beneficiary institutions are those naturally in tune with modern consciousness. Eastern rather than Western religion,⁷ cults and sects rather than religion which is rooted in and which affirms the traditional culture of the society,⁸ will attract the kind of person (and hence the kind of Jew) whom I have described. But in the last analysis Jewish life is shaped by those who are committed to its continuity; it responds only indirectly to those who are indifferent to its survival. Yet modern consciousness has already affected committed Jewry. Hence my question: What implication does this have for committed Jewry and Jewish life which is fashioned by that Jewry?

There is no question that the *havurah* movement,⁹ the popularity of *The Jewish Catalogue*, the increased interest in Jewish culture in recent years, the sudden popularity of Jewish art, the fascination with *Hassidism*, the increased

7 Peter Berger, *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press, 1979).

8 Bryan Wilson, *Contemporary Transformations of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976).

9 On the *havurah* movement see Bernard Reisman, "The Havurah: An Evaluative Assessment," *Analysis*, 63 (January 1978); and on synagogue based *havurot* in particular, *The Chavurah: A Contemporary Jewish Experience* (New York: The Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1977).

interest in adult Jewish education, (particularly courses in Jewish mysticism), reflect the changing orientations I have described. It has led synagogues to greater experimentation but it has also surprised the Orthodox by the willingness of young people who came from Jewish assimilated homes to find meaning in Jewish dietary restriction and laws of family purity which their second generation parents found bizarre. This latter phenomenon should not surprise us. Concentration upon self, particularly on the inner person is reflected in the construction of symbolic boundaries distinguishing the inner and the outer. This leads, in turn, to a concern with problems of purity and contamination.¹⁰

It is not inconceivable that the orientations we have described will even lead to a revival of the synagogue itself. Such an event might require some restructuring, some redirection of rabbinic role, some innovative techniques. But American synagogues and rabbis have been remarkably adaptive in the past and there is no theoretical reason to preclude their accommodating themselves to these newer orientations.

Nevertheless, I think these orientations ought to trouble anyone who is concerned about collective Jewish life — anyone whose image of Judaism contains a conception of a Jewish policy, anyone concerned about the future of Israel-Diaspora relations or for that matter anyone who feels that unless American Jews perceive of themselves as a political entity on the American scene the interests of other Jewish communities and their own immediate interests will suffer.

Of course, it may be pleaded, all I am affirming is that the new orientation which denies the reality of an objectified political world is wrong; or that effective political action requires recognition of public life independently of the personal meaning which one can or cannot find in such action. If I am right then forces exist outside ourselves which react upon us quite independently of our own feeling, spirit or intent and it is disastrous to ignore them. This is particularly so if there are groups functioning within the political system with interests that are antagonistic to those of the Jews and groups whose intentions toward the Jews are malevolent.

However, I also believe that the present orientation among American Jews raises problems of Jewish identity and has implications for Jewish survival from an internal point of view. My argument is that Jewish public life, regardless of how poorly and ineffectively it may operate, and regardless of

10 The point is developed by Mary Douglas in a number of her works. See especially: *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), and *Natural Symbols* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970).

whether it confronts "real" problems, is also an instrument for strengthening Jewish identity. Hence, I am not only concerned about the ability of the Jewish world to accommodate itself to new orientations, but also about the possibility of its over-accommodating and overadapting itself.

There are two analytically distinguishable models of Jewish identity. First is what I would call the cultural-religious-spiritual model, which takes the individual as its starting point. Judaism, in this model, is a meaning system. It provides the adherent with an orientation to what life is about, to questions of ultimate concern. It doesn't always provide answers to the most important personal questions, but it certainly speaks to them. A second model for the expression of Jewish identity and its reflection in Jewish behavior might be called a political-secular model. This model takes the Jewish people as its starting point and concerns itself with its collective existence. It seeks to create public instrumentalities and undertakes the kind of activity that is preeminently secular to insure the physical welfare of the Jewish people.

I don't mean to exaggerate the differences between these two orientations. They overlap in the lives of many Jews, and they reinforce one another. There has to be a spiritual dimension to political involvement in Jewish life (at least in the United States), otherwise there is little reason to become involved. Nor can there be any religious-cultural activity in the absence of an institutional base for such activity. Given government's increased role in domestic affairs, there must exist some kind of Jewish political organization to protect the Jewish interest. Nevertheless, I believe that Jews differ in their primary orientation to Jewish life, and the two models explain the initial involvement of different groups.

In the final analysis, it would be unfortunate if the organizationally-oriented Jews found no effective way of expressing their Jewish interests because Jewish organizations had turned their exclusive attention to meeting the spiritual and inner needs of American Jews.