

Perched Between Continuity and Discontinuity: American Judaism at a Crossroads

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It is a particular honor for me to be here at this session in memory of Rabbi Simon Greenberg. I spent my early years as one of the faculty children in the synagogue of the Jewish Theological Seminary, where Simon Greenberg sat prominently in the front row, and in later years I spoke with him whenever our paths crossed. I recall that in my very last conversation with him just a few years ago at the Seminary, he spoke of the great importance of American Jewish history. It is only through an appreciation of both American *and* American Jewish history, he believed, that the experience of Jews in this country can properly be understood.

My assignment this morning, however, is not so much to look backward historically, as it is to look forward to deal with the question of Jewish continuity, ongoing Jewish survival in this country. This assignment, in many ways, is a dangerous one for an historian, because if you actually examine the history of prophecies about Jews, whether in America or elsewhere, almost all of them have proved wrong. One of the oldest recorded mentions of the name Israel is, in a sense, such a prophecy. It is included in an Egyptian hymn of victory dating to Pharaoh Mer-ne-ptah (about 1230 BCE), and it reads, "Israel is laid waste, his seed is [wiped out]." We know that things worked out rather differently; in fact it is the Pharaohs that were eventually wiped out, while Israel lived on. More recently, just over 170 years ago, one of the wisest men in America, the nation's then attorney general William Wirt, predicted that within 150 years Jews would be indistinguishable from the rest of mankind. Today William Wirt is himself indistinguishable and long forgotten; again Jews live on. *Look Magazine*, in a famous cover story in 1964, wrote of "The Vanishing American Jew." Today, *Look* itself has vanished—

not just once but twice—and again the Jewish people lives on. In short, as somebody once said, prophecy is very difficult, especially about the future. This may be worth bearing in mind as we proceed.

Actually, there is a good reason *why* past prophecies about Jewish continuity have so often proved wrong, and that is that Jews have often been frightened by the image of the future that prophets, or *lehavdil*, Jewish historians project, and they work to change the future; which really means changing their ways in the present. The Prophet Jonah learned this lesson thousands of years ago in Nineveh and the lesson still holds true today. As an historian, I have become convinced that, paradoxically, *the best way to ensure Jewish continuity in this country is to predict that Jews will not survive. That more than anything else inspires our best minds and our best efforts to prove the prediction wrong.*

Now in this spirit, I want to point this morning to four great discontinuities in American Jewish life, caused by changes in the surrounding American social environment, that seem to me fraught with serious consequences for the American Jewish community. These are the key reasons why, it seems to me, that we Jews stand today at an historical crossroads.

First, for most of our history we have considered ourselves a separate people, different from our neighbors. *Hen am l'vadad yishkon uvagoyim lo yitkhashav*, "There is a people that dwells apart, not reckoned among the nations." [Num 23:9] So Bilam described us back in the wilderness, and so Jews remained for millennia. In America today, however, the idea that Jews are a separate people dwelling apart seems increasingly out of touch with reality. I am not referring just to the spatial distribution of Jews and to assimilation, although it is well known that Jews have spread out and have assimilated. I am concerned instead by the fact that Jewish peoplehood is no longer a recognized or meaningful category in this country. Where only a few years ago the central differences between Americans were said to be rooted in ethnicity (Italian, Irish, Polish, Jewish), today the emphasis everywhere is increasingly upon race: white, black, Hispanic, Asian American, and Native American. The United States census and the Department of Labor classify Americans by race (not for the most part by ethnicity), and programs of multiculturalism place primary emphasis on race. Racial differences are—unhappily—a central fact of life in contemporary American society, largely because the number of non-white Americans has grown exponentially since 1965, owing to immigration law changes and high birthrates. Consequently, the

lines dividing European white ethnic groups from one another in America have blurred. Jewish, Irish, and Italian Americans, viewed through the prism of color, are all alike white males and females. At best, Jewishness is seen today as something of a social invention: part of nurture, not part of nature. What we are witnessing, in Richard Alba's words, is the "twilight of ethnicity" in the United States. A few outward symbols and rituals, Alba insists, are all that remain to distinguish white ethnics in the United States from one another.

In terms of Jewish continuity, this poses a dramatic challenge that we have not previously faced in diaspora history: How do we maintain Jewish distinctiveness in a society that scarcely considers Jews, as a people, distinctive at all? And if it is true that the ethnic differences between Jews and their white neighbors are primarily symbolic, how do we stave off invisibility?

The second great discontinuity that I want to bring to your attention concerns the character of religion in the United States today. We are witnessing the growth in this country of Islam, of Eastern religions, and of Metaphysical, Psychic and New Age faiths. Concomitantly, we are witnessing a decline in that model of American religion that we all grew up with, the famous triad of Protestant-Catholic-Jew, celebrated in a bestselling book by Will Herberg, published in 1955. By some estimates, as many as 20%–25% of all Americans, as many as one in four, or one in five, now consider themselves neither Protestant nor Catholic, nor Jewish, including about three million American Muslims. The exact number of Muslims in this country is uncertain, but there is every likelihood that there will be more Muslims than Jews in this country in the 21st century. Whether or not that happens, Jews already are experiencing a declining status in the world of American religion: where once most Americans viewed Judaism as the "third-faith" in the United States, now it is viewed as one of many "minority faiths." As an example, one recent reference work from California, J. Gordon Melton's *Encyclopedia of American Religions* divides American religions into seventeen "religious families," only ten of which follow Christian beliefs and practices. Jews do not even rate a religious family of their own in this classification; instead we are grouped along with Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists under the "Eastern and Middle Eastern Family [of American faiths]." While this is somewhat bizarre, it points, again, to a problem that those of us concerned about Jewish continuity cannot ignore: How do we maintain our status in this new world of American religion? How do we ensure that Judaism is not lost amidst the welter of contemporary religious options?

The third great discontinuity on my list concerns marital patterns in the United States, the whole question of intermarriage. Into the 1960s, interreligious marriages of all kinds were comparatively rare in this country, and endogamy—in-marriage—was the rule among Americans of every group. Now, among European white ethnic groups, Jews aside, intermarriage has become the norm rather than the exception. Swedes, Norwegians, Germans, Italians, Irish—all according to the 1980 census, experience intermarriage rates in excess of 60%. At least 40% of Catholics now intermarry, many without conversion of their spouses, 69% of young Methodists marry non-Methodists, 70% of young Lutherans marry non-Lutherans, and 75% of young Presbyterians marry non-Presbyterians. Sadly, from an admittedly parochial Jewish point of view, intermarriage today is the American way: bonds of love take precedence over the bonds of faith, over the bonds of ethnicity, sometimes even over the bonds of color. Where once Jews and other Americans held congruent views on intermarriage, views strongly supportive of endogamy, Jews today are virtually alone in calling for in-group marriage: no other American faith or ethnic group worries about intermarriage the way, for very good reasons, we do and we must. The question, from the point of view of Jewish continuity, is how do we justify setting ourselves apart from the American cultural mainstream on this issue? Even more to the point, how can we successfully oppose intermarriage when those among whom we live look upon it as perfectly normative behavior?

Last, but certainly not least in my list of discontinuities that endanger Jewish continuity, we are witnessing a transformation in American society from ties of descent to ties of consent. Once in this country most people adhered to the faith and ethnicity of their parents—what I call "descent." Now, religious and ethnic loyalties are more commonly based upon free choice, what I refer to as "consent." About one American adult in four, according to George Gallup, has changed faiths or denominations at least once from the religion in which he or she was raised. About one American adult in three, a study by Mary Waters discovered, has changed his or her ethnic identity at least once from the cultural heritage in which he or she was raised; individuals of mixed ancestry who have been in the United States for several generations are particularly prone to such identity transformations. The once common belief that ethnicity is destiny—that it is something innate, immutable, and passed on from one generation to the next as if through the genes (descent) can, in the face of such evidence, no longer be sustained.

Today, throughout the United States, individuals expect to choose their ethnic and religious loyalties, and their choices often deviate considerably from those of their parents.

This transformation from descent to consent in American culture has, as can be readily imagined, tremendous implications for Jewish continuity. To take just a few examples, Jewishness by descent is irrevocable, as much a part of us as our blood type; Jewishness by consent, on the other hand, is completely revocable, purely a matter of choice. Jewishness by descent suggests a genealogical metaphor; it relates Jews one to another through ties of blood. Jewishness by consent implies a marital metaphor: committed today, but maybe divorced tomorrow. Jewishness by descent ties the future of Jewry largely to propinquity, the number of children that Jews give birth to. Jewishness by consent links the Jewish future to conversion and adherence, our ability to attract adherents and hold on to them.

Can Judaism and our traditional ideas concerning Jewish peoplehood be maintained in this new world where consent has replaced descent? This seems to me to be one of the prime challenges that everyone concerned about Jewish continuity in this country needs seriously to ponder.

In describing these four great discontinuities, I have been trying to make the case that American Judaism stands at an historical crossroads. I have argued that many of our central assumptions about American society and American religion no longer hold true, and that we have not yet come to terms with these new realities. So persuaded are we that Americanism and Judaism march harmoniously hand in hand that we did not notice that they have begun to diverge. We talk about Jewish continuity without taking sufficient account of discontinuity all around us.

Historically, at moments such as ours, moments of great social change and crisis, Jewish continuity has been secured not just, as we might expect, by unity and a renewed emphasis on the tried and true. But in addition—and most paradoxically—Jewish continuity has been also secured by divisive discontinuities. New historical conditions have generated new movements, new emphases, new paradigms. Hasidism, for example, responded to such a crisis of Jewish continuity, as did Reform and Conservative Judaism, as did Zionism. Note how in each of these three cases, Jewish continuity was ultimately *secured through discontinuity*. Each of these movements broke with critical assumptions of an earlier day, each faced charges that it was inimical to Judaism, each created enormous divisiveness in

Jewish life, yet each in its own way undoubtedly strengthened Judaism and promoted Jewish continuity. In more recent times, the day school movement is a similar if less cataclysmic example of the same phenomenon. Day schools challenged a century of American Jewish assumptions concerning public education, they generated fierce internal opposition, they were alleged to be un-American and disloyal. Yet today we would all agree that day schools have played a central role in promoting Jewish continuity in the last half-century.

In short, just as external discontinuities, changes in the outside world like those I described, *challenge* Jewish continuity, so internal discontinuities may promote Jewish continuity. As a result, even as we support, and must support, the so-called “continuity agenda,” it bears remembering that discontinuities—positive ones [and not all are positive; remember Sabbateanism and Frankism]—may have a greater impact still. This historical lesson bears remembering as the issue of Jewish continuity comes more and more to the forefront.

And this brings me to the *nehamah*. The good thing about being a Jewish historian is that I know that Jewish history is full of problems, crises, discontinuities, and anticipated catastrophes (even worse than those that we have heard about this morning). We, after all, are the people that invented the famous joke about the telegram that reads “start worrying; letter follows.” Jews are, in S. Rawidowicz’s term, the “ever-dying people.” The fact that Jews have defied the odds and continue to survive testifies to Divine Providence—and to the value of Jews being highly attuned to potential problems. We have learned that complacency is a luxury that we cannot afford.

So even if historians are pessimistic about Jewish continuity, Jewish *history* actually gives great cause for optimism: We have overcome far worse. Indeed, through the years, we have survived one doomsayer after another. We have done so, I believe, not by ignoring or belittling our prophets of gloom and doom, and not by fatalistically relying on God or the messiah or recitation of the Book of Psalms. Instead, we have survived because time and again we have carefully analyzed the problems that we as a community have faced, and we have then moved to resolve them: by changing our ways, promoting Jewish continuity, and instituting selective discontinuities. History teaches us that we can make a difference. With your help, ladies and gentlemen, I pray that in the years to come we *will* make a difference.

Thank you very much.