Reflections on the Jewish Situation

PART V - THE JEW IN AMERICA

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THE AMERICAN JEWISH reader of these chapters, even while grasping our description of this world, this age, this historic scene and its corruption of all values, will doubtless have asked at once: What of America? What of this land, these States? Was not a new and better order to be established here? And does America share in its totality the guilt of the world? Are we Jews in America no other in any respect from other Galuth Jews? Are we here, too, in homeless exile? These are in truth burning questions. These are questions that must, be answered before Jews who, as is our hope, have- re-allied themselves with their true nature and their tradition, can plan an embodiment of their recovered, reborn Jewishness.

The phrase has been mouthed until it is thread thin. But there was an “American dream.” It exists; it persists, at least in memory and in aspiration. But Jews, the very Jews often enough who think that they are within that dream, that hope, that aspiration, are most ignorant of it and most remote from it. Yes, the spiritual republic of which the republic as a body was to be the vestiture, was conceived under the image of a free society. At the dawn of things American Roger Williams declared in the forests of Rhode Island that all persecution was persecution for conscience’ sake. (1) In his serene old age Thomas Jefferson wrote to James Madison of his final conclusion: “I prefer dangerous liberty to tranquil servitude.” (2) At the height of the single classic movement in American literature Henry David Thoreau wrote: “A minority is powerless while it conforms to the majority.” (3) The wisest and most authentic of living American poets, Robert Frost, knows profoundly that fusion is not liberty, that the loss of form is not the republic’s gain, that “good fences make good neighbors.” (4) He goes deeper into the mastery of belongingness, of a man and his home. When the merely seasonal hired man comes back to the farm sick unto death, the farmer’s wife says:

“He has come home to die:
You needn’t be afraid he’ll leave you this time
The farmer is amused. “Home, he mocked gently.” The wife replies:
“Yes, what else but home?
It all depends on what you mean by home.”

And so they try, these wise, simple, classically American people, to define “home.” The farmer says:

“Home is the place where, when you have you go there,
They have to take you in.” His wife adds:
“I should have called it,
Something you somehow haven’t to deserve”. (5)

The poet does not, he observed, say anything about what the hired man has first to be in order to be taken in but emphasizes that home is home; because you need do nothing to deserve it.

Yes, there is an American dream in memory, in aspiration. “What I have to do is to see, at any rate, that I do not lend myself to the wrong which I condemn,” (6) Thoreau wrote. He also wrote: “Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also in prison.” (7) And but the other day an American Christian scholar and gentleman wrote to the New York Times: “The facts about Jewish life in the Christian world that have made Israel a necessity leave little room for Christian pride and moralizing. The rise of Israel should drive Christians to penitence and humility and, I think, also to gratitude.” (8) Yes, there is an America that nurtures the ideal of a free society, a society which knows, as John Stuart Mill wrote in his classical treatise, that its test is, “the freedom and variety of situation” (9) which it promotes and that, in such ages as these, “the mere example of non-conformity, the mere refusal to bend the knee to custom, is itself a service. (10) The
ideal of a free society is not dead in America; firmly the old aspiration dwells in the best and highest American minds. But What have the eager; assimilationists, the runners with every Gentile heard, the stentorian patriots and flag-wavers, the proponents of the danger of double or divided allegiance, the artists of the propitiatory gesture, the Jewish “liberals” and apes of everything alien to them - what have they to do with the Americanism of Williams and Jefferson, of Thoreau and Frost? What have they to do with that “freedom and variety of situation” which is the test and the definition of a free society? By all they are and do they undermine and seek to destroy its last vestiges. The ideal of “America is that of a free society. If Jews will take advantage of that freedom; if they will operate within that freedom and seek by their action and example to preserve and extend it, then America need not be an undifferentiated Galuth. It is in the hands and in the will of the Jews of America to transform this land into something other than Galuth before it is too late, before the American dream and vision of freedom fails utterly and they, themselves, the Jews, have helped to make it perish from the scene of history.

IT HAS NOT perished yet, that American aspiration after a free society. It has been, needless to say, resisted and attacked from the beginning. During the life of the republic it has never yet been directly attacked by law or enactment. It has been undermined by forces that have grown more and more powerful both within the American masses and within a self-constituted ruling class or caste. Those forces manifest themselves from the Jewish point of view today in the half-underground nativist anti-Semitic movements, of which typical spokesmen are Gerald Smith and Congressman Rankin; they manifest themselves on higher economic and cultural levels by the exclusion of Jews from heavy industry, banking and public utilities. They have deep roots, these forces. And the soil in which they were originally embedded was not of necessity a poisoned one. Rhode Island, the community founded by Roger Williams, refused naturalization to a few Jews, even though the person chiefly concerned, Aaron Lopez, was an uncommonly beloved and respected citizen. And Ezra Stiles, who was later to become president of Yale wrote: “I remark that Providence seems to make everything to work for the mortification of the Jews, and to prevent their incorporating into any nation, that thus they may continue a distinct people.” (11) Here we have, of course, the theological concept, shared by us, of the necessity of Jewish survival. But we have also the ugly implication that Jews as Jews cannot be members of a nation by choice. Thus the concept of a free society was negated, as it was to be again and again in the course of American history. Twenty years after this incident Ezra Stiles wrote of Aaron Lopez, who had just died: “He was my intimate friend and acquaintance! Oh! how often have I wished that sincere pious and candid mind could have received the evidences of Christianity!” (12) We are back with Josephus, back among the Alexandrian anti-Semites and proponents of the uniform master state of the first century: “Why, if you are Alexandrians, do you not worship the gods the city?” (18) Stiles was a man of exemplary goodness and a devout Christian. The republic swept away his notion of the necessity of an all Christian state. The sentiment which he entertained on a high plane was never quite eradicated.

During more than a century after the founding of the United States the question of the status of Jews as the very test of a free society never reached any acuteness. The sparse Sephardim of the early years were received more or less as foreign but acceptable gentlefolks. The early history of such a community as that of Charleston, S.C. bears out that description fully. The next wave of immigration, that of usually fairly assimilated German Jews, created almost as little disturbance. The Jewish intellectuals of Cincinnati and New York, though usually adhering to their reform synagogues, often cooperated smoothly in the acceptable life of the German-American groups. Until the First World War Jews were found functioning without friction in German-American cultural and social groups, in literary and Carnival societies, in musical enterprises of various kinds. Certain exclusions were nevertheless, rigidly though usually tacitly, exercised. A Jew found it all but impossible to teach in an American school or college; the once notorious incident of Dr. Mary Putnam Jacoby illustrates the tightening of social and residential barriers such as in normal times, existed in no Western European country.

Had this situation remained, static, an equilibrium, such as existed in the Netherlands before the Second World War, might have been maintained. But history took its inevitable turn. From the Czarist pogrom waves of the 1880s on the Jews of Eastern Europe poured into the land which was hungry for labor and for population - Jewish Jews, recognizable Jews poured in. Today our perspectives have doubtless been altered by subsequent events. Those whose memories go back prior to the First World War seem, upon objective examination, to find little nativistic resistance to the Jewish immigration of the thirty crucial years between 1880 and 1918. The country was in an absorptive mood. A general attitude of kindliness, not untempered by condescension toward those who passed through the portals, prevailed. No fear was felt - and this is the central point - as to the assimilation, the complete Americanization or the new Americans. The fallacies of the old Emancipation were believed with a touching faith. The new Americans themselves often shared those fallacies. Many of them
hastened to abandon Jewish faith and Jewish ways. To this day you will read in the marriage brokers’ columns of the Yiddish Press of “ladies” and “gentlemen”, emphasizing the fact that they are “American”, that is to, say, that their Jewishness has been reduced to an unobtrusive level. A scramble for Americanization took place. From the membership lists of Reform Temples the German names faded and the East European ones were substituted.

Polish and Lithuanian and Russian Jews even invaded the precincts of the Spanish Congregations. Two literary documents mark the trend and the aspect: Mary Antín’s “The Promised Land” and that small satiric masterpiece of Thyrä Sampter Winslow: “A Cycle of Manhattan.” But, as in many other ages and many other lands, the immanent will in history was not to be swerved. The vast majority of Jews remained, after some fashion or another, integrated with their Jewishness and their Judaism. Even the most ardent Americanizers on the lowest plane of Americanization remained recognizably Jewish to themselves, their fellow-Jews and, above all, to the world. Mimicry was a failure, as it has been through the ages. Jews remained Jews.

America or, rather, certain small but, as we shall see, important elements among the American people, gradually attained to an awareness of the eternal fact: that in their sense of measurable obliteration Jews were not assimilable. They were amazed and a little angry. For, even those who were intelligent enough to have noted the character of the problem in the Old World, had been sanguine that the freedom of America would accomplish what the unfreedom of other lands had failed to do. Here, it had been argued, Jews would cease to be Jews or, at all events, assume the character of a mere additional Unitarian sect. It is this silly and moldy fallacy, contradicted by all history and all experience, which still, like a ghost, stalks in the “American Council for Judaism.” Thus anxiety, not untinged by irritation, arose in certain circles in America. They forgot the nature of freedom, just as many Jews had forgotten its nature. Freedom is to be, of all things, not coercive. If it does not permit a man to be and to remain what God and history have made him, it is no longer freedom. The American anxiety concerning unassimilable foreigners rose. It included all the immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe. Then came, to the not un astonished American people, the involvement of the first World War; and every ember became a flame and every anxiety a small terror. Moreover, immediately after the war’s end, immigration figures rose. The year 1920 saw the entry of 430,000; the year 1921 of 800,000. Thus, in the latter year Congress passed the first stringent immigration act. But this was understood to be temporary and provisional. In 1924 came that immigration act which limited immigrants of a given nationality a year to two per cent of the persons of that nationality resident in the United States according to the census of 1890. The thing had been neatly and yet strangely thought out. Only the German quota represented an increase over the average immigration of the past decade; even the British was slashed. Italians and Jews (Russian, Polish, Austrian, Roumanian) were all but excluded. The anxiety of the nativists had won. Thus in 1927, the French sociologist Andre Siegfried was able to utter his polite jeers at an America which had dreamed of a universal fusion and had now the old and classical problem of unassimilable Jews on its hands. (14)

HE WAS WRONG. The nativists are wrong. The Jewish assimilationists are wrong. If the nativists and the Jewish assimilationists are right, then America is but another example of Galuth, of exile, with its thousand lies and miseries and its final catastrophe. But if, though today, only as memory and aspiration, the American Dream, nurtured by Americans from Roger Williams through Robert Frost, may be said to be a still living thing, then America can be rescued from the Gola, the area of exile, and assume a special place in Jewish history and experience. Those of us, at all events, who are convinced of the necessity of Jewish survival in the United States, must act as though the American dream of a free society were realizable. And we must, above all, cooperate with those forces in American life and culture which are on the side of a free society; a society of unrestricted variations within the framework of certain definite common purposes; we must resist and cooperate with all those who do resist the encroachments of state and ethnic absolutism in this country and, do so even for that country’s sake.

What we experience in the United States today is the conflict of two psychological and social patterns: the original American pattern of a free society and the pattern borrowed from Europe of an at least supposititious, ethnically and culturally unitary state which exercises complete control in order to preserve and enforce this unitary condition. The extraordinarily hopeful aspect of this situation and this conflict is the following: all civilized Americans act instinctively according to the first pattern. They form their own associations; they build and support their own denominational and lay schools and colleges; they are extremely sensitive to any infringement on the liberty of press or publishing; they are willing to protect eccentricity and even margins of intolerable license in the service of the freedom of society. They are beginning to protest bitterly and effectively in the very highest places against the low level and flat indoctrinations of the public school system. Nihilist, instrumentalist, mere pragmatic doctrines with their inevitable trend toward uniformity and enslavement are in

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recession and flight. Religion and freedom, faith and form are slowly gaining ascendency on the highest levels of American life. Who clamors for the unitary state and society in America? Gerald Smith and Lessing Rosenwald. Not Robert Hutchins or Reinhold Niebuhr or Archibald MacLeish. With which America are Jews going to make common cause?

Why are any Jews, why are thousands of Jews tempted to play into the hands of those who are both their enemies and the enemies of America? The matter admits of a clear analysis. The great immigrant masses who entered America between 1880 and 1920 were subjected to four circumstances and influences which shaped the lives of many and which have brought American Jewry to its present pass.

I. The immigrants found political freedom and economic opportunity. A state of euphoria, of intoxication; set in. Jewish faith and form and holiness were identified with the poverty and oppression of the Russian pale and America was identified not with the limited though inestimable good, the purely temporal good it had to offer, but with spiritual values and eternal aspirations. And since America had not these to offer, the values were themselves abandoned. Only the other day a dreadful young Jew wrote a novel in which he delineated as ascent in the human scale of values the grandson of a venerable sopher, ‘a Torah scribe in Russia, amid the rough sordid empty confusion of the Chicago streets. None of these eager apostates from Mary Antin on seemed to know how alienated they were from the classical American tradition. The Separatists of Massachusetts Bay, the Quakers let by Penn, the pietists led by Pastorius in Pennsyl- vania, the Huguenots of New Rochelle and Charleston, all came to America to establish and to exercise the freedom of their faith and ways not to abandon it.

II. The immigrants arrived during the period of America’s gigantic industrial development, its unparalleled growth in wealth and power. Cultural pressures had never been very potent in America. Now they almost disappeared. Often indeed, an odd inverted pressure set in, which had been operative for long on the diminishing frontier. Books, values, ideas, the arts, grace of speech or manners were discredited as unpractical; effeminate. There arose the symbolic figure of the two-fisted American with hairs on his chest, ranging in shadings from the rough frontiersman with a heart of gold to the go-getting Babbit. And a thing arose; a phenomenon came into view, so hilarious and melancholy, so degraded and sickly, so grotesque and unnatural, that the long ages of human civilization have not seen its detestable like. Jews, members of the am-ha-sefer, the people of the Book; Jews who had sustained schools for their children and academies for their youth in the long illiterate ages of Europe when a priest who could half read his missal was considered a real scholar; Jews who had made of a book a living substitute for their lost fatherland; Jews who in every other corner of the diaspora had sought to excel in the cultures of their adopted countries and had indeed done so; Jews eagerly aped this decay of the humanities and this contempt for humanistic values. Proudly Jewish merchants and manufacturers and professional men aver that they have no “time” to read literature. They cannot go to synagogue because they are tired and must play golf or bridge. They cannot sustain the serious theater because they need amusement. They endow, when they can, football stadiums and athletic fields. Plain people, proud of their “plainness” - another incredibly grotesque phenomenon among Jews - and pseudo-intellectuals of Jewish birth actually fell so low as to cooperate with that contempt for values and ideas which fills the minds of authentic Americans with horror and dismay. They yielded and yield to that notion destructive of a free and democratic society which has never been better diagnosed than by Professor R.B. Heilman in a presidential address before the American Association of University Professors. “One of the most disquieting of the phenomena of democracy is a suspicion of various kinds of superiority, a desire to ignore it, or at worst to ridicule and undermine it; the converse of this is the misuse of democracy to glorify the commonplace or even the meretricious… The worst blow that can be struck against a democracy is for standards of excellence to be identified with exclusiveness, and therefore to be considered ‘undemocratic’.” (15)

What was the result of the process here described? To say that it was an assimilation too rapid and too eager is not to say enough. Assimilation is no simple problem. Cooperation with the society and culture in which they live is both the right and duty of Jews. What took place in America, for the first time in all history, was assimilation on the lowest possible plain - assimilation not on the level of Emerson and Thoreau and Henry James but on the level of baseball, gin-rummy, the average Hollywood film and the comic strip. The representative folk-heroes of great masses of American-Jews - not all, thank God, not all - are Eddie Cantor (a truly good and righteous man in his private character) and the Marx brothers. Nowhere and at no time in all history have Jews fallen so low. Total assimilation is a great sin and a terrible danger. But assimilation to Pascal and Racine or to Goethe and Beethoven left the assimilationists the bearers of high and eternal though alien values. American
assimilation on the “folksy” level is destructive of every value by which Jews must live, if they would survive in any guise except the guise of apes and fools, of objects of contempt to those Americans who are seeking to guide the Republic to better things, of no less hatred and suspicion from that rabble with whom they have made common cause. Unless Jews re-integrate themselves with their Judaism, its traditions, its values, its standards, and cooperate as such, as integrated Jews, on highest levels of American culture and cm these alone, there is no future for the American Jewish community except one of shame and disaster.

III. Another phenomenon which impaired the cultural life and Jewish survival of the immigrants precisely during the crucial years was the dominance during those years, a dominance only now beginning to weaken, of materialism and instrumentalism in the world of thought. The immigrants were busy making a living. They sent their children to the public school and, when they could, to college. Home life disintegrated under economic and other pressures and the Jewish children for the most part fell in, as was natural, with what they were taught concerning the reduction of man to an animal level, concerning the death of all values except those that were supposed to “work” in a business civilization, concerning the complete sacrifice of all culture which must be made in the service of one class alone, that, namely, of the industrial worker, a sacrifice which certain misguided rabbis equated with “prophetic Judaism,” with the abandonment of “useless” studies, Hebrew, Latin, Greek, philosophy, with all those notions and practices which have brought our civilization to its present pass. Religion, man’s way of grasping the inscrutable, so that he may live, became a bye-word or a perfunctory gesture. With these forces the old-fashioned cheder or Talmud Torah could not cope.

IV. Finally and briefly: during the latter years the sinister forces of the concept of me total State, the master State, insinuated itself into this still free society. Jews fled to cover. Jews, sensitive to moral and social atmospheres, Jews too, not wholly guiltless in not having trained their children to deeper Jewish loyalties, so that not even the few noisy fools who did could have made common cause with the Soviet tyranny and its crimes - Jews fled in sharp consternation from their God-given difference. They became loud patriots. They founded a few of them, the American Council for Judaism. Zionists and traditional Jews of various shadings by their hundreds of thousands resisted this degradation. Against the forces of cultural assimilation on a low plane not too many of even these stood firm.

The chain of reasoning is complete. The free society in the United Statesman can be wrested from Galuth. The best forces in American society at its highest spiritual levels are striving to save democracy from the tendency to level downwards. They are trying to reestablish faith and values; they are re-introducing discipline and form into education; they are re-allying themselves with their ancestral religions; they are recovering the classical insights and know at last that “under the perpetual smile of modernity there is a grimace of disillusion and cynicism.” (16) With these forces and with the men who represent these forces all that is best in American Jewry must ally itself. We must return to our insights, our sanctities, our disciplines as they are returning to theirs. As equals with them and co-workers, as possessors of the fundamental mother-wisdom and mother-insights of both their democratic freedom and their faith, we must strive with them to keep America a free society within which our faith and our form, the most venerable in the Western World, will redeem us and redeem the residual unfreedoms of America to freedom by our intrepid exercise of it. Here, then, at last, Jew need not be psychical and moral helots; here a group of Jews may recover and use its creative, its history- making will.

(1) The Bloody Tenent of Persecution for Cause of Conscience.
(2) Malo periculosam libertatem quam quietam servitutem.
(3) An Essay on Civil Disobedience
(4) Mending Wall
(5) The Death of the Hired Man
(9) J.S. Mill. On Liberty.
(12) Op Cit.
(13) Contra Apion.
(14) Les Etats Unis d’aujour d’hui 1927.