

CHAZAK, CHAZAK

A four-year stint at the helm of the National Jewish Welfare Board provides the opportunity for a rare perspective on changing Jewish life in America; and the view from such a vantage point shows an American Jewish community of far stronger vital signs than conventional wisdom would have believed possible.

Those looking backward often see American Jews as still uneasy aliens on the fringe of the national culture; uprooted, displaced persons who do not quite belong. In the words of one observer as recently as 1960, they were “psychologically still in exile, marginal people with an undiminished sense of strangeness.”

The current reality is quite different, for the American Jewish community has clearly achieved a level of material well-being, prestige, acceptance and influence unparalleled in Jewish history, with virtually all the worthwhile doors of our society open to it. Our plays, poems and novels do not yet reflect this, but the facts are beyond dispute.

In America today Jews constitute roughly 2½ % of the population, yet they consistently win some ten times that percentage of the country’s Nobel Prizes, Pulitzer Prizes, National Book Awards, etc. It is estimated that over one-fifth of the members of the American Bar Association are Jewish; and Jews buy an estimated one-fifth of all hardcover books other than dictionaries, cookbooks, Bibles and “how-to-do-it’ manuals. This past fall, after Anwar Sadat’s visit to Jerusalem, when Pravda (certainly no sympathetic observer) tried to explain to its Russian readership the impact of U.S. Jews on American national policy, it pointed out that one-fifth of American millionaires are be-

lieved to be Jewish, and that Jews are well known to vote, to write for publications and to contribute to political candidates of all parties far out of proportion to their numbers in the population.

If a generation ago, anyone had ventured to guess that in 1978 the Mayor of New York and his immediate predecessor would be active and practicing Jews, as were the immediate past Secretary of State, the past U.S. Attorney General, and a past Ambassador to the United Nations, he would have been dismissed as a visionary crackpot. If, further, he had predicted that the President of DuPont would be named Irving Shapiro, his listeners would have assumed they were being set up for an elaborate joke. If he added that the current Secretary of the Treasury, the Secretary of Defense, the recently replaced Chairman of the Federal Reserve Board, and the newly created energy czar had all at least been born Jewish, his listeners would politely have excused themselves and gone elsewhere.

It is hard for many of us to realize how substantially and how quickly conditions have changed. Although it was actually in 1947, it seems only yesterday that I entered Yale and agreed to serve as U.J.A. solicitor for my 1,110 freshman classmates; neither I nor anyone else was surprised when the admission office promptly sent over a list of 111 Jewish freshmen who constituted, to the button, the prescribed 10% permitted by the informal quota system. Today there is almost no Ivy League college with less than one-fifth of its roster composed of Jewish students, and some reportedly approach one-half.

By virtually every accepted index of social health, the American Jew emerges with flying colors—whether in per capita receipt of Ph.D.'s (high) or of penitentiary incarcerations for crimes of violence (low); whether of per capita charitable contributions and communal participation (high) or incidence of alcoholism or paternal desertion of the family (low), the picture is clear and sometimes poignantly so. When the Census Bureau reports that the approximately 350,000 Jewish poor in New York City receive far below their proportionate share of federal aid, investigation shows that poverty aid formulas cause funds to flow to specific districts on the basis of such factors as

incidence of juvenile delinquency. Since, in New York, two-thirds of Jewish poor are over 65, and the remaining one-third are Hasidic families with virtually no juvenile delinquents, the numbers tell a dramatic story: the American Jew has created for himself a sub-culture whose carefully documented, statistically delineated characteristics are impressive when set against those of any comparable group.

Not to recognize this reality is to be blind to the obvious; not to ask why is to do an injustice to the socio-cultural tradition of which it is a reflection.

Yet this end result was not obvious nor even apparent when, at the turn of the century, English author and historian H. G. Wells looked at the bedraggled Jews pouring into America from eastern Europe. He said it was a tragic error to let them enter because they would “never be more than a semi-literate urban peasantry.” His fear seemed borne out by the charge of New York’s police chief, Theodore Bingham, in 1908 that, although Jews constituted one-fourth of the city’s population, they accounted for one-half of the crime.

Few non-Jewish voices were raised in their defense, and for the most part those were muted; but one prescient observer had loudly and clearly stated his conviction that the Jew in America would not only succeed, but would succeed gloriously. Hutchins Hapgood: a young Midwesterner writing about four specific characteristics that set the immigrant Jew apart and would insure his successful adaptation to American life. In his now famous series, *The Spirit of the Ghetto*, in *The Atlantic Monthly*, he said they had 1) a fierce self-confidence and determination to succeed; 2) an all-abiding conviction of the importance of education; 3) remarkably strong family ties and a commitment to mutual aid, and 4) a sense of community support that made the family feel it was not isolated.

Hapgood was correct about the future of the Jews; I believe he would have been intrigued to see that the characteristics he noted were merely the symptoms or manifestations of a cultural pattern that would stand in good stead not only those immigrants but their descendants far into the future.

Though the debate about what Judaism is may go on forever, what is clear is that those who form that sub-culture and adhere to its standards have a statistically demonstrably better chance today of leading richer, fuller, more meaningful lives, lives with greater probabilities of self-fulfillment and self-realization; better chances of leading lives of grace and dignity, meaning and purpose.

Two conclusions follow: first, that this group is indeed different, and different not in trivial aspects, but in something profound and fundamental; second, that the crucial and significant factors which cause the difference should be analyzed, understood, and, where possible, perpetuated.

This message is an important and, I believe, a new one. Past generations of Jews affirmed their relation to Judaism because a theological covenant on Mt. Sinai designated them a Chosen People. Today, not only the devout but the questioning, the agnostic, and the theologically indifferent can affirm traditional Jewish values, can inculcate them in their children, and can move to perpetuate them in their communities, for life-enhancement today, as well as tomorrow.

The questions of whether Judaism has survived beyond its time and whether Jewish group existence is an anachronism have answered themselves. The life of the Jew in America is better because of his Judaism.

Neither the individual Jew nor the American Jewish community exists in a vacuum; it is important to note the mutually supportive relationship between vibrant, vital American Jewish sub-culture and the general American society, for the two are not only compatible, but each benefits from and reinforces the other.

Magical, unbelievable America—the ‘goldene medina’ of the immigrant, the one nation in modern history where the majority consists of minorities; where, in practice as in law, it is safe to be unpopular; where equality of opportunity has always been a national goal—that America has been good to the Jew and the Jew has been good to America.

The American creed celebrates “life, liberty, and the pursuit of

happiness;” but the obtaining of happiness is the responsibility of each individual or voluntary grouping of individuals. If the strong and continuing affirmation of traditional Jewish values helps draw the American Jew toward what Abraham Joshua Heschel called “the authentic life, authentically lived,” then everyone benefits.

American society’s strengths today are economic, social and political; they are not spiritual, and more’s the pity. T.S. Eliot speaks of “the decent godless people; their only monument the asphalt road and a thousand lost golf balls.” That is a harsh way of putting it, but we must live with the realization that aspects of life which give resonance to existence are more than the material or sensual celebrated today by American mass media. Perhaps the American Jewish sub-culture can remedy the deficiencies, at least for its adherents, and perhaps it can do so indefinitely.

Outlining feasible scenarios for a successful American Jewish sub-culture of the future should be an important part of our agenda, in the hope that worthwhile self-fulfilling prophecies may be created. In any case, we must be clear in our goals: the structuring of a self-sustaining, self-perpetuating American Jewish community dedicated to maintaining those aspects of Jewish culture and tradition which are ‘life-enhancing’ for its members.

Such a Jewish community would not conflict with the finest American traditions, but would strengthen them in precisely the spirit reflected in George Washington’s memorable letter to the Jewish community of Newport. Its members would be assimilated, not acculturated; they could look, dress and speak like everyone else, but would maintain a traditional Jewish outlook about the goals of life, the nature of home and family, the role of education, the significance to the donor of charity and compassion, and all other components of the traditional Jewish value system.

What specific characteristics such a Jewish community would possess are open to debate. Traditional Zionist theory, for example, has as yet no ideological framework for a long-term, vibrant, self-sustaining Diaspora and David Ben Gurion’s thesis was that none was possible.

My own belief is that such a Diaspora is already emerging, but that, for realistic hopes of continuity, a number of mutually reinforcing factors must be present.

For example, a sustained knowledge and use of the Hebrew language is imperative. For ritual purposes and as a worldwide psychological bond, its role in strengthening Jewish identification will be increasingly critical. In this regard, it is interesting to recall that the one large Jewish community in history which quietly evaporated was Alexandria, where the use of Hebrew was permitted to languish and disappear.

Continuing relationships with fellow Jews abroad, especially in Israel, are essential for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the beneficial impact on both giver and receiver of the fruits of communal solidarity. The social and educational effect of UJA, Israel bond and local Federation drives is at least as important as the economic transfer payment involved. And the effect on the morale and self-image of U. S. Jews of the role they have played in the life of world Jewry in these last decades is incalculable.

The importance of vital religious and Jewish educational institutions is self-evident, and the increasing sophistication of the American Jewish community should be matched in time by the increasing sophistication of those institutions. Although the role of religious ritual in the life of the American Jew can be judged by the level of Friday night synagogue attendance, the synagogue has other important roles: it often serves as a surrogate for the extended family; as a vehicle for education and the transmission of values, and as a center for Jewish rites of passage (birth, death, marriage and that much maligned Jewish experience, the bat or bar mitzvah.) In time these affairs will become more restrained and more tasteful, but I hope we retain indefinitely the ritual act of affirmation when the individual stands before family, friends and congregation and says loudly and clearly, "I am a Jew."

The Jewish school is a separate and complex subject, but for now, let it be said that the caliber of the school and the caliber and professional status of the educator must be raised dramatically. The day of the old-fashioned melamed has passed.

The final important factor in Jewish continuity will be the constant revitalization and renewal of a vibrant, appropriate Jewish communal social service network, a *sine qua non*, “that without which” such a community could not survive.

Jewish communal services have been and are outstanding, but must strive to be even better, even more responsive to emerging needs.

What Jung called key racial memories must be kept fresh and alive: the sense of historical continuity; the values and ideals of the ‘extended family’ carried out to one’s neighbors and the community beyond; and the sense of being ‘chosen’—not in terms of privilege, but of obligation. Jews should feel not that they are better, but that they should be.

The “lives of quiet desperation” led by so many today, full of joyless pleasures and meaningless strivings, may reflect the materialistic tenor of our time, but as Jews we should hope for more. When Clemenceau commented a generation ago that the modern world was going “from barbarism to decadence with nothing in between,” he intended the comment as a warning rather than a prediction. Each of us, as individuals or members of a group, can make it true or false for ourselves.

Strengthening and perpetuating the American Jewish community in our own way may be the best means we have to affirm our choice, and our efforts will benefit our own generation as well as those to come.

The story is told of the traveler in Biblical times watching three men struggle down a mountain with one of the great cedars of Lebanon. When asked what they were doing, the first man replied that he was trying to move the tree; the second said he was transporting building material; but the third said quietly that he was building the temple for King Solomon.

“Building the temple” may be an appropriate metaphor for some of the ostensibly mundane work discussed at this convocation of the National Jewish Welfare Board, where the nuts and bolts of communal work are analyzed and discussed, where lessons are learned, experiences exchanged, friendships made, and the work of the field

advanced. JWB is an organization aiding thousands of volunteer and professional workers who spend some \$100 million a year on behalf of the one million members of America's Jewish community centers, Y camps and affiliated groups; it is an organization through which the Jewish chaplaincy services military personnel and their families, an organization which sponsors the Jewish Book Council, the Jewish Media Service, and other activities,

If the American Jewish community survives and flourishes (and I am convinced it will), in no small part it will be because of the efforts of large numbers of dedicated individuals doing day-to-day communal work and in the process "building the Temple."

As I complete my heartwarming and immensely satisfying four years as President of JWB, I find myself grateful for the experience of working with the remarkable men and women of this organization, proud of what we have accomplished together, and mindful of all that remains to be done.

To Bob Adler and the other incoming officers, I extend my warmest good wishes and pledge of support, and as my term ends, I echo the words repeated at the end of the Torah:

Chazak, chazak, venischazak – Be strong, be strong, and let us strengthen one another.

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