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Concentration

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IS IT THE BEST OF TIMES for the Jewish community, a new “golden age,” or is ours the worst of times, an era of assimilation and demographic decline? Most considerations of this subject focus either upon education and culture, where the trends are heartwarmingly positive, or upon intermarriage and the Jewish birthrate, where most of the news is depressingly glum. I want to shift the focus to consider a different arena of change: patterns of Jewish settlement. Recent data suggests that a new Jewish world is aborning.

A century ago, Jews lived on six continents and in almost every country in the world. They lived in Muslim countries and in Christian countries, in countries that were both underdeveloped and developed. Travelers supplied colorful accounts of exotic Jewish communities in places such as China, Ethiopia, and Yemen. The prophecy that “you shall spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south” (Gen 28:14) seemed to have been fulfilled.

Today, by contrast, the Jewish world is rapidly consolidating. Some 80.3 percent of world Jewry lives in just two countries: the United States and Israel. Half of all Jews live in just five metropolitan areas: Tel Aviv, New York, Los Angeles, Haifa, and Jerusalem. Fully 95 percent of all Jews live in but fourteen countries. The rest of the countries of the world are today totally barren of Jews or house remnant communities that are far too small to be viable. This includes Muslim countries like Iraq and Syria where Jews had lived for millennia, but were forced to leave after 1948; European

countries like Poland and Bulgaria, where Jews were either murdered in the Shoah or departed in its aftermath; and Caribbean communities like Suriname and Jamaica, where Jews have either emigrated away or assimilated out of existence. Owing to the effects of persecution, Zionism, and economic change, Jewish settlement patterns have radically shifted. The world, as a result, abounds in neglected Jewish historical sites, remnants of once glorious Diaspora Jewish communities that have now faded into memory.

The consolidation of world Jewry is not necessarily a bad thing. To the contrary, as the Jewish demographer Sergio Dellapergola reminds us, Jews have moved since 1945 to “economically affluent, politically stable, and socially attractive environments.” (“Changing Cores and Peripheries” in R. S. Wistrich, *Terms of Survival*, p.36) 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, Israel, and France. As a result, no major Jewish community in the world today suffers widespread persecution, and the majority of Jews, even in the Diaspora, benefit from strength of numbers. They live in large, comparatively affluent Jewish communities that maintain diverse Jewish institutions while maintaining close ties to non-Jewish neighbors.

Yet these benefits come at a steep price. Where most of the world’s great religions — Christianity, Islam, and Eastern religions — are today expanding, Judaism is contract-

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ing. 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 Diaspora — are practicing consolidation.

The implications of this consolidation reach far beyond the spatial distribution of world Jewry. Far more important is the fact that Judaism today is no longer a world religion. Asia (leaving aside Israel) contains all of 42,800 Jews — a mere droplet in an ocean of 3.688 billion human beings. An even smaller number of Jews live in Africa (excluding South Africa), and the numbers in Central and South America are not much better. For all that Jews still talk about “improving the world,” the reality is that they have withdrawn from those sections of the world that most need improvement. As the 21st century dawns, Judaism has instead shriveled into a regional religion. Centered in Israel and North America, it preserves diminishing communities in Europe, Australia, and New Zealand.

Is it any wonder, given these constricted demographics, that most of the world knows nothing about Jews, fails to understand why they feel as they do about the State of Israel, and falls prey to wild, conspiratorial theories such as the notoriously antisemitic *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*?

To be sure, the situation of Jews prior to the Shoah, when Jews were far more widely distributed across the world than they are now, failed to protect Jews when they needed protection most. Nor, historically, has antisemi-

tism been more prevalent in countries without Jews than in countries where they dwelt in large numbers. The fact that Jews, in 1931, comprised some 9.8 percent of Poland’s population by no means prevented their slaughter.

Still, the Jewish world of the 21st century — a world where Jews concentrate in a few first-world countries and avoid most other countries completely — raises numerous questions. How, for example, will countries

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without Jewish communities of their own respond to Jews and Jewish issues in the years ahead? How will Jews retain their sensitivity to the needs of the underdeveloped world if they are not present in that world? And most important of all, will the long-term survival of Jews be enhanced by the strategy of concentration, or would a strategy of dispersal prove more beneficial? The Jewish community over the past 50 years has transformed historic Jewish settlement patterns without considering any of these questions. Will that prove to have been a prescient move or a blunder of historic proportions? Whether this new pattern of settlement proves beneficial or detrimental to Jewish interests in the long term, only time will tell. ●