

Judaism Resurgent? American Jews and the Evolving Expression of Jewish Values and Jewish Identity in Modern American Life

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In 1943, at the height of the Holocaust and at a moment of intense agitation for the creation of a Jewish state, Joseph Proskauer, then president of the American Jewish Committee, authored an AJC-sponsored “Statement of Views.” Addressed to world leaders who would eventually frame the terms of an armistice and dictate postwar conditions of peace, the document stated: “We urge upon the United Nations and those who shall frame the terms of the peace the relief from the havoc and ruin inflicted by Axis barbarism on *millions of unoffending human beings*, especially Jews.” In commenting upon this statement, historian Marc Dollinger has observed that “the AJC’s decision to focus on ‘human beings’ first and list ‘Jews’ second reflected Proskauer’s universalist orientation. American Jews did possess the right to protect their co-religionists, but that campaign must focus on human rights, not Jewish particularism.”¹ Or, to phrase it in other terms, the American context did not compel Proskauer to eschew particularism completely. However, it could only be championed comfortably when subsumed within a more universalistic framework and when Jewish concerns could be presented as being completely compatible with the larger humanistic values and affirmations of the broader American culture.

This episode is hardly a singular one, and both the primacy Proskauer accorded universalism and the trajectory that marked his statement were hardly idiosyncratic to this particular Jewish leader. Instead, they reflect an ordering of values as well as a sense of Jewish identity that have informed most American Jews throughout U.S. history. Indeed, Irving Howe, one of America’s foremost literary critics and Jewish intellectuals, reports a comparable episode that reflects the same American Jewish hierarchy of values in his autobiography, *A Margin of Hope*. In it, he recounts a heated public debate he had during the early 1960s with Oscar Handlin, the Brooklyn-born, Harvard-based Jewish historian of the American immigrant experience. At issue was the moral propriety of the Israeli kidnapping of Adolf Eichmann from Argentina to stand trial in Jerusalem. The crimes Eichmann had committed against the Jewish people during the Second World War were by any reckoning immense. According to Howe, however, Handlin unflinchingly condemned the kidnapping as “a violation of

international law.” Howe, in contrast, defended it “as a necessary moral act by victims of the Holocaust.” This debate, held before a predominantly Jewish audience at Brandeis University, produced conflicting emotions among the students that “it would still be hard to sort out—bruising conflicts between their liberalism and their Jewishness, between what they took to be principle and had to recognize as feeling.”²

At the conclusion of his narrative, Howe attempts to account for why this debate aroused such “bruising conflicts.” In his view, he and the students, no less than Handlin, perceived a tension between their universalist heritage of American “liberalism” and the particularistic emotions “their Jewishness” elicited. They, no less than Handlin, seemed to believe that the broad-based ethics of the former tradition demanded that they condemn the kidnapping as “illegal” and “morally unworthy.” Only their own “narrow” Jewish patrimony caused them to view the act as a “necessary” deed. The ambivalence Howe expresses in recalling this event stems from his perception that “principle” alone would surely have compelled them to censure the kidnapping. The fact that Eichmann was brought to trial through such “illegal” means could only be warranted, it seems, through the “particularistic, emotive” demands that “Jewishness” imposed.

The incidents recounted here indicate that for generations of Jews there was surely some degree of discomfort, a perceived incongruity, between “Americanism” and its universal all-embracing values and larger identity, on the one hand, and “Jewishness” and its narrow values and particularistic identity, on the other. Ethnic affirmation was seen as suspect, even base, though its claims were so great that Howe and others could not avoid acting on them.

How different the year 2000 seems—at least from one perspective. In the time that has passed since the Proskauer and Howe episodes, Jews have gained an access to public positions of power and a proud visibility in American life that was surely unimaginable decades earlier. This novel turn in the public posture of Jews and Judaism can be seen most dramatically in the nomination and campaign of Senator Joseph Lieberman for the office of U.S. Vice President. Although the role of Jews in American public life had increased dramatically since President Woodrow Wilson first appointed Louis D. Brandeis to the Supreme Court in 1916, the nomination of a Jew as a major party candidate for such high elective office remained unprecedented. Lieberman’s nomination represented an exponential jump toward a maximal acceptance of Jews and a widespread visibility of Jewish values and practices in both the public and private spheres of American society.

Most striking was the fact that Lieberman is a traditional Jew whose public observance of Jewish ritual, as well as his public expressions of piety, are considered a significant virtue by a broad array of Americans. His observance of particularistic Jewish laws—for instance, those dealing with kashruth and the Sabbath—exposed Jewish ritual to an audience of millions of Americans. Furthermore, Lieberman did not hesitate to publicly proclaim his devotion to Judaism. As the *New York Times* put it, “Lieberman . . . refers at every campaign stop to his Jewish faith,” and he demanded “a role for religion in politics and public discourse.”³

Many people were not sanguine about this development. Again in the words of the *New York Times*: “In a remarkable campaign development, Mr. Lieberman is being criticized by some Jewish leaders . . . fearful that his declarations of faith as a devout

Jew, and his calls for more religion in public life, are an affront to Americans who are less religious or whose faith comes from a different tradition.”⁴ Indeed, the Anti-Defamation League felt compelled to condemn “Lieberman’s regular infusions of biblical language and allusions to a heavenly creator” as “‘inappropriate and even unsettling.’” As both the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* observed, such criticism of Lieberman on the part of the ADL stood as one of the greatest “oddities” of recent years, as it “pitted the nation’s oldest battler against anti-Semitism against the first Jew named to a major party presidential ticket.”⁵

In contrast, many others—particularly non-Jews—were delighted with Lieberman’s injection of religion into the public arena. Richard John Neuhaus, a Catholic priest and the editor of the conservative religious journal *First Things*, argued that “there is nothing wrong with making policy proposals in frankly moral terms. . . . The only thing strange about what Senator Lieberman is saying is that people think it is strange.”⁶ According to Richard Land, president of the Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, “just as it took Nixon to go to China, maybe it will require an Orthodox Jew to restore to its rightful place the role of religion in this society.”⁷ The influential Catholic theologian and social commentator Michael Novak echoed these sentiments in a remarkable op-ed piece that was published in the *New York Times*. In Novak’s words: “I love what Senator Lieberman, an Orthodox Jew, is doing to wake this nation up to its deepest identity, rooted in Jewishness.”⁸

Such fragments of the 20th-century American Jewish experience are telling, for they hold up a mirror to the diverse and evolving ways in which Jewish values and identity have been expressed in the United States. They reveal that the public expression of American Jewish identity and American Jewish cultural and religious values must be understood against a larger backdrop of general American social, cultural, and political developments. Indeed, these developments have had far-reaching consequences for the ways in which Jews and Gentiles alike have perceived Jewish identity. By rehearsing and analyzing these changes within American life during the course of the 1900s, this essay will highlight those elements of historical continuity and discontinuity that have marked (and continue to mark) the expression of Jewish values and identity. In this way, the nature and meaning of what has widely been hailed as the resurgence of Jewish values and identity in both the public and private spheres of American life at the end of the 20th century can be more properly assessed.⁹

The political parameters of the modern West were established upon the basis of individual, not group, rights. In historical terms, dissolution of the medieval world brought with it the demise of corporatism. Civil rights were granted to individual persons within the context of a modern nation-state rather than to corporate semi-autonomous ethnic bodies residing within the nation. In an oft-quoted statement, Clermont-Tonnerre, a leader of the French Revolution, articulated this philosophy vis-à-vis the Jews when he proclaimed that “the Jews should be denied everything as a nation, but granted everything as individuals.”¹⁰

In Europe, vestiges of a medieval feudal political order meant that the demise of the Jewish corporate order was not absolute, even with the advent of the 19th century. As Jacob Katz pointed out in numerous writings, the European Jewish community, though severely reduced in scope and coercive political powers, legally retained some

corporate prerogatives and features. However, the United States, conceived as a wholly modern nation free of the medieval past, was different. Jewish communities in America, “where no external forces impinged,” were, in contrast to European communities of the 1800s, *completely voluntary associations*, where individual Jews were free “to organize around synagogues with different styles and prayer services [or not], according to their individual choice.”¹¹ America applied the theory of Clermont-Tonnerre and others in an unqualified way: bestowing full rights on Jews as individuals, it was unwilling to accept the legitimacy of a corporate Jewish community.¹²

On a certain level, this created a dilemma for Jews, something akin to a secular version of the premodern Christian demand for conversion. The message was that individuals could fully participate in the larger life of the American polity only if they were willing to divest themselves of particular ethnic traits and group loyalties. Adherence to “universalism”—in effect, Protestant mores and manners—was the price demanded for admission to full participation in American society.

The desire to take on the cultural characteristics and, in large measure, the values of the dominant host society has been typical of Jews of all western nations since the onset of emancipation. In Germany, France, and England this was reflected not only through Jewish participation in the cultural, political, and economic life of host cultures, but also in the way that Jews came to view their religion, and, in turn, themselves. Anxious to divest themselves of ethnic particularism, the Jews of Western Europe consciously came to regard Judaism almost exclusively as a religion and did not see themselves as belonging to a unique ethnic group, a “Jewish nation.” To have done so would have betrayed the very notions of western universalism and liberalism that made the emancipation of the Jews possible in the first place. Thus, the German Jews who immigrated to the United States prior to 1881 brought their views of a non-particularistic, universal, and rational religion to a country that, it was hoped, was prepared to advance them into positions of prestige and status. Because of both their background and the promise of future advancement within American society, they were predisposed to eschew Jewish particularistic values that emphasized group distinctiveness. Hence their creation of American Reform Judaism in the “classical” mold that rejected all stress on particularistic Jewish loyalties and practices. Finding expression in documents such as the Pittsburgh Platform of 1885, American Reform purged “Oriental” patterns of worship from the synagogue, devised a liturgy almost wholly universalistic in orientation, abandoned dietary laws, and rapidly conformed to the cultural patterns and mores of the United States.

With the onset of Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a different type of Jew came to U.S. shores. The experience of East European Jews had been radically different from that which had informed their German Jewish predecessors, and during the first part of the 20th century, they both avoided and were purposefully excluded from the Reform community. Notwithstanding, it is a romantic misconception to claim that East European Jews and their children did not possess the same desire for acculturation that had characterized the German Jews. Indeed, the desire to participate in the life of the larger society has been the most characteristic element of the Jewish response to the American nation.

Commentators such as Arthur Hertzberg and Charles Liebman have explained the East European immigrants’ proclivity to acculturize on the basis of their intellectual

and cultural characteristics. They have pointed out that these Jews were not carriers of elite Jewish religious values as articulated by the scholarly rabbinic leaders of Eastern Europe. Rather, they were drawn to America by its promise of a brighter future; by and large, they lacked a commitment to those Jewish religious values that could hinder their acculturation. Thus, most of them quickly abandoned observance of the Sabbath and the dietary laws, and their initial failure to construct ritual baths or Jewish day schools indicates their lack of attachment both to laws of family purity and to traditional Jewish learning.¹³ First-generation American Jews and, even more, their children, were largely lacking in those inhibitions that might prevent their full involvement in American life. Public expressions of Jewish values and identity that would have reduced their prospects for full participation were discouraged.

To be sure, this orientation exacted certain costs. After all, such purging of values and identity can be purchased only at the price of a high degree of psychological ambivalence. The author Israel Zangwill mirrored this ambivalence in his play of 1908, *The Melting Pot*. Produced on Broadway, this play gave general currency to a type of thinking that dominated both America's self-perception and ethnic minority groups' views of the United States for the next 60 years.

The hero of the play, David Quixano, is a Jewish violinist whose parents have died in a Russian pogrom. He is engaged in writing a great symphony celebrating America when, at a settlement house, he meets and falls in love with Vera—the daughter of a Russian army officer. They determine to marry, but their love is almost ended when David discovers that Vera's father was the murderer of his parents. David's symphony is a great success, however, and its triumph revives his faith in the "melting pot." Determined to cast aside the blood feuds of the past, David rejects his particularistic Jewish heritage and affirms his love for Vera. In the climactic speech of the play, David shouts, "God is making the American . . . he will be the fusion of all races, the coming Superman." Thus, the rapturous vision of the play is that of the universalist who rejects selfish and confining particularity.

The Melting Pot advances a negative view of ethnicity. "Ethnic" implies that there is something wrong with the individual or group that is so defined: the religion, character, or speech pattern is in some way aesthetically amiss, and such characteristics should certainly not be displayed publicly. Most significantly, "ethnicity," by its failure to conform to universal standards of brother- and sisterhood, is also morally wanting. While Zangwill undoubtedly felt some disquietude as an advocate of the "melting pot," there is little doubt that he favored the expansiveness of David Quixano's universalism over the narrowness of particularistic loyalties.

The Melting Pot does more than reflect the conflicts the Jews of those decades experienced in adapting to the demands of a non-Jewish world. It also bespeaks the intense desire those Jews had to acculturate, to revel in the freedom the United States promised. The American Jews of these years did so not only by eagerly accepting all the benefits that the American nation was prepared to confer upon them. They also accepted the definition of Judaism as exclusively a religion,¹⁴ and they established systems of religious thought and practice—Reform and Conservative Judaism—that applauded the virtues of democracy and the American way of life. Indeed, an offshoot of Conservative Judaism, Reconstructionism, accorded the status of *sancta* to such

American civic festivals as Thanksgiving, Labor Day, and the Fourth of July. Even when a highly particularistic vision of cultural Judaism such as Zionism was affirmed, it was articulated so that Justice Brandeis—as well as many rabbis—could confidently proclaim that Zionism and the values of American democracy were one and the same.¹⁵ Finally, committed as well as “deracinated Jews” largely justified and celebrated Jewish particularity by their authorship of apologetic works “proving” Judaism’s decisive impact upon this or that value or element of American history and civilization. Such claims to Jewish influence upon the values of the United States, as well as the notion of compatibility between Jewish and American values, undoubtedly contain more than a kernel of truth; vestiges of these attitudes inform many American Jews to this day.

Yet even as they rejoiced in this model of adaptation and integration, Jews during these years still socialized almost exclusively among themselves. This outcome was not only the consequence of internal Jewish attitudes. External conditions also reinforced a collective distance that kept Jews at a social remove from non-Jews. Simply put, one sociological variable required for large-scale exogamy on the part of any minority group—widespread acceptance of group members as desirable or acceptable marriage partners—was missing. This in turn gave rise to a Jewish social solidarity that promoted group endogamy. In short, prior to the 1960s, intermarriage between Jews and Gentiles was virtually nonexistent. Although America was prepared to advance a model of the melting pot (at least for white ethnics), social reality did not always conform to the vision this model advanced. Hence, a certain sense of unease, though seldom overtly acknowledged, characterized American Jewry during this era. Of course, this is hardly surprising for a predominantly first- and second-generation immigrant community struggling to adapt to the demands and mores of the new country.¹⁶ Less than completely secure, American Jewry was not yet prepared to advocate (nor was U.S. society prepared to allow) a pluralistic American cultural model that would have permitted a greater display of public ethnicity of any sort, including Jewish ethnicity.

To the extent that they were observed at all, particularistic Jewish values and rituals were thus confined to the private sphere. Indeed, no less a personage than Rabbi Irving (Yitz) Greenberg gives voice to this reality in his account of the Jewish “self-denial and anonymity” of those years. In an interview, Greenberg reports that when he entered Harvard University in the 1950s to study for his doctorate in American history, “everything Jewish was marginal. . . . When I arrived no one told me, but I just knew you could not wear a *kippah*.” While this “bothered me a lot because I was Orthodox,” social mores simply did not permit Greenberg to cover his head either in class or at student receptions. In a poignant vein, Greenberg recalls that at such receptions he would “hold a drink in my hand all the time because I would not drink it without covering my head and making a *bracha*.¹⁷ Such confinement of ethnic expression in general and Jewish ethnicity in particular, as mentioned earlier, hardly distinguishes the American Jewish community of this period. By constricting Jewish identity and praxis to the private realm, American Jews were displaying a compartmentalization between public behaviors and private manners that also marked members of other racial and cultural minorities who were desirous of acceptance into

mainstream American life—indeed, it may be said that the public/private bifurcation was a Protestant American mode that became generalized throughout American society.

The 1960s and 1970s changed all this, initiating a trajectory in American Jewish public expression and private commitment that remains in effect until this day. In his influential book *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics* (1972), Michael Novak coined the phrase “the new ethnicity” to describe what he saw as a then-emerging trend in American society. According to Novak, the prevailing cultural image of the ideal American, as established by members of the WASP, Ivy League-educated upper class of U.S. society, had been substantially discredited among many young Americans as a result of the Vietnam War, urban decay, racial frictions, educational decline, and the gross dishonesty of many public officials.¹⁸ As Novak, writing again on the topic in 1974, put it: “The older image of the truly cultured American is no longer compelling. Many, therefore, are thrown back on their own resources.”¹⁹ The times, it seemed, promoted a new and more pluralistic model that would ultimately have a profound impact on how Jews would understand and express their heritage in public as well as in private.

An explanation for how and why this transformation took place within precincts of the American Jewish community at this time can be found in *The Mask Jews Wear* (1973), authored by Eugene B. Borowitz, the premier liberal American Jewish theologian. Borowitz, like Novak, noted that significant numbers of Jews (as with members of other ethnic groups) were no longer infatuated with the model of the “melting pot.” Rather, they prized what he described as a “creative alienation.” In his words:

Today mankind needs people who are creatively alienated. To be satisfied in our situation is either to have bad values or to understand grossly what man can do. . . . Creative alienation implies sufficient withdrawal from our society to judge it critically, but also the will and flexibility to keep finding and trying ways of correcting it. I think Jewishness offers a unique means of gaining and maintaining such creative alienation. This was not its primary role in the lives of our parents and grandparents.²⁰

In declaring such a role for Judaism in contemporary America, Borowitz bespoke an ongoing effort involving many Jews throughout the final decades of the 20th century. As Nathan Glazer observed, such Jews sought to anchor their quest for genuine community and enduring values in a recovery of the resources Judaism was capable of providing, without abandoning their commitment to liberal values.²¹

Of course, this changed posture in American Jewish public and private ethnic expression did not derive solely from trends in the larger American society. Internal rhythms of Jewish history also played a role. The Six-Day War of 1967 prompted American Jews (and Jews worldwide) to celebrate their own distinctiveness. Fearing for the very existence of the Jewish state at the outset of the conflict, they responded to the stunning Israeli victory with both relief and unprecedented pride. As Charles Silberman noted, “the Six-Day War was a watershed between two eras—one in which American Jews had tried to persuade themselves, as well as gentiles, that they were just like everybody else, only more so, and a period in which they acknowledged, even celebrated their distinctiveness.”²²

The nature of the “watershed” of which Silberman spoke and the pride in “dis-

tinctiveness” he described can also be seen in an autobiographical vignette provided by Harvard Law School professor Alan Dershowitz in *Chutzpah* (1989). In this book, Dershowitz contrasts a number of his own sensibilities regarding matters of Jewish American identity and values with those of the renowned U.S. Supreme Court Justice, Felix Frankfurter.²³ In one telling reminiscence, Dershowitz recalls that on his first day as a law student at Yale, “I read a Supreme Court decision [*West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette* (1944)] involving a compulsory flag salute during World War II, to which some Jehovah’s witnesses objected on religious grounds. The majority agreed with the religious objectors, but Justice Felix Frankfurter dissented . . . on the ground that patriotism during wartime is more important than religious liberty.”²⁴

Indeed, Frankfurter wrote a dissent in this case that was described by James O. Freedman—the first Jewish president of Dartmouth College—as “one of the most confessional and emotional of Supreme Court opinions.” Frankfurter wrote:

One who belongs to the most vilified and persecuted minority in history is not likely to be insensible to the freedoms guaranteed by our Constitution. Were my purely personal attitude relevant I should wholeheartedly associate myself with the general libertarian views in the Court’s opinion . . . But as judges we are neither Jew nor gentile, neither Catholic nor agnostic. We owe equal attachment to the constitution and are equally bound by our judicial obligation whether we derive our citizenship from the earliest or the latest immigrants to these shores.²⁵

Frankfurter’s dissent in *Barnette* was consistent with the position he had adopted in a similar case three years earlier. In that instance, Chief Justice Hughes had assigned Frankfurter the majority opinion in *Minersville School District v. Gobitis* (1940), a case “upholding the constitutionality of a statute requiring all students, including the children of Jehovah’s Witnesses,” to salute the flag, an act the Witnesses viewed as blasphemous. The Chief Justice had chosen Frankfurter for the task, Hughes recalled, “because of Frankfurter’s emotional description, in conference, of the ‘role of the public school in instilling love of country’ based upon his own experiences as a [Jewish] immigrant child.”

Dershowitz, the child of Orthodox Jewish parents raised and educated in an intensely Jewish Brooklyn enclave, comments that he read the 1943 opinion “in astonishment. As a twenty-one year old student, I simply couldn’t identify with it. I didn’t feel ‘vilified’ or ‘persecuted,’ or even as part of a ‘minority.’” In fact, the only “insensitivity” Dershowitz observed in these cases was that Frankfurter was “quite ‘insensitive’ to the religious freedoms of the Jehovah’s Witnesses.”²⁶

The gap between Frankfurter’s views and those of Dershowitz is emblematic of the transition in attitude and ethos among American Jewry. Frankfurter, the product of an immigrant Jewish community that internalized the image of a melting pot, could permit no emphasis upon particularism and group distinction. Indeed, he regarded such ethnocentrism or religious isolationism as unworthy—under some conditions, even intolerable. Frankfurter felt obliged to insist upon the adoption of “neutral, universal” values in his efforts to guide American society. His vision of Judaism and all other “particularities,” like that of so many other Jews of his generation, allowed no room for the expression of specific ethnic or religious values and interests.²⁷

In contrast, Dershowitz, belonging to a post-Holocaust generation that was no

longer dominated numerically by an immigrant population, did not hesitate to affirm his or any other “particularity.” For Dershowitz, such affirmation was not only defensible; it was demanded by James Madison’s notion, articulated in *The Federalist Papers*, of an “expanding sphere”—that is, a free and open society where values of tolerance and diversity could best be realized. Agreeing with this notion was Norman Podhoretz, the conservative writer and commentator, who viewed as wrong “the conception according to which one [is] supposed to act not as a member of a particular community but as the ‘citizen of a human society’ . . .” Podhoretz, too, believed that Jews, as well as members of other ethnic and interest groups, have every right to promote “their own stake in the system.”²⁸ Notwithstanding very different political and ideological outlooks, Dershowitz and Podhoretz, in common with many other contemporary American Jews, share a confident sense of American Jewish identity.

By the last decades of the 1900s, more American Jews than ever before had begun to appreciate the wisdom that Judaism could provide, and many of them also advanced Jewish interests, agendas, and values in the larger public arena. Silberman’s claim that American Jews had now entered an age where they “celebrated their distinctiveness” thus contains more than a kernel of truth. Nevertheless, his claim is somewhat exaggerated. A more nuanced and judicious assessment of the phenomenon of public/private American Jewish identity must also take into account the fact that most American Jews today remain indifferent to their Jewish patrimony, at a time when the social and cultural distance between Jew and Gentile has grown narrower than ever.²⁹

A paradox thus emerges in this analysis of the resurgence of Judaism in contemporary American life, whose roots are to be found in the transformation in social and cultural status of American Jewry. First-generation East European Jewish immigrants and their children socialized exclusively among themselves; as late as the 1950s, it was extremely rare for Jews (whose roots in Anglo-Saxon culture were so “shallow”) to receive appointments as college professors in top-flight departments of American history or English—nor could they serve as executives or partners in major corporations or elite law firms. Given this situation, the understandable aim of Jewish immigrants and their children was to adapt to the manners of the larger American society. In contrast, third- and fourth-generation American Jews became less comfortable with the image of a universalistic American melting pot. Instead, they began to reclaim their Jewish heritage, both privately and publicly.

One outcome of this new situation was the steady growth in Jewish day schools during the past few decades.³⁰ Another was the blossoming of college-level Jewish studies programs—currently, there are more than a thousand members of the Association for Jewish Studies in the United States; thousands of students are enrolled in college-level Jewish studies courses; and many others are attending one-year programs in Israeli institutions of higher learning. While the factors accounting for the growth of Jewish day schools and Jewish studies courses are of course multiple and complex, they indicate how an increasing number of American Jews have come to assert the legitimacy of a Jewish cultural heritage in a multicultural world.

Particularly noteworthy in this regard is the recent case involving five Orthodox Jews who sued Yale University to seek relief from the university requirement that first-year students live in a (co-ed) dormitory. However one assesses the merits of

their case, these students have exhibited a level of Jewish self-assurance that was virtually inconceivable a mere generation ago.³¹ In essence, their argument is that America must uphold its own principles of tolerance and freedom by affirming *their* right to be full participants in American life while at the same time holding to a strict code of particularistic Jewish behavior. In other words, Jewish values are not to be seen as parochial. Rather, the affirmation of Jewish identity implies an advocacy for one of many individual paths through which a universal American spirit can unfold.

Alongside their growing ethnic and religious assertiveness, American Jews today are also far more comfortable in social interactions with non-Jews. In the corporate realm, Jews with names like Shapiro have served as CEOs in corporations such as Du Pont, which in the not so distant past did not have a single Jew on its board of directors. In the educational sector, Ivy League universities that once enforced strict quotas on Jewish students are now headed, in some instances, by a Jewish president.³² The acceptance and high visibility of Jews in contemporary America is exemplified not only by Joseph Lieberman's vice-presidential candidacy but also by the appointments of Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Stephen Breyer to the U.S. Supreme Court. In contrast to the furor that erupted over President Wilson's decision to elevate Louis Brandeis to the High Court in 1916, these two recent appointments were greeted with equanimity by the general U.S. public. Moreover, it is now common for Jews from all parts of the United States, including states with relatively sparse Jewish populations, to be elected to serve in Congress, in state legislatures, and in mayoral offices.³³

Concurrent with these indications of American Jews' increasing social and professional success is a growing concern with Jewish continuity in the context of America's open society. The rate of Jewish intermarriage has increased from less than 5 percent in the 1950s to 31 percent in 1970 and 52 percent in 1990. Furthermore, record numbers of Jews do not affiliate with any sector of the community whatsoever.³⁴ American Jewry has thus entered a postmodern situation of antipodean trends: record rates of nonaffiliation and abandonment of Jewish religion and identity are competing with intense pockets of Jewish commitment and public expression. The pluralism of the modern setting, the bewildering variety of choices it provides, has led many to forsake Judaism. Simultaneously, other Jews, living within a pluralistic framework that continues to underscore the importance of individual choice,³⁵ have sought out Judaism for the sense of wisdom, security, identity, and community it affords. As has been shown, this was not the function Judaism served for first- and second-generation American Jews.

The twin trends of renewed emphasis on ethnic-religious expression, on the one hand, and the ever-growing attenuation of such attachments, on the other, have been promoted by larger societal trends that have been identified by sociologist Peter L. Berger. In his influential work, *The Heretical Imperative* (1979), Berger points out that the quintessential feature of modern western culture is *hairesis*—option or choice.³⁶ People leave their native towns; women become clergy; gays and lesbians “step out of the closet” and have their unions sanctioned by religious denominations. Such examples, among others, characterize the modern world. In Berger’s felicitous phrase, modernity is marked by the move from “fate to choice.”

As Berger describes it, this movement is liberating. It frees people from the shack-

les of stultified traditions that define roles and expectations in a narrow and confining way. At the same time, it leaves people feeling bewildered, or, as Berger states in one of his earlier works, “homeless.” In *The Homeless Mind*, Berger and his co-authors argue that the modern condition of choice—particularly the displacement that marks the upwardly mobile as they move about in search of career and opportunity—has left many persons without a secure sense of roots.³⁷ Many have been liberated from “tribal brotherhood,” but still more have experienced the anomie and alienation of “universal otherhood.”³⁸ One consequence is the seeking out of fundamentalisms of all sorts in order to cope with anxieties that are engendered by the loss of a stable communal framework.³⁹ Another is the turn (or return) to religious tradition, which is perceived to offer values that are necessary for the emergence of a “good society.”⁴⁰

In Berger’s most recent edited collection, *The Desecularization of the World*, he and others argue that the process of secularization (which Berger foresaw as completely triumphant three decades ago) has actually run its course among certain people: modernization, it seems, often strengthens religion.⁴¹ Similarly, Jose Casanova, in his *Public Religions in the Modern World*, notes that many individuals feel “deprived” as a result of the dichotomy between public life and private beliefs. In reaction, they have become increasingly strident about giving expression to their “full” selves in the larger world—projecting, for instance, their views on such issues as abortion, school vouchers, and school prayer into the political arena.⁴²

These particular issues play themselves out in a variety of ways in the American Jewish community.⁴³ What is clear, though, is that many contemporary Jews, like their Christian counterparts, believe that constitutionally mandated freedom of religion can be maintained without trivializing faith or treating believers with disdain. Thus, a large part of Joseph Lieberman’s appeal derived from his well-publicized sense of traditional community as well as his advocacy of time-honored values.⁴⁴ Indeed, the sociological tradition to which Peter Berger belongs has long emphasized that humans (even in the age of the internet) are social creatures who seek out relationship and community. Moreover, as the sociologist Ferdinand Toennies commented at the turn of the 20th century, “the force of *gemeinschaft*,” that is, small, intimate community, “persists even in the period of *gesellschaft*”—impersonal, modern western society.”⁴⁵ As Sharon Sandomirsky and John Wilson have also pointed out, voluntary affiliation remains as crucial in today’s America as it was in the past.⁴⁶ Americans, like all others, remain inveterate joiners, notwithstanding the highly individualistic ethos that continues to dominate much of American society.

Many people simply do not want to choose between the extremes of a vacuous and ahistorical secularism, on the one hand, and a raging religious fundamentalism, on the other. Rather, they are anxious to perceive a sacred vitality at the core of both their nation and their own private worlds.⁴⁷ For these reasons, religion continues to play a crucial role—even in a country like the United States with its constitutional wall between religion and state—in promoting social cohesion as well as group and individual identity.

As Stephen Carter, the Yale University professor of law, has pointed out, American democracy has always been dependent in part on religion’s perceived role as a “mediating structure” between people and the state. Accordingly, many Americans assert that religious faith must continue to be a significant element in American public life,

despite the importance of church/state separation.⁴⁸ Here too, Joseph Lieberman's campaign touched a responsive chord. As Jim Spencer, a middle American, non-Jewish political pundit, noted:

Joe Lieberman encourages Americans, even politicians and policy makers, to embrace a spiritual life. He tells you what that means to him, not what it should mean to you. The distinction explains why Lieberman might connect with Americans in a way that right-wing Bible thumpers never have and probably never will. While they might sound a tad pious to the cynical, Lieberman's statements about the role of his personal religious beliefs in his life as a U.S. Senator do not presume that Jewish Orthodoxy is the only route to salvation, much less public education. . . . He has not asked to exclude anyone that I am aware of. He has merely asked Americans to think in spiritual terms. Lieberman does not push us toward theocracy, the God-centered government of which so many Christian conservatives dream. He pushes us toward tolerance. He reminds us that, like it or not, spirituality plays a role in the private lives of political leaders. He insists that such considerations are as enviable as they are inevitable. Somewhere, in the recesses of our over-stimulated minds, we know that intuitively.⁴⁹

Religion in general, and Judaism in particular, find acceptance in American society precisely because they provide for a communitarian ethos and a nonrelativistic sense of morality in a world where many people are mindful of both the atomizing excesses of individualism and the horrifying consequences engendered by moral relativism. Put somewhat differently, contemporary American expressions of Jewish tradition are viewed by many as bearing an affinity to the positive moral values bequeathed by Enlightenment rationalism to the modern world, while at the same time offering a corrective for the fragmenting effects of that secular tradition. Such Jewish expression, promoted by trends in the larger world, is attractive to many persons both within and beyond the Jewish community.

Nevertheless, any triumphalist conclusion concerning Jewish life and values in contemporary America must be tempered. As Charles Liebman pointed out more than a decade ago, Jewish religious erosion threatens to overshadow the achievements of the committed elite of American Jewry. "What I sense," Liebman wrote, "is an increasingly incoherent pattern of symbols and a random structure of responses that constitute much of American Jewish life."⁵⁰ In a world where the political parameters that formerly preserved the premodern Jewish community have been dismantled, Jewish commitments and knowledge have become so attenuated that a diminution of Jewish life in this country is taking place despite the current efflorescence of Jewish culture and values.

By and large, modern Judaism has been taken out of the home and placed into public, institutional settings. Although the synagogue and the Jewish federation play a critical role in American Jewish life, the public affirmation of Jewishness may well mask the absence of more enduring private commitments. Given the lack of ritual observance on the part of most American Jews, Liebman worries about the durability of American Judaism and is pessimistic about its future. He does not dispute the accuracy of observations about the pro-religious achievements of some American Jews. Yet, for him, this reflects no more than "the capacity of a minority to sustain and even strengthen their Jewish commitments despite the tendencies of the majority."⁵¹

This essay demonstrates the ways in which American attitudes toward ethnic iden-

tity and public manifestations of faith have evolved greatly over the past century, with significant implications for the way in which Jewish faith and culture are today expressed. The ideal of the melting pot that dominated at the turn of the 20th century was rejected by many beginning in the 1960s, at which time a greater appreciation of ethnic values and identity began to emerge. Yet even as the groundwork was being laid for a resurgence of Jewish expression, it was being done within the embrace of the larger American culture from which American Jewry was not prepared to retreat. For this reason, the revival of Jewish consciousness that was evinced in the birth of a "new ethnicity" was not identical to the Yiddish culture, ethnic distinctiveness, or the associational patterns that had characterized the first-generation East European immigrants. By the 1960s, American Jews had overwhelmingly internalized most of the dominant values of their host society, and that society no longer segregated them in any significant way.

All of this must be borne in mind in assessing the renaissance of Jewish life in contemporary America. Jews in the United States are overwhelmingly universalistic, and particularistic affirmations are made in the service of universal moral and spiritual values. For Jews, as well as for members of other U.S. ethnic groups, the question that remains is whether such affirmations will prove strong enough over time to sustain a broad cultural and communal identity.

Notes

1. Marc Dollinger, *Quest for Inclusion: Jews and Liberalism in Modern America* (Princeton: 2000), 95.
2. Irving Howe, *A Margin of Hope: An Intellectual Autobiography* (San Diego: 1982), 188.
3. *New York Times* (28 Aug. 2000), A14.
4. Ibid. (31 Aug. 2000), A22.
5. Ibid. (30 Aug. 2000), A17; *Los Angeles Times* (30 Aug. 2000), A1.
6. *New York Times*, 30 Aug. 2000.
7. Ibid. (3 Sept. 2000), 5, "The Nation."
8. *New York Times* (4 Sept. 2000).
9. No one has been more enthusiastic in asserting this position than Charles E. Silberman; see his *A Certain People: American Jews and Their Lives Today* (New York: 1985). The final part of this essay will discuss trends and views that allow for what I consider to be a more balanced appraisal.
10. Quoted in Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz (eds.), *The Jew in the Modern World* (Oxford: 1995), 115.
11. Jacob Katz, *A House Divided: Orthodoxy and Schism in Nineteenth-Century Central European Jewry*, trans. Ziporah Brody (Hanover, N.H.: 1998), 9. For a more general discussion, see two of his classic works, *Tradition and Crisis: Jewish Society at the End of the Middle Ages* (New York: 1958) and *Out of the Ghetto: The Social Background of Jewish Emancipation, 1770–1870* (Cambridge, Mass: 1973).
12. Of course, I recognize that the historical reality was more complex than this overarching observation would indicate. There were surely places in the United States during the Federalist period and beyond where Jews were, in some sense, accorded political treatment as a corporate group and where individual political emancipation was not complete. Morton Borden makes this point quite well in his *Jews, Turks, and Infidels* (Chapel Hill: 1984). Notwithstanding, the general point made by Jacob Katz still holds: the Jewish community in America has always been essentially voluntary, with Jews being viewed as individual citizens of the state devoid of all corporate political identity. Furthermore, as a result of this modern po-

- lical order and its liberal trajectory, there was no formal place for Jewish values or identity in the public square.
13. See Charles S. Liebman, *The Ambivalent American Jew: Politics, Religion and Family in American Jewish Life* (Philadelphia: 1973), 42ff.; and Arthur Hertzberg, *The Jews in America: Four Centuries of an Uneasy Encounter* (New York: 1989).
14. As Oscar Handlin put it, "Jewish identification remained meaningful in the [only] area of diversity America most clearly recognized—that of religion." Quoted in Will Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* (Garden City: 1960), 205; throughout the book, Herberg makes the same point. Also see Evyatar Friesel, "American Jewry as Bearer of Contemporary Jewish Tasks," *American Jewish History* 78 (1989), 492.
15. See Louis D. Brandeis' formulation of the equation between Zionist and American values in Arthur Hertzberg, *The Zionist Idea: A Historical Analysis and Reader* (New York: 1959), 520. On the rabbis, see David Ellenson, "Zion in the Mind of the American Rabbinate during the 1940s," in *The Americanization of the Jews*, eds. Robert M. Seltzer and Norman J. Cohen (New York: 1995), 193–212.
16. See Jonathan D. Sarna, "The Cult of Synthesis in American Jewish Culture," *Jewish Social Studies* (new series) 5, nos. 1–2 (Fall/Winter 1998–1999), 52–79.
17. This anecdote appears in Irving Greenberg and Shalom Freedman, *Living in the Image of God—Jewish Teachings to Perfect the World: Conversations with Rabbi Irving Greenberg* (Northvale: 1998), 6–7. My own father, Samuel Ellenson, a 1948 Harvard Law School graduate, had a similar experience: wearing a *kipah* at the law school, he says, would have been tantamount to declaring: "I do not want to be employed at a law firm."
18. Michael Novak, *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics: Politics and Culture in the Seventies* (New York: 1972).
19. Michael Novak, "The New Ethnicity," *The Center Magazine* 7, no. 4 (July/August, 1974), 20.
20. Eugene Borowitz, *The Mask Jews Wear: The Self-Deception of American Jewry* (New York: 1973), 209.
21. See Nathan Glazer, "The Crisis of American Jewry," *Midstream* 16, no. 9 (Nov. 1970), 3–11.
22. Silberman, *A Certain People*, 201. Cf. Eli Lederhendler (ed.), *The Six-Day War and World Jewry* (Bethesda: 2001).
23. On Frankfurter, see Michael Alexander's essay, "Frankfurter among the Anarchists: The Case of Sacco and Vanzetti," which appears in this volume on pp. 175–191.
24. Alan M. Dershowitz, *Chutzpah* (Boston: 1989), 48.
25. The Frankfurter opinions cited in these two paragraphs can be found in James O. Freedman, "Insiders and Outsiders: Inaugural Lecture of the Center for American Jewish History at Temple University" (12 Nov. 1990), 8–9.
26. Dershowitz, *Chutzpah*, 48.
27. See Jerold S. Auerbach, *Rabbis and Lawyers: The Journey from Torah to Constitution* (Bloomington: 1990), esp. 229.
28. Norman Podhoretz, *Breaking Ranks: A Political Memoir* (New York: 1979), 334.
29. See Elihu Bergman, "The American Jewish Population Erosion," *Midstream* 23, no. 8 (Oct. 1977), 9.
30. For figures documenting the growth of Jewish day schools in the U.S., see the booklet by Marvin Schick published by the Avi Chai Foundation, *A Census of Jewish Day Schools in the United States* (New York: 2000), 12ff. Also see Jack Wertheimer, "Jewish Education in the United States: Recent Trends and Issues," *American Jewish Year Book* (1999), 3–115, in which he relates and analyzes the many factors that account for this increase. Prominent among them are "the attitudinal changes towards matters Jewish among baby-boomers. Many who had a less intensive Jewish education are receptive to giving their children opportunities they themselves did not enjoy" (*ibid.*, 53–54).
31. For a fuller account of the students' case against Yale, see Samuel G. Freedman, *Jew vs. Jew: The Struggle for the Soul of American Jewry* (New York: 2000), ch. 5.
32. The literature on this topic is considerable. Among the most prominent and representa-

tive books on the subject of Jews and higher American education are Harold S. Wechsler, *The Qualified Student: A History of Selected College Admission in America* (New York: 1977); Suzanne Klingensteine, *Jews in the American Academy: The Dynamics of Intellectual Assimilation* (New Haven: 1991); idem, *Enlarging America: The Cultural Work of Jewish Literary Scholars* (Syracuse: 1998); Dan A. Oren, *Joining the Club: A History of Jews at Yale* (New Haven: 1985); and Paul Ritterband and Harold S. Wechsler, *Jewish Learning in American Universities: The First Century* (Bloomington: 1994).

33. For an analysis of Jewish participation in the United States Congress and American political life, see J.J. Goldberg, *Jewish Power: Inside the American Jewish Establishment* (Reading, Mass.: 1996). In my native region of Tidewater, Virginia—hardly a venue of dense Jewish population—the mayor of Newport News is Joseph Frank; and my cousin, Meyera Ellenson Oberndorf (who attended Stern College of Yeshiva University), is the mayor of Virginia Beach.

34. See Bergman, “The American Jewish Population Erosion” for the 5 percent and 31 percent intermarriage rates; for more recent figures and other statistical information relating to the issues of this essay, see Barry A. Kosmin, Sidney Goldstein, Joseph Waksberg, Nava Lerer, Ariella Keysar, and Jeff Scheckner, *Highlights of the Council of Jewish Federation's 1990 National Jewish Population Survey* (New York: 1991).

35. On the seminal role of individualism and autonomy in the contemporary American psyche, and the impact such doctrines have upon the religious expression of the American people, see the second edition of Robert N. Bellah, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: 1985). While other significant works have been written on this topic, *Habits of the Heart* remains the landmark volume. For an insightful treatment of how these themes play themselves out within the Jewish community, see Steven M. Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen, *The Jew Within: Self, Family, and Community in America* (Bloomington: 2000), and Bethamie Horowitz, “Connections and Journeys: Shifting Identities Among American Jews,” *Contemporary Jewry* 19 (1998), 87.

36. Peter L. Berger, *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation* (Garden City: 1979).

37. See Peter L. Berger, Brigitte Berger, and Thomas Luckmann, *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness* (New York: 1973).

38. These phrases were coined by the late Benjamin Nelson, one of the foremost students and observers of societal directions in the modern West, in his *The Idea of Usury: From Tribal Brotherhood to Universal Otherhood* (Chicago: 1969).

39. See Freedman, *Jew Vs. Jew*, for how this trajectory has marked many in the American Jewish community. For a more general and authoritative scholarly treatment of the rise of fundamentalism in the modern world, consult the various volumes of the University of Chicago Fundamentalism Project produced under the editorship of Martin Marty and R. Scott Appleby.

40. See Robert N. Bellah, et al., *The Good Society* (New York: 1992), a follow-up to their *Habits of the Heart* that explores the theme of religious communitarianism.

41. See Peter L. Berger and Jonathan Sacks (eds.), *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids: 1999).

42. See Jose Casanova, *Public Religion in the Modern World* (Chicago: 1994).

43. For example, in a report on a State of Wisconsin Supreme Court ruling on the issue of school vouchers, *The Jewish Bulletin of Northern California* (19 June 1998), stated that liberal and traditional camps in the Jewish community were split over this issue. Persons such as Marc Stern of the American Jewish Congress and Steve Freeman of the Anti-Defamation League expressed opposition to the Wisconsin court’s decision that such vouchers were legal. Others, such as Nathan Diament of the Institute for Public Affairs of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America and Marshall Berger of the Jewish Policy Center, applauded the verdict.

44. See “Al Gore’s Leap of Faith,” and “The Senator: How Lieberman Walks His Walk,” *Time* (21 Aug. 2000), 24–34, for a journalistic presentation and analysis of these points.

45. Cited in David Hackett, "Sociology of Religion and American Religious History," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 27, no. 4 (1988), 467.
46. Sharon Sandomirsky and John Wilson, "Process of Disaffiliation: Religious Mobility Among Men and Women," *Social Forces* 68, no. 4 (June 1990), 1211.
47. See Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation* (San Francisco: 1993), for an exposition of this position.
48. This is the essence of the argument put forth in Stephen Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivializes Religious Devotion* (New York: 1994).
49. Jim Spencer, "There is More Than One Way to Get to Heaven," *Daily Press* (Newport News, Va.) (6 Sept. 2000), C1.
50. Charles S. Liebman, "A Grim Outlook," in *The Quality of American Jewish Life—Two Views*, ed. Steven M. Cohen and Charles S. Liebman (New York: 1987).
51. *Ibid.*, 51.