

AMERICAN JEWISH POLITICAL CONSERVATISM IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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“Jews are by nature conservative,” the American-trained British chief rabbi, Joseph H. Hertz, writes in his prayer book, completed during World War II. Hertz explains that “loyalty to the State is ingrained in the Jewish character,” and that “in all those countries in which persecution has not embittered their life,” Jews “are no more radical than the non-Jewish members of the social class to which they belong.”¹

Hertz’s claim surprises us for at least two reasons. First, he attributes Jewish political behavior to “nature” and “ingrained” characteristics, whereas we would surely attribute such behavior to nurture and acquired characteristics. Second, and even more surprising, he considers Jews to be “naturally conservative,” whereas the bulk of those who describe Jewish political behavior in the United States assume, if anything, that Jews are “naturally liberal,” and, as heirs of the biblical prophets, always have been.²

Hertz’s characterization of Jewish politics might be easily explained away on the basis of his having been a well-known apologist³, or as a generalization drawn from his experiences in England. There, the Conservative Party enjoyed at various times substantial Jewish support, especially from the Jewish establishment, although the majority of Jews in Hertz’s own day actually backed the Labour Party.⁴ Just to dismiss Hertz on these grounds, however, would be a mistake. For, as we shall see, political conservatism does draw from a deep wellspring of Jewish political philosophy, law, and historical experience. Even in the United States, where traditional Jewish politics was transformed by the Revolu-

1. Joseph H. Hertz, *The Authorised Daily Prayer Book* (rev. ed., New York: 1948 [orig. ed., 1942-45]), 503.

2. Lawrence H. Fuchs, *The Political Behavior of American Jews* (New York, , 1956), 171-203; idem, “Introduction,” *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 66:2 (December 1976), 182-183; Gerald Sorin, *The Prophetic Minority* (Bloomington, IN: 1985), 3; Henry L. Feingold, “American Liberalism and Jewish Response,” *Contemporary Jewry* 9 (Fall Winter 1987/88), 19-45.

3. Harvey Meirovich, *A Vindication of Judaism: The Polemics of the Hertz Pentateuch* (New York: 1998).

4. Geoffrey Alderman, *Modern British Jewry* (Oxford: 1992), 335-338; idem, *The Jewish Community in British Politics* (Oxford: 1983).

tion, political conservatism, while by no means "natural" or even widespread, was certainly more prevalent than generally imagined.

The prophet Jeremiah provides us with the first sustained statement of Jewish political philosophy in the diaspora. Notwithstanding the supposed radicalism of the biblical prophets, his message is a staunchly conservative one. Writing from Jerusalem to the Jewish community exiled in Babylonia, the prophet exhorts Jews to "Seek the welfare of the city to which I have exiled you, and pray to the Lord in its behalf; for in its prosperity you shall prosper (Jer. 29:7)." This prudent, support-the-status-quo counsel was reiterated by the rabbis in the Ethics of the Fathers (3:2), where they explained, in the name of the first century deputy High Priest, Rabbi Hanina, that one should "Pray for the welfare of the government, since but for the fear thereof men would swallow each other alive." Samuel, the Amoraic leader of the Babylonian Jewish community at the time of the Sassanid conquest, went further, declaring it a religious principle that Jews should observe the law of the land as binding ("*Dina De-Malkhuta Dina*"), superseding, in some cases, even established Jewish law.⁵ A gentile government of laws, even if it was an oppressive government, the rabbis believed, was superior to social chaos and anarchy. In this, incidentally, the rabbis anticipated an important tenet of modern conservative thought. Where liberals have traditionally been suspicious of governmental and institutional restraints, conservatives, Jerry Muller shows, "are disposed to protect the authority and legitimacy of existing institutions because they believe human society cannot flourish without them, [and that] the restraints imposed by institutions... are necessary to constrain and guide human passions."⁶ Traditional Judaism agreed. One of the "longest and most consistently held ideas in the history of [Jewish] political thought," Martin Sicker has demonstrated, is the idea that government is required to protect order, lest society disintegrate.⁷

A remarkable letter, dated September 1864, from Sir Moses Montefiore in London to the Jewish community of Morocco, epitomizes Jewish political philosophy as generations of conservative-minded Jewish leaders understood it. The letter is worth quoting at length:

5. David Biale, *Power and Powerlessness in Jewish History* (New York: 1986), 54-57; Shmuel Shilo, "Dina De-Malkhuta Dina," *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: 1972), VI, col. 51-56; idem, *Dina De-Malkhuta Dina* (Jerusalem: 1974).

6. Jerry Z. Muller, *Conservatism: An Anthology of Social and Political Thought from David Hume to the Present* (Princeton: 1997), 11.

7. Martin Sicker, "A Political Metaphor in Biblical and Rabbinic Literature," *Judaism* 40 (Spring 1991), 208-214.

Throughout the world, a chief characteristic of the Jews is that of being loyal, obedient and peaceful subjects of their Sovereign. The precepts inculcating this conduct are enforced on us by the Sacred Scriptures, and by the wise exhortations of our Sages. Unless due respect be paid to the just exercise of legally constituted authority, there can be neither order nor safety though it may be that, in some places, the subordinate authorities abuse the powers with which they are entrusted, let it not be said that their severity or wrongdoing is attributable to any manifestation or disrespect on your part. You must never for a moment forget the loyalty, the affection and respect due to your Sovereign, on whom you must rely, and to whom, in case of need, you must appeal for protection against oppression, and redress for injury. It is by conduct such as this, we may hope that, under the Almighty's blessing, the heart of those who would molest or injure you will be softened; or that, should injustice be done, it will be speedily and surely punished.⁸

Sir Moses' letter, in addition to its restatement of Jeremiah's principle, points to an important conservative political corollary that is also deeply rooted in Jewish political thought: what historian Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi has called the "royal alliance." "Throughout medieval Christian Europe," Yerushalmi writes, "the Jews inevitably, yet willingly, allied themselves to the Crown as the best, and, ultimately, the only guarantor of stability and security." The book of Esther served as something of a biblical proof-text for this "royal alliance." Thanks to the activities of Jews working in and around the Persian court of King Ahasueros, according to the well-known story, the machinations of Haman were foiled, and at the king's behest the Jews were saved. In medieval Christendom, from the thirteenth century onward, Jews in many countries actually held the status of *servi camerae* (serfs of the chamber), making the monarch their direct legal protector. The result, in Yerushalmi's words, was a "royal alliance," born of necessity and confirmed by history, that "flowered beyond its obvious mundane realities into a guiding myth."⁹

This myth, characteristic of Jews throughout the medieval world and, as Montefiore's letter demonstrates, well into the modern period as well, inspired Jews not only to cast their lots with the sovereign authority but also to pray fervently for its welfare. Indeed, the traditional Jewish prayer for the government, composed in the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century and recited with minor variations in some American synagogues to this very day, calls on God to "bless, guard, protect, help,

8. Reprinted in Myrtle Franklin with Michael Bor, *Sir Moses Montefiore 1784-1885* (New York: 1984), 30.

9. Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *The Lisbon Massacre of 1506 and the Royal Image in the "Shebet Yehudah,"* Hebrew Union College Annual Supplements no. 1 (Cincinnati, 1976), 35-66, esp. 37, 39.

exalt, magnify and highly aggrandize" the king and the royal family [or their American equivalent], to grant them a long and prosperous rule, and to inspire them with benevolence "toward us and all Israel our brethren."¹⁰ Elsewhere, I have argued that this prayer actually conceals a hidden subversive message, "a call for rescue, redemption, and revenge."¹¹ The prayer's manifest content is, nevertheless, highly conservative, and it bespeaks the almost obsequious relationship that frequently developed over the years between the Jewish minority and the ruling authorities—a relationship based on the widespread Jewish assumption that "kings, and royal officials generally, are always ardent protectors of the Jews against the attacks of the rabble."¹²

We know, of course, that this Jewish assumption sometimes proved calamitously wrong—witness Spain, Portugal, and Czarist Russia. Nevertheless, this combination of law, political philosophy, and historical experience, reiterated time and again as Jews moved from one diaspora land to the next, generally reinforced conservative, pro-monarchist policies. These, Jews believed, were what tradition demanded and, besides, the alternative seemed fraught with a great deal more peril. As historian Ben Halpern observed, Jews learned from diaspora experience "that their safety always depended on political and social stability... they depended for their lives on the authorities, on the persons and groups who exercised legitimate power."¹³ Looking back over Jewish history, Halpern, himself a staunch liberal, Zionist, and secularist, arrived, surprisingly enough, at much the same conclusion as Chief Rabbi Hertz had years earlier. "The *natural* Jewish political attitude," Halpern declared, "the attitude that truly expresses a continuous tradition up to and including the *shtetl*, is one of conservatism."¹⁴

10. Hertz, *Authorized Daily Prayer Book*, 506-507. This paragraph is drawn from Jonathan D. Sarna, "Jewish Prayers for the U.S. Government: A Study in the Liturgy of Politics and the Politics of Liturgy," *Moral Problems in American Life: New Perspectives on Cultural History*, ed. Karen Haltunen and Lewis Perry, (Ithaca, NY: 1998), 200-221, esp. pp.202-204.

11. *Ibid.*, 204.

12. Yerushalmi, *The Lisbon Massacre*, 39. Yerushalmi, of course, is describing the views of Solomon Ibn Verga. For later, parallel views expressed in nineteenth-century Galicia and Poland, see Raphael Mahler, *Hasidism and the Jewish Enlightenment* (Philadelphia: 1985), esp. 54f and 222f.

13. Ben Halpern, "The Roots of American Jewish Liberalism," *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 66 (December 1976), 194-195.

14. Ben Halpern, *Jews and Blacks: The Classic American Minorities* (New York: 1971), p.100, italics added. Jerold S. Auerbach takes a different approach, rooting traditional Jewish conservatism in the observance of Jewish law; see his *Rabbis and Lawyers: The Journey from Torah to Constitution* (Bloomington, IN: 1990), 26-48, and his "Liberalism, Judaism and American Jews: A Response," in *The Americanization of the Jews*, ed. Robert M. Seltzer and Norman J. Cohen (New York: 1995), 144-145.

What happened when Jews came to America? Having won the right to settle and trade in the seventeenth century, all indications are that Jews embraced the same traditional, conservative political tactics that they had practiced in Europe. The directors of the Dutch West India Company held that a “sectarian” could remain in its colonies so long as “he behaves quietly and legally, gives no offense to his neighbor and does not oppose the government.”¹⁵ Jews accepted and internalized all three of these conditions. They believed deeply in the values of tradition and deference, and as merchants and traders what they prized above all else was security and stability.

A century later Colonial Jews gave expression to these values in their earliest published liturgical composition, a “Form of Prayer” from Congregation Shearith Israel in New York, marking the day (October 23, 1760) “Appointed by Proclamation for a General Thanksgiving to Almighty God, for the Reducing of Canada to His Majesty’s Dominions.” The prayer recited on this occasion, displaying characteristic loyalty and subservience, offered “Honour, Praise and Thanks” to God “for the Victory and Salvation” granted “to the Armies of our Lord, and King, against his Enemies,” and rejoiced in the conquest of Canada under the “happy Dominion of his Sacred Majesty, King GEORGE, the second, whose name be exalted as a Banner to be displayed for Glory and Renown.” It included a version of the traditional prayer for the government, complete with its blessings for the King and the royal family (“as it’s done every Sabath and Holiday thro’ the Year”) and it concluded with a prayer for “Peace, Tranquility, and Prosperity.”¹⁶ The document was obviously designed for external consumption, but for precisely this reason it remains revealing. In presenting themselves to the public, colonial Jews sought to underscore that, basically, they shared the same civic and religious values as their neighbors.

These values underwent significant changes with the advent of the American Revolution. The war divided Americans into two political camps, popularly known as Patriots and Tories, and the Jewish community likewise divided, the majority favoring independence and the minority opposing it. Tory sympathizers, Jews among them, largely left the United States by the war’s end, and with them, some historians

15. E.T. Corwin (ed.) *Ecclesiastical Records of the State of New York* (Albany, NY: 1901), 1:530.

16. *The Form of Prayer Which was performed at the Jews Synagogue in the City of New-York on Thursday October 23, 1760 . . . Composed by D.R. Joseph Yesurun Pinto . . .* (New York, 1760), 3-4, reprinted in *Studia Rosenthaliana* 13 (January 1979): following page 24.

believe, political conservatism likewise departed. In its place, these scholars argue, new liberal ideas concerning government, religion, citizenship, and individual rights spread throughout the New Nation. A newer group of scholars, however, has shown that conservatism did not so much disappear as metamorphose: it draped itself in new republican and constitutional garb. "In a republic founded upon the principles of popular sovereignty and individual liberty, and upon an assertion of natural rights," Jerry Muller explains, "American conservatism stressed the limitation of popular sovereignty, the necessity of a relatively strong federal government, and the importance of reverence for institutions nurtured by a sense of continuity with the past."¹⁷

Jews, of course, formed only a very tiny part of the New Nation—less than one tenth of one percent. Their chief objective was to achieve equality in the New Nation: as the German-Jewish immigrant merchant Jonas Phillips put it in his letter to the 1787 Constitutional Convention meeting in Philadelphia, "the Israelites will think themselves happy to live under a government where all Religious societies are on an Equal footing."¹⁸ The question, for our purposes, is whether Jews after the Revolution maintained the "natural conservatism" that, we have seen, characterized diaspora Jewish life for centuries, or whether under the influence of their new situation their politics changed.

In a highly influential article, published back in 1948, Morris U. Schappes indicated that early American Jews changed their politics, linking themselves with the liberal Jeffersonians in opposition to the conservative Federalists. Late 18th century Federalists, he contended, were not only "anti-democratic, anti-immigrant, [and] anti-Negro," but antisemitic as well, and he enumerated five significant Jews—Gershom Mendes Seixas, Solomon Simpson, Naphtali Judah, Moses Levy [actually a Christian of Jewish origin¹⁹] and Benjamin Nones—who, along with "other Jews in the ranks of progress . . . fought the reaction of their day . . . participated in the election of Jefferson to the presidency and thus, in a humble way, helped to change the course of American history."²⁰ Benjamin Nones' ardent and oft-quoted dedication to the Democratic-Republicans' cause buttressed Schappes' claim. In a well-known letter,

17. Muller, *Conservatism*, 146.

18. Jonathan D. Sarna and David G. Dalin, *Religion and State in the American Jewish Experience* (Notre Dame, IN: 1997), 1, 73.

19. Edwin Wolf 2nd and Maxwell Whiteman, *The History of the Jews of Philadelphia from Colonial times to the Age of Jackson* (Philadelphia: 1956), 209, 217.

20. Morris U. Schappes, "Anti-Semitism and Reaction, 1795-1800," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 38 (December, 1948), 109-137.

published in the *Philadelphia Aurora* (August 11, 1800), Nones declared, "I am a Jew, and if for no other reason, for that reason am I a republican." He went on to ask:

How then can a Jew but be a Republican? In America particularly. Unfeeling & ungrateful would he be, if he were callous to the glorious and benevolent cause of the difference between his situation in this land of freedom, and among the proud and privileged law givers of Europe.²¹

Persuasive as all this evidence seems, however, and much as we might imagine that all Jews would have supported Thomas Jefferson's election, it turns out that some of Philadelphia's richest and most influential Jews, including Joseph and Hyman Gratz and Aaron Levy, were *not* Democratic Republicans. They continued to support the Federalist Party, its record of Jew-baiting notwithstanding. Nationwide in 1800, according to historian Jacob Rader Marcus, "a substantial number of the Children of Israel were Federalists," though all evidence suggests that even more of America's small number of Jews were not.²² Economic and cultural considerations doubtless played some role here, as has been generally true in America, but neither was determinative. What *is* certain is that the American Jewish community was politically divided in 1800: there were staunch liberals like Nones, staunch conservatives like the Gratzes, and not a few Jews whom we can identify as political independents, for they moved back and forth. This pluralism—this diversity of political positions within the Jewish community—is to my mind the most important legacy of the American Revolution. It also, as Ezra Mendelsohn reminds us, represents a defining characteristic of modern Jewish politics generally.²³ In place of the "natural conservatism" associated with traditional Jewish group politics, individual Jews, now legally free to vote as they liked, espoused a wide range of political beliefs, liberal and conservative alike. Henceforward, Jews, far from being united politically, cast votes on both sides of most contested elections, and this same pattern adhered throughout the nineteenth century.

The *New York Herald* discovered this pattern as early as 1841, in the earliest American analysis of the Jewish vote that I know. Attempting to categorize Jews according to their country of origin, it reported that "most of the Portuguese Jews are Whigs; of the German Jews, about half

21. Morris U. Schappes, *A Documentary History of the Jews in the United States 1654-1875* (New York: 1971), 95.

22. Jacob R. Marcus, *United States Jewry 1776-1985* (Detroit: 1989), I, pp. 527, 579; Wolf and Whiteman, *History of the Jews of Philadelphia*, pp.218-19.

23. Ezra Mendelsohn, *On Modern Jewish Politics* (New York: 1993), 3-36.

are Whigs; of the Pollakim [Polish Jews] about one third. There is still another sect of Jews in this city whose politics, etc. are but little if at all known."²⁴ Even if, as I suspect, this report was based upon impressionistic evidence, rather than hard data, it remains interesting for two reasons. First of all, it indicates that contemporary observers considered Jews to be politically divided; this is not just a historian's retrospective analysis. Second, many Jews apparently associated themselves with the conservative Whig Party, in opposition to the more liberal Jacksonian democrats. As we shall see, the leading American Jewish politician of that time, Mordecai Noah, was himself a Whig, and this may well have influenced his Jewish associates.

Further evidence for the variety of Jewish political expressions in nineteenth century America may be found in the *American Jewish Year Book's* list of Jews who served in Congress prior to 1900. Of the twenty-three Jewish Congressmen and Senators found on this list (many of whom did not self-identify as Jews), I was able to identify fourteen as Democrats, six as Republicans, one as a Jacksonian, one as a member of the (nativist) American party, and one, Judah Benjamin, who began his career as a Whig, later became a Democrat, and still later served in the Confederacy.²⁵ East European Jews, when they immigrated, maintained this pluralistic political tradition. In 1893, George Price, in his book on Russian Jews in America written for a Russian audience, wrote that Jews "did not form an independent political party but they divide their allegiance among all of them."²⁶ Robert Rockaway reached this same conclusion in his retrospective study of Jewish politics in Detroit: "up to 1914 the Eastern European Jewish immigrants...remained splintered politically and were cultivated by candidates of all political persuasions."²⁷ In Cincinnati, the political divisions within the Jewish community blazed for all to see in the election of 1900. There—for "the first time in our history," according to the *American Israelite*—two notable Jews, Julius Fleischmann (Republican) and Alfred M. Cohen (Democrat), ran against

24. *New York Herald*, April 13, 1841, p.2; Jonathan D. Sarna, *Jacksonian Jew: The Two Worlds of Mordecai Noah* (New York: 1981), 101.

25. *American Jewish Year Book* 2 (1900-1901), 517-524. Where no party preference is indicated in the *Year Book*, I have relied upon data in the *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress 1774-1989* (Washington DC: 1989). There is some doubt as to whether several of these 23 were even of Jewish descent, but I have accepted them as Jews for the purposes of this exercise.

26. George M. Price, "The Russian Jews in America," translated by Leo Shpall, *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 48 (December 1958), 127.

27. Robert A. Rockaway, "The Eastern European Jewish Community of Detroit, 1881-1914," *YIVO Annual* 15 (1974), 101.

one another for the position of mayor. Fleischmann won, but there is every reason to believe that—as so often the case in the nineteenth century—the Jewish vote was divided.²⁸

In a few cases, Jewish political conservatives in nineteenth-century America not only voted conservatively, but also articulated a well-founded conservative political philosophy. No full-scale survey of this topic can be undertaken here, but I offer several examples to demonstrate that at least some Jewish conservatives were ideologically motivated; they were not simply driven by political expedience. The best example also concerns the best-known American Jew of his day, the journalist-politician Mordecai M. Noah (1785-1851). Noah, as a young man, had espoused social reform and famously advocated a colony for the Jews (“Ararat”) on Grand Island, New York, but beginning in the mid-1830s (about when Noah himself turned fifty) he joined the conservative wing of the Whig Party, and his newspaper, the [New York] *Evening Star*, articulated principles that would, for the most part, win support from conservative politicians even today. He called upon Americans to “weaken the powers of the general government and to strengthen the powers of the state.” He thought that government should concern itself largely with peace and tranquility. He spoke out in favor of “order,” “discipline,” and “good government,” and warned against the domestic threat caused by disorderly mobs. He attacked vices, and advocated self control and social control. And he held up the wealthy as deserving of emulation because, he contended, “almost all who are rich men began life as poor men, and by economy, industry, good fortune and integrity have become rich.” Noah’s conservatism was, in some cases, tempered by conscience, especially on issues connected to freedom of religion. He thus opposed anti-Mormonism and anti-Catholicism, causes that too many social conservatives of his day fell prey to. But when it came to other conservative issues like nativism, Southern rights, and preserving the status quo on slavery, Noah displayed no similar qualms. “The bonds of society,” he believed, “must be kept as they now are.” “To emancipate slaves,” he warned menacingly, “would be to jeopardize the safety of the whole country.”²⁹

Politically conservative Jewish leaders of the post-Civil War era did not follow Noah’s example on these issues, just as many American Jews of his own day ignored him. But it is striking that, on other issues, two

28. Jonathan D. Sarna and Nancy H. Klein, *The Jews of Cincinnati* (Cincinnati: 1989), 101; Zane I. Miller, *Boss Cox’s Cincinnati* (Chicago: 1968), 172-174.

29. Sarna, *Jacksonian Jew*, 103-114.

of America's foremost late nineteenth and early twentieth century American Jewish leaders did self-consciously articulate conservative ideas. Jacob H. Schiff (1847-1920), the community's greatest philanthropist and financier, was (except on rare occasion) a solid Republican, and he publicly supported "sound money" and "conservative methods," even as he feared "social revolution." A staunch believer in the Puritan tradition and the 'American dream,' Schiff lived, according to his biographers, "by a sense of duty and strict morality."³⁰ His friend Louis Marshall (1856-1929), the lawyer who ruled the Jewish community under what was sometimes called "Marshall law," lived up to an even more conservative code.. His biographer characterizes him as "naturally Republican," and shows how he evinced "a generally conservative approach to social and economic innovations, especially those extending the power of the federal government." Marshall even considered it "unpatriotic" to desert the Republican party in 1912, when so many other Republicans, including Jacob Schiff, voted for Woodrow Wilson. "I am absolutely convinced, he wrote, "that the Republican party presents the only hope against the onslaught which is now in process against our cherished institutions."³¹

The ideological conservatism of Marshall, Schiff and Noah reflects an all-but-forgotten tradition in early American Jewish politics and, as we have seen, within the Jewish political tradition as a whole. While studies of American Jewish liberalism proliferate, Jewish political conservatism lies untended; it is a neglected field of study. One need not accept Chief Rabbi Hertz's claim that "Jews are by nature conservative." Nor does the American evidence support his theory that Jews "are no more radical than the non-Jewish members of the social class to which they belong." Still, as we have seen, the conservative tradition in American Jewish politics does have firm historical, cultural and religious roots. Whether scholars in the twenty-first century will probe those roots, and whether politically-minded American Jews will take nourishment from them, remains to be seen.

30. Cyrus Adler, *Jacob H. Schiff: His Life and Letters* (Garden City, New York: 1929), 306-314; Priscilla M. Roberts, "The American 'Eastern Establishment' and World War I" (Ph.D., Cambridge University, 1981), ch. 1; Naomi W. Cohen, *Jacob H. Schiff: A Study in American Jewish Leadership* (Hanover, NH: 1999), ch. 1.

31. Morton Rosenstock, *Louis Marshall, Defender of Jewish Rights* (Detroit: 1965), 27-31; Charles Reznikoff (ed.), *Louis Marshall: Champion of Liberty* (Philadelphia: 1957), 1152-1155.