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JEWISH RELIGIOUS DISAFFECTION AND AMERICAN ANTI-SEMITISM

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The American Jewish world has been roiled, once again, by the results of another demographic study. This time the Pew "Portrait of Jewish Americans" is telling us things we would prefer not to hear, particularly about the disaffection of Jews from contemporary movements and branches of Judaism. There were, of course, similar findings and reactions to the CJF 1990 National Jewish Population Study (NJPS) and the 2000-2001 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS).

One interesting aspect of all three studies is the unexplored link between outmigration from Jewish religious life and anti-Semitism. Although the 1990 study found that from 66 to 83 percent of the different categories of respondents identified anti-Semitism as a serious problem, there was little or no discussion at the time of the connection, and the two later studies make virtually no mention of it.

In 2003, however, not long after the 2001 NJPS, Leon Wieseltier addressed the international conference on anti-Semitism, "Old Demons, New Debates: Anti-Semitism in the West," sponsored by the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research at the Center for Jewish History. Mr. Wieseltier's perspective, one that is not uncommon, raises some related nagging questions.

On the one hand, the titling and content of his remarks, as an essay on www.jewishpress.com—"The Village is Not Burning: A Realist's Appraisal of Anti-Semitism Today"—seemed to suggest that there is an unchecked epidemic of dysfunctional fear about anti-Semitism among American Jews. On the other hand, Mr. Wieseltier proposed that, although anti-Semitism is resurgent almost everywhere else in the world, we have an "embarrassment of riches" in the United States. He explicitly rejected the Zionist conviction that the United States is only a temporary haven for Jews and, instead, suggested that the country represents a "revolution in Jewish history, a nation that—considering its philosophical foundations and its political practices—is structurally hospitable to us." Certainly, both of these perspectives are commonplace today.

Wieseltier went on to say that, "We cannot be pilloried as a state within a state that is comprised of states within a state. We cannot be excoriated for difference in a society in which difference is the substance of sameness."

Those remarks, although more than a decade old, raise important contemporary issues: First, was there or is there a great deal of dysfunctional fear about anti-Semitism among American Jews? Second, is it the case that the United States represents a revolution in Jewish history that, because of its philosophy and political system, permanently precludes the kind of anti-Semitism that has been endemic to Europe? And of course, is there any substantive connection between American anti-Semitism and outmigration from Jewish religious belief and affiliation?

Fear of Anti-Semitism?

In the late 1990s my wife Khulda bat Sarah and I were enjoying a quiet dinner at home with middle-aged Jewish friends who were beginning to show an interest in Judaism and congregational life, one of whom eventually became the president of her Conservative congregation. The subject of anti-Semitism came up and we described some "in-your-face" anti-Semitic hostility that we had personally encountered in local public places when wearing a yarmulke.

The reaction of these friends to our experiences in this vein was indifference and incredulity. They said that from their point of view, anti-Semitism in the United States was a non-starter at the end of the 20th century. Certainly, to borrow the jewishpress.com

imagery, they didn't have any idea that "the village is burning."

In fact, the vast majority of Jews we have met are *not* raising the alarm that anti-Semitism is rampant, but on the contrary define overt acts of anti-Semitism that don't touch them directly as "ignorance," a "youthful escapade," or "an isolated incident."

One example was a congregation in the Northeast, located in a town that was leafleted with anti-Semitic flyers targeting Jews as a group. The leaders of the local Conservative congregation did not take any action, although the authors of the flyer, representing the Church of the Creator, had been linked with several violent attacks on Jews and other minorities. The synagogue leaders did not feel it was necessary to institute any general security measures, to take specific steps to ensure the security of religious school students, or to participate in a citywide rally to denounce intolerance. The village certainly was not burning from their point of view.

While our experience has been that most American Jews only become concerned about anti-Semitism when it affects them or their children personally or is very likely to do so, even then we have seen that the typical response is not dysfunctional fear but "cool anger" that produces strategic and focused initiatives, which was the case with our congregation in Northern California when three synagogues were torched in nearby Sacramento. Our members didn't become hysterical or immobilized, imagining that a tide of anti-Semitism would engulf them. On the contrary, they conferred with regional ADL officials to learn what security measures they could take and then acted smartly to implement several that they concluded would be cost-effective.

America Revolutionary in Jewish History?

Is it true that in its philosophical foundations and political practices, the United States is structurally hospitable to Jews, that "we cannot be pilloried as a state within a state that is comprised of states within a state" and "we cannot be excoriated for difference in a society in which difference is the substance of sameness"?

These questions raise more questions about the fundamentals of American anti-Semitism: What has been the long-term and recent learning history of anti-Semitism in the United States? And what are the contemporary contingencies for the expression of that learning in overt individual and institutional behavior?

Anti-Semitism in the United States has been deep and durable. From colonial times up to the mid-20th century, Americans were largely open and unapologetic about their anti-Semitic attitudes and actions, both individually and institutionally.

Growing up in the 1950s in Los Angeles, it was not uncommon in public places to be openly called a "kike" or "dirty Jew" by other youngsters, within the hearing of adults who were invariably indifferent. It was well known—a fact that dawned painfully on my sister when she graduated from high school—Jews were not employed by the phone company or other public utilities in Los Angeles. There was a sign on the entrance to a private golf course in nearby Orange County that read, "no dogs, no niggers, no Jews allowed," which was still posted in the early 1960s.

Certainly there has been a marked change in the acceptability of expressing anti-Semitic attitudes in the public square and in virtually all forms of overt institutional anti-Semitic behavior. Both law and social norms have changed so as to powerfully discourage these particular manifestations of anti-Semitism. But if anti-Semitism itself is so low as to be vanishing by historical standards, we should expect the country to be largely free of covert anti-Semitic attitudes that are revealed in individual acts of personal anti-Semitism, which in turn should be declining over the long-term.

Yet this has not been the case. The ADL reported a long-term rise over two decades in "harassments, threats, and assaults"—the personal in-your-face variety of anti-Semitism—in contrast to vandalism and forms of anti-Semitism that are reflected in institutional policy and practice. Currently, the ADL's 2013 Survey of American Attitudes Toward Jews in America, a national telephone survey of 1,200 adults, was conducted October 12-22, produced some unsettling results:

- Fourteen percent agreed with the statement, "Jews have too much power in the U.S. today" (which was unchanged from 2011).
- Thirty percent of Americans continue to say that American Jews are "more loyal to Israel" than to their own country, America (which was unchanged from 2011 and 1964).
- Nineteen percent of Americans believe Jews have too much power in the business world (which is nearly unchanged from the 20 percent who agreed with this statement in 2011).
- Seventeen percent say that Jews have too much control on Wall Street (which is a slight decline from 19 percent answering "true" to that statement in 2011).
- Fifteen percent agreed that Jews are "more willing to use shady practices" (which is unchanged from 2011).
- Twenty-six percent of Americans continue to believe that "Jews were responsible for the death of Christ" (which is down from 31 percent in 2011).
- Eighteen percent say that Jews have too much influence over the American news media, and 24

percent agreed that the movie and television industries are pretty much run by Jews.

- Nearly one-quarter of respondents agreed, "Jews still talk too much about what happened to them in the Holocaust."

Some take comfort in those indications of anti-Semitism that are declining, but it must be acknowledged that such self-reporting studies are notoriously unreliable, and there are several less congenial explanations for the apparent improvements, not the least of which is that it has become increasingly unacceptable to openly admit racial and ethnic bigotry.

Moreover, to imagine that covert anti-Semitic attitudes cannot produce highly dangerous forms of institutional anti-Semitism in the U.S., because of the country's philosophical foundations and political realities, confuses intellectual or ideological history with its institutional counterpart. To believe otherwise would require ignoring the experience of Americans of Japanese ancestry during World War II and American Muslims since 9-11.

The government has acted in force against minority groups, suspending their civil liberties and rights and incarcerating them en masse when it has been politically acceptable, because the majority of the population perceives the minority—typically encouraged by blatant manipulation of public opinion by mass media—as posing a critical threat to the nation. These situations require a convergence of circumstances in which the group in question is perceived as a threat and it does not possess the economic wherewithal and political influence to protect its interests from government actions.

The now infamous internment of Japanese-Americans following the attack on Pearl Harbor was paralleled recently on a smaller scale when hundreds of Muslim non-citizens were swept up after 9/11. Of course, it was not until 1983 when the courts repudiated the 1944 Supreme Court decision that upheld the Japanese-American internment. Presumably, by 1983 the Japanese-American population had achieved an unassailable economic and political position in American society.

Even though it has been decades since the Congress and the President of the United States declared the Japanese-American detention a "fundamental injustice," the judge ruled in the June 2006 case of Turkmen v. Ashcroft that the government has the latitude to detain *non-citizens* indefinitely on the basis of race, religion, or national origin. Although non-citizens brought the suit, the U.S. Justice Department's argument in the case might also give pause to citizens: it was that government officials "were confronted with unprecedented law enforcement and security challenges in the wake of the Sept. 11 attacks"[1]—an argument that the court apparently accepted.

Notwithstanding the notion that "we cannot be excoriated for difference in a society in which difference is the substance of sameness," the experiences of other minorities demonstrate that their treatment by the government is a harbinger for our own if sometime in the future we come to be in their political and economic shoes, if the current population numbers of approximately 1.5 million Muslims[2] and 5 million Jews should come to be reversed.

We will be responsible and culpable for the anti-Semitic consequences of current demographic trends if we fail to acknowledge and respond[3] to their destructive potential. The Jewish population in the United States is in long-term decline, notwithstanding deluded demographics that count as Jews those who have no meaningful Jewish identity—which inevitably must be coupled to a parallel decline in our overall economic power and political influence vis-à-vis the growing population-driven power and influence of other ethnic and cultural minorities. They often see themselves in zero-sum relationships with individual Jews and organized Jewry, so of course it's not incidental that other minority groups have fed much of contemporary American anti-Semitism.

Lest we forget, there is nothing so dangerously lulling as the power and privileges that accompany our success as a society within a society—whether in Spain, Germany, or the United States.

Understanding American Anti-Semitism

Possibly the most important mistake we can make about American anti-Semitism is to assume that the 21st century variety will resemble that which has been notable in the past, especially in European history, which ironically has become the model for the Middle-Eastern varieties.

How are we to account for the gradual rise of personal anti-Semitism in recent decades?

The modern version of anti-Semitism in the United States, which dates roughly from 1960, does *not* punish Jewish status per se, but instead targets Jews who visibly and vocally proclaim themselves uniquely Jewish in the public square. One who on the job or in civic affairs wears a yarmulke or argues government or corporate policy from an explicitly Jewish point of view, in our experience, will learn quickly that anti-Semitism is alive and well in the United States.

The phenomenon isn't limited to stereotypical bigots. A report from anti-war organizing against the Iraq war related a number of instances in which Jews were, without apparent justification, excluded or treated with hostility. The progressive author of the report concluded: "When Jews are out and about in a highly visible manner as Jews, they confound expectations. Jews who are invisible, or who distance themselves from a Jewish constituency ("I'm not like those other

Jews. . . ."), are accepted without reservation. But Jews demanding to be seen as part of a Jewish community are seen as suspicious, as though they are tainted with the same kind of nationalism that makes Israel so problematic."[4]

Anti-Semitism and Religious Outmigration

Many Jews have experienced incentives to downplay their religious beliefs and practices as Jews. When they do so, their personal experience of anti-Semitism declines, and they are increasingly likely to believe that anti-Semitism in general is declining. But in surveys they consistently report their low-level anxiety about anti-Semitism, possibly because they have no illusions that it has disappeared permanently—they know it is their own Jewish commitment and practice that is disappearing—and so they live with a quiet but gnawing anxiousness.

As the number of Jews who make themselves publicly visible as Jews declines, those who stand out and are counted as such make increasingly attractive and vulnerable targets for anti-Semitic rhetoric and behavior.

What do we conclude about persistence and change in American anti-Semitism and its effects?

Anti-Semitic attitudes, although often declared to be declining in frequency by self-reporting surveys, have no more disappeared from the United States after a half-century of legal and social condemnation than they did in Eastern Europe after more than a half-century of Soviet homogenizing of ethnic populations. Neither has the potential for virulent forms of institutional bigotry and discrimination, including anti-Semitism, disappeared from the American landscape.

What has changed is that, except for the Orthodox, increasing numbers of American Jews are abandoning those features of their identity that are uniquely and visibly Jewish—that is, "religious," since so much of Jewish non-religious culture (e.g., food, humor, etc.) have become American staples—at least when in the public square, which seemingly corresponds to their record rates of outmigration, intermarriage, and assimilation. Ironically, whether religious self-abjuration or the much less frequent jettisoning of ethnic identity, their response has neither diminished their private anxiety about anti-Semitism nor the public vulnerability of others who remain identifiably Jewish in belief and practice, who continue to be visible targets for the rancor of anti-Semites.

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[1] "Relatives of Interned Japanese-Americans Side With Muslims," *New York Times* (April 3, 2007).

[2] See Barry A Kosmin and Egon Mayer, "American Religious Identification Survey 2001," The Graduate Center of the City University of New York, (http://www.gc.cuny.edu/studies/aris_part_two.htm), which concludes that, "In statistical terms, this means there is a 95 percent probability that the adult US Muslim population is in the range of 1.1 to 2.2 million," which of course is not the same as the total Arab-American population, estimated to be 75 percent Christian by the Arab-American Institute.

[3] The how-to of this imperative is much more difficult to describe. In simplest terms it may be fair to say that until significant numbers of Jews actively ally themselves politically and economically with other organized ethnic and cultural minorities, they will continue to be perceived as competitors for scarce resources and rights rather than compatriots.

[4] Malka Fenyvesi, "Report to The Shalom Center on the Chicago UFPJ Conference," J-list@ShalomCtr.org (July 13, 2003).

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