

AMERICAN JEWS IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM

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Prophecy is a dangerous assignment for an historian of American Judaism. A cursory examination of the history of prophecies about Jews, whether in America or elsewhere, discloses that a great many of them through the years have proved wrong. The oldest recorded mention of the name Israel is, in a sense, such a prophecy. It is included in an Egyptian hymn of victory dating to Pharaoh Mer-nep-tah (about 1230 BCE), and it reads, “Israel is laid waste, his seed is not [i.e. his offspring is wiped out].”¹ We know that things worked out rather differently; in fact the Pharaohs were eventually wiped out, while Israel lived on. The second mention of Israel, 400 years later in the so-called Mesha Stone, is of the same order: “I have triumphed...” Mesha king of Moab declared, “while Israel hath perished for ever.”² Again, things worked out rather differently. Except for The Hebrew Bible, who would ever even have heard of Mesha?

In America, in 1818 one of the nation’s wisest leaders, the nation’s then Attorney General, William Wirt, predicted that within 150 years Jews would be indistinguishable from the rest of mankind.³ Today, William Wirt is himself indistinguishable and long forgotten; again, Jews live on. Still more recently, *Look Magazine* in a famous cover story in 1964 wrote of “The Vanishing American Jew.”⁴ Today, *Look* itself has vanished – not just once but twice – and again the Jewish people lives on. In short, as somebody

¹ James B. Pritchard (ed.), *The Ancient Near East : An Anthology of Texts and Pictures* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1958), 231.

² Ibid, 209.

³ Jonathan D. Sarna, *Jacksonian Jew: The Two Worlds of Mordecai Noah* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1981), 178, n.65.

⁴ Thomas B. Morgan, “The Vanishing American Jew,” *Look* 28 (5 May 1964), 42-46.

once said , “prophecy is very difficult, especially about the future.” This may be worth bearing in mind as we proceed.

In this spirit, I want to point to four transformations affecting American Jewry in the 21st century. And then I want to point to three areas of uncertainty concerning the community’s future -- areas where it seems to me that the evidence is not yet in, visions are contested, and the future is being shaped (even as we speak) by the actions of contemporary American Jews. As we look ahead into the 21st century, these are some of the challenges that the Jewish community confronts.

The first transformation that is impacting upon Jewish life in the United States is demographic. In the 21st century, it is safe to predict, the American Jewish community will shrink both absolutely (the number of Jews will decline) and also relatively (the percentage of Jews within the total US population will also decline). The latest *American Jewish Year Book* estimates the current American Jewish population at somewhere between 5.5 and 6 million.⁵ This means that Jews form between 2.2 –2.4% of the national population; 22-24 out of every thousand Americans are Jewish. As a percentage of the population, this represents a substantial decline since the 1940s when Jews were almost 3.7% of the nation’s population (37 out of every thousand). Relatively speaking, then, the Jewish population has already been in decline for half a century. Since the US population is growing and the Jewish population is not, Jews will almost undoubtedly form a smaller and smaller percentage of America’s population, falling below 2% in the 21st century. Still, the absolute number of American Jews has until now not declined. Thanks to immigration and conversions to Judaism that number has remained fairly

⁵ *American Jewish Year Book* 99 (1999), 209, 552.

constant for forty years.⁶ Yet, given the low Jewish birthrate (below zero population growth), the now-declining rate of Jewish immigration, and the burgeoning effects of non-marriage and intermarriage, it seems likely that America's Jewish population will decline in the 21st century. This would mark the first time since the colonial period that America's Jewish population has moved downward.

The Jews of England have already witnessed such a decline. Since 1967, Anglo Jewry's population is estimated to have dropped from over 400,000 to less than 300,000.⁷ The diaspora Jewish population as a whole has also been dropping, by about .8% (65,000) a year.⁸ There is no reason why American Jewry should be immune from this trend. While nobody can predict how great the future decline will be, I suspect that the American Jewish population will fall substantially below five million in a few decades.⁹

At least one scholar, Steven M. Cohen, professes to be unconcerned by this development. He argues that the American Jewish community will become, in effect, "leaner and meaner." It "may shrink numerically," he admits, but those that remain will be "stronger qualitatively" -- better educated Jewishly and more committed Jewishly -- than before.¹⁰ To some this may sound like the ideal corporate scenario for the 21st century: downsize in order to become stronger and more effective. But I am not so sanguine. All evidence suggests, at least in the world of religion, that when faith communities cease to grow -- when their numbers decline both in absolute and in relative

⁶ Jonathan D. Sarna, *The American Jewish Experience* (2nd ed., New York: Holmes and Meier, 1997), 359.

⁷ Bernard Wasserstein, *Vanishing Diaspora: The Jews in Europe Since 1945* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), viii.

⁸ See the "World Jewish Population" section of each year's *American Jewish Year Book*.

⁹ Cf. Sidney Goldstein, "Profile of American Jewry: Insights from the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey," *American Jewish Year Book* 92 (1992), 124.

terms – pessimism takes hold and they lose their vitality and spiritual freshness. Look at Christian Science in America, or at the Quakers, or at the Mainline Protestant denominations that have been in decline for decades and have to a great extent lost the spark that once made them attractive. Continuing cutbacks in the size of the American Jewish population may have a similarly demoralizing impact on the American Jewish community of the future, particularly when Jews see that other faith communities, like the Mormons, Evangelicals, and Catholics, are rapidly increasing.

This leads me to a second important transformation affecting American Jews: the likelihood that in the 21st century, American Jewry will shrink in significance both nationally and internationally. This claim may initially elicit surprise: a case could be made, after all, that American Jews have never been as significant politically as they are right now, with Jews occupying two seats on the Supreme Court, about ten percent of Congress, several governors' chairs, and more. But at the same time, in other respects, the decline in Jewish significance has already taken place. For a time, particularly in the 1950s and 60s, American Jews saw themselves and were seen by others as part of a religious triad celebrated in a best selling book by Will Herberg entitled, significantly, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew* (1955). According to Herberg, America had become a “triple melting pot,” defined by three great ‘communions’ or ‘faiths.’ “Not to be ...either a Protestant, a Catholic or a Jew,” he declared, “is somehow not to be an American.”¹¹ Americans at that time also commonly spoke of their “Judeo-Christian” heritage, again a

¹⁰ Steven M. Cohen, “Why Intermarriage May Not Threaten Jewish Continuity,” *Moment* 19 (December 1994), 95.

¹¹ Will Herberg, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (Revised ed., New York: Anchor, 1960), 256-257.

phrase that included Jews among religious insiders.¹² Nonbelievers, Muslims, Buddhists, and all of the other non-Christian faiths, by contrast, did not feature on the nation's religious canvas in those years. They were outsiders and in many cases had no official status at all.

Today, no serious student of American religion adopts the Protestant-Catholic-Jew model. We recognize that Herberg excluded a great many significant players from his account, and we pay enormous attention to religious outsiders – and well we should: their numbers are growing fast. Islam is reputedly the nation's fastest growing religion. In the 21st century there is every likelihood that there will be more Muslims than Jews in this country: some would say that has already happened.¹³ The result, for Jews, is a decline in status in the world of American religion, one that will only become more evident in the years ahead. Where once most Americans viewed Judaism as the “third faith” in the United States, as well as the nation’s largest non-Christian faith, now Judaism is viewed as one of many American “minority faiths,” and in many circles it is treated accordingly.

A revealing indicator of this may be seen in J. Gordon Melton’s widely praised *Encyclopedia of American Religions*. The 1989 edition of this work divides the country’s 1,588 primary religious bodies into nineteen “families” of religion, only ten of which follow Christian beliefs and practices. Remarkably, Judaism does not even rate a religious family of its own in this classification; instead it is grouped along with Islam,

¹² See Mark Silk, *Spiritual Politics: Religion and America Since World War I* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), 40-53.

¹³ Carol L. Stone, “Estimate of Muslims Living in America,” *The Muslims of America*, ed. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 25-36; *New York Times*, May 2, 1993, p.1; *Boston Sunday Globe*, October 20, 1996, p.B1.

Sufism, Zoroastrianism and Bahai as part of the “Middle Eastern Family.”¹⁴ While this is somewhat bizarre, it does seem to me to adumbrate changes that lie ahead. In the 21st century, Judaism will be seen not as America’s 3rd or even 4th faith, but as one of a great many American religious options – part of the *smorgasbord* of religion in the United States.

As if this change were not enough, 21st century American Judaism will also have to come to terms with its diminished significance on the world Jewish stage. Within the next few decades, Israel is poised to overtake the United States as the largest Jewish community in the world. Today, the United States still is home to between 700,000-1,000,000 more Jews than live in Israel, but Israel’s high birth and immigration rates make its ascension almost inevitable, barring a catastrophe. Indeed, already according to the *American Jewish Year Book*, there are more Jews in Greater Tel Aviv than in Great New York, the first time in a century that New York has not ranked first on the list of cities with major Jewish populations. From an Israeli point of view, Israel’s demographic rise marks the ultimate triumph of Zionism: the first time since the days of the Bible that Israel will truly be the single largest population center of world Jewry. For American Jews, though, the impact of downward mobility, of moving from being the greatest Jewish community in the world – the center of world Jewry – to merely second best may well prove sobering. It will surely affect the self-image of American Jews, their fundraising, their relationship to Israel, and their sense of responsibility to the Jews around the world. Already, the American Jewish community is mired in something of a

¹⁴ *The Encyclopedia of American Religions*, ed. J. Gordon Melton (Detroit: Gale Research, 1989).

crisis of confidence concerning itself and its future.¹⁵ The additional trauma of diminished world and national significance runs the risk of alienating some 21st century Jews completely.

The third transformation is related to this change: in the 21st century, Jews, especially American Jews, will view the diaspora differently than they view it today. Currently, there is an enormous disjunction between the image of the diaspora in the contemporary Jewish and Christian mind, and the reality of the diaspora as it now exists and likely will continue to exist in the new millennium. Jews and Christians still imagine Jews as being a global people spread from one end of the world even unto the other, a people that is, as the late Dr. Jacob Rader Marcus used to say, “omniterritorial.” The reality, however, is that the combined forces of persecution, on the one hand, and Zionism on the other have redrawn the map of world Jewry completely. The diaspora has shrunk by more than forty percent since 1939, and Jews in the diaspora are more concentrated today than ever before. Ninety-five percent of the diaspora Jewish population is confined to just fourteen countries today. A mere 39 countries can boast communities of 5000 Jews or more. Most of the 200 or so countries of the world, including several where Jews had lived for millennia (Iraq, Syria, Ethiopia) are now completely barren of Jews or show tiny communities that are unsustainable. Indeed, huge areas of the world show no Jewish presence whatsoever.¹⁶

There is, to be sure, a silver lining in this data: the vast majority of diaspora Jews, as Sergio Dellapergola has shown, have moved to “economically affluent,

¹⁵ Jonathan D. Sarna, *The American Jewish Community's Crisis of Confidence* Policy Forum No. 10 (Jerusalem: World Jewish Congress, 1996).

¹⁶ *American Jewish Year Book* 97 (1997), 542; 99 (1999), 578.

politically stable and socially attractive environments” over the past fifty years.¹⁷ They have abandoned underdeveloped countries (like Yemen), and unstable, dangerous countries (like Bosnia) and now live in the world’s most economically advanced countries (like America and France). Yet this benefit comes at a price. Where most of the world’s great religions – Christianity, Islam and Eastern religions – are today expanding, Judaism is contracting. Where other peoples are preaching the gospel of globalism and spreading their diasporas north, south, east and west, Jews who invented the very concept of a diaspora are reducing their exposure to the larger world and practicing consolidation.

That brings me to the fourth transformation to be discussed, which concerns the changing nature of general American religious life, and its impact upon Judaism and Jewish life. American Judaism, of course, has always operated within the context of American religion, and has always been deeply influenced – some would say too deeply influenced -- by its norms and values, even when, as frequently happens, these run counter to millennia of Jewish tradition. This accounts for the extraordinary variety of Jewish religious expressions in the United States, parallel to what we find in Protestantism, and also accounts for such much-discussed phenomena as Jewish feminism, gay/lesbian synagogues, the growing interest in Jewish spirituality, and even the rising tide of intermarriages – all of them developments that parallel, albeit with elements of uniqueness, what we find in contemporary American religion as a whole.

In the 21st century, American Judaism is likely to resemble the Protestant denominational structure ever more closely, with the result that in Judaism, as in

¹⁷ Sergio DellaPergola, “Changing Cores and Peripheries: Fifty Years in Socio-Demographic Perspective,” in Robert S. Wistrich, ed., *Terms of Survival: The Jewish World Since 1945* (London and New York:

Protestantism, there will be burgeoning pluralism, greater focus upon the individual than upon the group, more permeable denominational and even interfaith boundaries, and greater emphasis on the value of consent, as against the more traditional Jewish emphasis on descent. Most immediately, we see many new movements in Jewish religious life, including New Age Judaism, Haurah Judaism, Humanistic Judaism and more. About 20% of Jews in a 1995 Boston survey refused to categorize themselves under one of the more familiar rubrics of Orthodox, Conservative, Reconstructionist and Reform Judaism.¹⁸ There are also a burgeoning number of “private ordinations” outside of the established rabbinical seminaries.¹⁹ In the 21st century these trends will likely continue; they parallel what is happening in American religion generally. Similarly, I suspect that we will see a growing number of one generation Jews: Jews (converts to Judaism) who have neither Jewish parents, nor Jewish children. The cultural emphasis on “consent” rather than “descent” (free choice rather than automatically following in the ways of one’s ancestors) makes this well nigh inevitable. A great many converts today assume that their children will freely choose their faith, just like they did.²⁰

Intermarriage reflects a similar emphasis on consent (marry whomever you choose) as opposed to descent (marry only a member of the tribe). Americans of all faiths are marrying across religious lines today in record numbers.²¹ It seems very unlikely that Jews will form an exception to this pattern. The recently published Boston Jewish

Routledge, 1995), 36.

¹⁸ Sherry R. Israel, *Comprehensive Report on the 1995 CJP Demographic Study* (Boston: Combined Jewish Philanthropies, 1997), 46.

¹⁹ See *Boston Globe*, October 22, 1996, pp.D1,D4.

²⁰ See, for example, Brenda Forster and Joseph Tabachnik, *Jews By Choice: A Study of Converts to Reform and Conservative Judaism* (New York: Ktav, 1991), 107.

²¹ Jonathan D. Sarna, “Interreligious Marriage in America,” *The Intermarriage Crisis: Jewish Communal Perspectives and Responses* (New York: American Jewish Committee, 1991); Paul R. Spickard, *Mixed*

population survey reveals that only 1/3 of unmarried Jewish adults consider it “very important to marry someone Jewish.”²² Indeed, it seems to me likely that American Judaism will come in the years ahead to resemble the pattern familiar to us from studies of Protestant denominational switching. A substantial amount of population “churning” will characterize the American Jewish community as eager newcomers enter the Jewish fold and dissatisfied veterans seek out greener religious pastures. As a result, assuming that present trends continue, Jewish “peoplehood” will become a far less significant category in 21st century America, while Judaism (the religion) comes increasingly to resemble its American religious counterparts. Recent research by Steven M. Cohen suggests that this is happening sooner than anyone could have anticipated. Just 52% of the Jews he surveyed agreed with the statement “I look at the entire Jewish community as my extended family.” Only a minority – 47% -- believed that they “have a special responsibility to take care of Jews in need around the world.”²³

So much for transformations. Let me now turn to areas of uncertainty, where it seems to me that the future is still very much up in the air, and significant questions remain. The first of these questions – much discussed in American Jewish circles today – is whether the 21st century will be marked by assimilation or revitalization? Signs of assimilation, of course, abound; witness widespread ritual laxity, disaffiliation and intermarriage. Most Jews have friends whose children have either married out or are less religiously observant than their parents. The much-publicized (although probably

Blood: Intermarriage and Ethnic Identity in Twentieth Century America (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989).

²² Israel, *Comprehensive Report*, 94.

²³ Steven M. Cohen, *Religious Stability and Ethnic Decline: Emerging Patterns of Jewish Identity in the United States* (New York: Florence G. Heller-Jewish Community Centers Association Research Center, 1998), esp. 19-20, 44.

exaggerated) figure of 52% intermarriage is indicative of this trend. Efforts to promote what the organized Jewish community calls “continuity” and “renaissance” reflect the same fear that American Jews may eventually disappear.

At the same time, however, anybody even remotely connected with Jewish life is aware of strong elements of revitalization and renewal within the community. Jewish educational institutions and programs of every kind are flourishing, including Jewish day care centers, private Jewish day schools (equivalent to parochial schools), Jewish high schools, Jewish studies programs at the university level, Jewish summer educational programs, Jewish summer camps, intensive talmudical academies (*yeshivot*), educational institutions for women, and an array of programs of adult Jewish study. There has also been a perceptible return to religion among young people. Every Jew today knows somebody whose children are far more religiously observant than their parents. Even in terms of synagogue attendance, figures point upwards. In Boston, synagogue attendance rose dramatically between 1985 and 1995 among Orthodox, Conservative and Reform Jews alike.²⁴

The question as Jews witness these two contradictory trends operating simultaneously – assimilation and revitalization -- is which one will turn out to be the dominant trend, and which will be looked back upon as an epiphenomenon, an historical side-show, “static on the screen”? The answer, of course, is that nobody knows. The question is being decided day by day in the hearts and minds of contemporary American Jews. At the deepest level, that is what much of Jewish communal politics in recent years has been all about: how to prevent assimilation and promote revitalization.

²⁴ Israel, *Comprehensive Report*, 48-49.

A second area of uncertainty concerns the question of whether Judaism in the years ahead will be characterized by religious polarization (Jews becoming, in Jack Wertheimer's memorable phrase, "A People Divided"²⁵), or whether there will be a return to the "vital center" in Jewish life, isolating extremists on both sides? The case for religious polarization is easy to make, not just because the level of polarizing rhetoric is so high, and American culture as a whole has been embroiled in culture wars, but also because there are some seemingly unbridgeable issues that divide left and right, chief among them the hundreds of thousands of Jews whom the Reform movement accepts as Jews and traditional Orthodoxy does not (including converts and children of intermarries where the mother is not Jewish.) Israel also encourages polarization in American Jewish life in many ways. Since Orthodoxy is the only recognized form of Judaism in Israel and most Jewishly affiliated Israelis are in fact Orthodox, many leaders of American Orthodoxy view rapprochement with Conservative and Reform Jews as almost a betrayal of their Orthodox counterparts in Israel who are fighting to maintain the State's Orthodox character. Add all of this together and the case for a schism in the Jewish world seems powerfully strong.

There are, however, also significant signs of a movement back to the center in Jewish life, especially at the lay level. The vast majority of American Jews identify themselves as standing somewhere in the middle of the Jewish religious spectrum, from Centrist Orthodox to Centrist Reform, and it is these Jews who are most appalled by the specter of a communal schism. Most Jewish lay leaders come from this group, and they form a strong force speaking out on behalf of Jewry's "vital center." Recent years have thus

²⁵ Jack Wertheimer, *A People Divided: Judaism in Contemporary America* (New York: Basic Books, 1993).

witnessed the rise of “transdenominational” Jewish schools and summer programs, intra-Jewish dialogues, and other efforts aimed at effecting communal reconciliation. America itself seems to be moving back to the Center politically; might Jews follow suit? At this point, the answer to the question cannot be known. Like the assimilation-revival conundrum, the question of whether the center will re-emerge or schism will result is actually being decided on the ground wherever Jews gather.

Finally, uncertainty surrounds the question of whether 21st century American Jews will be able to identify a mission compelling enough for the American Jewish community to become passionate about and rally around. The great causes that once energized and invigorated American Jewry – immigrant absorption, saving European Jewry, creating and sustaining a Jewish state, rescuing Soviet, Arab, and Ethiopian Jews – all of these great missions have now been successfully completed. Today, for the first time in historical memory, no large community of persecuted Jews exists anywhere in the world. Nor will 21st century American Jews gain the kind of meaning from helping Israel, keeping alive the memory of the Holocaust, and fighting antisemitism that their 20th century parents did; indeed, the major themes of 20th century American Jewish history – fighting antisemitism, saving world Jewry, and establishing Israel -- are essentially past.

There are, to be sure, no shortage of important secular and universal causes that American Jews can and do embrace, from environmentalism and gay rights to world hunger and animal rights, and these are all significant causes, many of them with a sound basis in Jewish tradition. But these are not, ultimately, Jewish causes, in the way that Zionism and the Soviet Jewry movement certainly were. Diaspora Jews today are the

poorer for not having found a well-defined, elevating mission to inspire them. It remains to be seen whether such a new and compelling mission can in fact be formulated.

Rather than concluding on this note of uncertainty, however, let us instead recall that problems, crises and anticipated catastrophes – many of them far worse than anything that American Jews are currently experiencing – cascade through Jewish history. They are what make Jews, in Simon Rawidowicz's famous phrase, the “ever-dying people.”²⁶ The fact that Jews have so often defied the odds and continued to survive testifies to the value of their being highly attuned to such problems. Complacency, Jews know, is a luxury that they can never afford.

²⁶ Simon Rawidowicz, *Studies in Jewish Thought*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1974), 210-224; Marshall Sklare, *Observing America's Jews*, ed. Jonathan D. Sarna (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1993), 262-274.