

Tomorrow's Prospect



MARCUS

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By

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of the
AMERICAN JEWISH ARCHIVES

located on the Cincinnati campus of the
Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion
Cincinnati • New York • Los Angeles • Jerusalem
3101 Clifton Avenue
Cincinnati, Ohio 45220
www.americanjewisharchives.org

THIS ADDRESS was originally delivered before the annual assembly of the Central Conference of American Rabbis in Cincinnati, June 16, 1965.

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IT SHOULD BE OBVIOUS to us that we have been living in an age of political reaction ever since the Treaty of Versailles in 1919. There is less liberty today for small states, less respect for the sanctity of the individual and his personality. When I think of what happened in Germany during the 1930's and 1940's, I am almost inclined to believe that the period between the French Revolution and World War I was only a brief modern interlude and that medievalism is still very much alive. Our present-day world, however, is different because there have been great technological "advances"—a revolution in communications and transportation, for instance—which make it possible to wage total war throughout the whole earth. Speedy accessibility easily enables great empires to rise and confront each other. Thus, two colossal states are at this moment arrayed against each other, the United States and the Soviet Union. For the first time in its history, our republic is faced with a serious foreign threat to its way of life. In order to save itself, it is compelled to consolidate all its forces against the enemy. In a somewhat similar situation, the Syrian Empire of Antiochus Epiphanes sought to integrate all its religio-ethnic elements when it found itself menaced by the emergent Romans.

Our fear of the Russians and the hostility of almost two billion Asians toward America explain, in part, the rise of an ecumenical movement among the Christians. It is an attempt to save the Judaeo-Christian way of life with all of its social,

economic, and religious implications. The success of this ecumenical movement is fraught with important consequences for us. It may—for the first time in history—bring Jews and Christians together in an almost messianic sense. On the other hand, however, if it succeeds in uniting all Christians, the end result may well be a defacto establishment of Christianity in this country. We ought not to forget that the first time Christianity became the monopolistic faith of a great empire—that was in the fourth century—Roman citizens who happened to be Jews found themselves after two centuries second-class subjects of a medieval state.

These possibilities should lead us to reflect. We already are an apprehensive people. The anti-Semitism which arose in this country during the 1920's and the German Holocaust which followed drove American Jews to recreate for themselves a medieval-type community. Some call it Jewish suburbia; I call it a post-prandial physical and psychological haven where we can enjoy the security of our own philanthropic, medical, recreational, vocational, and educational agencies. We can even look forward—or backward—to our own all-day schools in the two great megalopolises which will extend from Baltimore to Boston and from San Diego to San Francisco. The Christianization of these United States will only immure us the more firmly—though comfortably enough—behind our un-walled ghettos with their automated bowling alleys and their kosher snack bars.

Fortunately we live in two worlds. The one I have just described is the Jewish ethnic community; the other is our American world. Most of us, even rabbis, are really more Americanistic than Judaistic. The result of this double impact is that, ever since the gates of immigration were closed, there has been

emerging, out of the welter of a dozen different Jewries on this soil, the typical new Jew of tomorrow. He represents a fusion of much that is good both in Judaism and in American culture.

With apologies to Crevecoeur I ask: “What then is the American Jew, this new man?” Through inter-marriage and the physical environment, he no longer looks Jewish—whatever that is. He is a college graduate who has about fifteen times as many chances as his Gentile neighbor to win a Nobel Prize in the sciences. If he is an ambitious layman interested in Jewish life, he will attempt to secure control of his communal and synagogal apparatus and rival the rabbi as the town’s representative Jew. The Jew of tomorrow will be a white-collared, self-employed business or professional man. Politically he will be a “democrat”—with a small “d”—wary of any attempt to modify the American Constitution in the direction of the Christian state. Jewishly, his intelligent child in the religious school will know more about the development of Jewish history and Judaism than even the medieval Rashi or Maimonides could have known. In his evening ethnic enclave, our typical Jew will tolerantly accept every other Jew—all the way from the earlocked hasid to the inverted Marrano, all the way from the pietist for whom the Baal Shem Tov still walks the earth to the man who, though overtly a Jew, is at heart a Christian without the courage to secede from the Jewish community. Because of his religious education, his participation in a host of Jewish activities, and his immersion in a Jewish world, his sense of kinship for Jews will be a universal one. As a cultured, liberal-minded gentleman, he will have a profound concern for all peoples and their problems in every corner of the world. At the risk of being accused of fliopietism, I would venture the statement that there will be no more civilized human being than the typical American Jew of tomorrow.

But what of religion? The new Jew will belong to a synagogue which he will join because of the imperative demands of the American ethos. Still there is always the hope—and the chance—that those who join perfunctorily will remain to pray. Orthodoxy in the generations to come will decline; Classical Reform, too, will become a minority viewpoint, and the typical American Jew, whether he calls himself a Neo-Reformer or a Conservative, will gradually evolve a common type of practice and belief. The religious service will be characterized by complete decorum with its Christian sepulchral silences. The Protestantization of this new American Jewish worship will be documented increasingly by the use of English, art music, a choir, an organ, the family pew, and a pulpit facing the audience rather than God in the ark. Our orientation is anthropocentric, not theocentric. Skullcaps will be worn in many shrines, but their miniscule size will document eloquently our advancing assimilation.

But what about theology? How many laymen are even today concerned about the great issues of God, reward and punishment, and theodicy? It is sufficient to say that they are all against sin. But rabbis are concerned with theology, and the new homogenized faith of the next generation will reflect itself in the English prayers, translations, and paraphrases that will confront the Hebrew side of the liturgical page. On the whole, the new Jew will find himself committed to a broad humanitarian universalism of the highest ethical character. And now, for a minute or two, let me throw away the historian's hat and speak simply for myself. What do I want for Reform? I want it to continue to be what it is: the largest truly liberal religious movement in the world today. If I may parody a phrase of Sir Walter Scott, I am proud of the fact that the sun never sets on a Reform Jewish congregation. Yet today we are no longer in

the van of progress. We have made a religious truce with the Jewish masses for fear of offending them. Conformity is the order of the day; the spark of an evangelical fire has almost died. Many Reform Jewish leaders honestly believe that Orthodoxy, Conservatism, and Reform are equally valid, but I do not believe in a triple truth, in a triune Judaism. Our attitude toward the basic sources of our faith must be reverential, but always critical. The Bible, the Talmud, the great codes like the *Shulhan Aruk* reflect, in large part, primitive cultural and economic backgrounds in which illiteracy was the rule not the exception. Jewish tradition must be a quarry out of which we will carve new truths, not millstones.

What do I want? I want Reform to stop thinking in terms of expediency, to remember always that its obligation is to be true to itself. I want it to reject the concept of the static, the authoritarian, the mechanical performance of obligatory traditional forms. I want it to emphasize constantly the spiritual and the ethical. Our American Jewish faith is and should remain a unique combination of piety, learning, modern western culture, and selected elements of traditional religious practice freely chosen by the individual. I want every Jew to continue to write his own *Shulhan Aruk*, to help develop a faith that will appeal through its rationality, its humanity, its beauty, in an age of reaction, fear, and panic-stricken surrender of man's faith in himself. I still believe in man, who, I was taught, is but little lower than the angels. The challenge to us as Reformers is once more to turn our faces to the future, to liberalize American Jewry, and to attempt to win for our cause every synagogue in these United States. I am tired of belonging to a minority. I want Reform to become the Judaism of this land, the majority movement. It can be done: all it requires is imagination, indomitable courage, and a sincere belief in the validity

and primacy of one's own cause. So much for Marcus and his antediluvian liberalism.

Let us return now to the realm of history. Will our grandchildren survive as Jews? We are daily increasing in numbers. That is incontrovertible. Of course we are intermarrying and converting out, but there are compensations through the children of those marriages who remain with us, and proselytes to Judaism are by no means uncommon. Ultimately, in a generation or two, I expect, we will begin to decline numerically, but that should not disturb us. Numbers are not vital: the numbers game is the American idolatry. How often have we been a majority in the past? No period ever nourished a more desperately devoted Jewish people than the Dark Ages when we were but a pitiful handful. German Jewry, numbering less than one percent of the population in the century before the Holocaust, contributed more to Jewish learning than any Jewry of the last two thousand years. It is quality that counts.

Ours is a great Jewry, one destined to become even greater. We American Jews manifest our interest in our fellow-Jews in a fashion unparalleled in all Jewish history. We spend one billion dollars for Jewish communal services every twenty-one months. In the last fifteen years, we have sent one thousand million dollars across the seas. All things considered, this is the greatest philanthropic feat in all history. We have developed a network of schools, teachers' colleges, seminaries, universities, and *yeshivot*. We have created museums, tremendous libraries of Hebraica and Judaica, newspapers and magazines, Hillel Foundations, and youth camps. The Jewish education of each successive generation is improving steadily even in the area of Hebrew. At this moment there are greater Talmudists in New York City than there are in Jerusalem. I was shocked recently to walk into a Reform congregation in Texas—deep

in the heart of assimilation—and to hear the religious school children read the weekly portion from the unvocalized Scroll. I was also gratified. I want more Hebrew, much more, but may I remind you that the most important book in all Jewish life, the Talmud, was written in the vernacular—and, parenthetically, the Bible, too, was written in a vernacular. There is no magic in Hebrew itself; if there were, every Haifa stevedore would be a potential Isaiah, and I have my doubts. There has never been any land in the world where adult education has flowered as it has on these shores in this very generation. Every year dozens if not hundreds of books are rolling off our presses in Hebrew, Yiddish, and English. From the vantage point of my ivory tower, I can see a tremendous efflorescence of Jewish culture. We have already entered into a Golden Age. The American Jew of the next generation will survive to be enriched by our comparatively free society; he will be more generous, more tolerant, more educated, and—in Jewish terms—more broadly knowledgeable than his grandfather.

In the days of our grandfathers, there was a Cincinnatian who once owned a horse, a buggy, and a farm. His name was Isaac Mayer Wise, and he was president of the Hebrew Union College. When he drove back to his home in the country, the journey might well have taken an hour. In another ten or twenty years, we who are here today will travel from Los Angeles to New York in that same space of time. It is obvious that, when all American Jewry is but an hour or two apart, a nationally organized community will ensue. Since the 1920's, we have been developing nationwide over-all agencies for social welfare, education, fund raising, religion, recreation, newsgathering, and the defense of our civil liberties. There is as yet no *waad hamishim arazot*, no American Jewish assembly to co-ordinate all work on a country-wide scale, but it will come to pass. It is

imperative; it is inevitable. A group of men in the past few years has effected a union of American Jewish national organizations to work solely for Israel. This also happened in a somewhat similar fashion during World War I and World War II in the guise of an American Jewish Congress and an American Jewish Conference. If a Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations is permanently established, I hope that our representative leaders will employ it as an instrumentality to aid all Jews in all lands and also to help us solve our problems here.

When I lived as a teenager in Farmington, West Virginia, I, too, drove a horse and buggy, but now I travel by plane. In 1962, on returning from a trip to Israel, I left Jerusalem one morning and slept in my own bed in Cincinnati that same night. (May I interject parenthetically that I still do not believe that Elijah ever went to heaven in a chariot!) This annihilation of space and time, I have already intimated, will have tremendous consequences for all peoples and for us, too, of course. If the United States is being internally integrated and fused, it is the better to protect itself here and to further itself abroad. An empire's backyard may be six thousand miles away. This country is being driven by the dynamism of its very nature to make a thrust for power in Latin America, and in the Afro-Asian complex of lands. It is a new form of Manifest Destiny which one may well call the Pax Americana, the compulsion and the need of this Empire to maintain international stability in order to survive and to salvage its cherished values. The Jews of these United States, like all groups in America—whether they be ethnic, economic, or religious—are employed, wittingly or unwittingly, as instruments to implement the Pax Americana. They are lending themselves to this end, for, as they help our country to reach its international goals, they seek at the same

time to bring authority, harmony, and order into World Jewry. Let us constantly bear in mind that we are the largest, wealthiest, and most cultured Jewry in the world, and the exercise of hegemony by one Jewish settlement over others has been typical in Jewish life for almost two thousand years. Noblesse oblige. It is our responsibility to assume leadership, and indeed we have not evaded this obligation. It is fascinating to peek at history and to watch it at work. In this effort to provide world leadership and to exercise control from the vantage point of this land, various American Jewish agencies are reaching out politically, philanthropically, and religiously into Europe and the rest of the world. The American Jewish Committee has created an international consultative council. The Zionists, the American Jewish Congress, and the B'nai B'rith have united in a rival World Conference of Jewish Organizations (COJO); the Reformers, the Conservatives, and even the Orthodox are establishing international denominational unions. In 1492, as the Jews fled from Spain, they were robbed, killed, raped by their cruel hosts, and rejected heartlessly even by some Jews to whom they had appealed for help. Today, however, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee with branches in a dozen countries has salvaged over two hundred thousand Jews in Egypt and Algeria alone.

This work of American Jewish organizations abroad reflects more than American political imperialism and the proud exercise of our spiritual hegemony over other Jewries. I am convinced that American Jewish societies working abroad are, perhaps subconsciously, probing and preparing the way for the rise of new Jewish settlements that may be needed someday to sustain and lead the Jewish people.

American Jewry is studying South America and its opportunities. If the future lies with the Brown Peoples, then some

sort of *pied-à-terre* must be found in the Far East. If civilization in the Atlantic Basin is declining—and I do not say that it is—then it can shift only to the Pacific, which embraces a billion human beings. Los Angeles, then, with its hundreds of thousands of Jews, with its Jewish religious seminaries and colleges, will have a great future on a coast that faces Asia. American Jewry has established a Standing Conference on European Jewish Community Services. Do we sense, then, with our delicate historical antennae, that a United States of Europe may yet arise, powerful enough to maintain the values of a Jewish-Christian civilization and to act as a buffer against the bronze new world of two billion Marxists and other non-Christians, who have dedicated themselves to emancipation from the West and also perhaps to the ultimate subjection of the white peoples of Western Europe and the Western Hemisphere? And, if this powerful new Europe comes into being, shall we return to Germany, that land of scientific geniuses and moral monsters? Yet we returned, did we not, to France and to England, whose cruelties in the Middle Ages can be paralleled only by the horrors and inhumanities of a modern Germany. A great new European Jewish cultural center is well within the realm of probability.

But why should we probe for new centers in other lands? Have we not Israel, the second largest free Jewry in the world today, colossus-like astride the Asian and African continents, facing both East and West? It is for us, in one respect, the most important of all countries, for it is the only place in the world where a Jew may go as of right. The gates of these United States, the “haven and asylum for the oppressed of all the world,” were closed in 1924, and our people were left to perish by the millions in the European furnaces. In effect, these gates remain closed. The land of Israel, this city of refuge, must be

helped and maintained at all costs. The help I have in mind is not merely monetary; I am thinking of the general educational level of its masses. No Jewish community can rise above its own secular academic background, and there are thousands upon thousands of untutored Asians and North Africans in the Promised Land. As religionists, as liberals, as Western intellectuals, we cannot submit ourselves spiritually to the Israelis at this hour. We dare not be assimilated by them. I hold it irrational for American Jewry to submit voluntarily to a culture that is not yet developed in a state that may not survive, a state kept alive by a coldly impersonal American government which uses Israel as a pawn for American purposes in the eastern Mediterranean and as a sop to an aroused American Jewish electorate. Israel must be exposed to our concept of Diaspora religion. We, not they, are in the mainstream of Judaism. Our religion, for two thousand years, has been a Diaspora faith; we have as great a claim as theirs—perhaps a greater claim—to the inheritance of Poland, Spain, Babylon, and even Palestine. With the passage of the years, the new Israeli republic will of ineluctable necessity develop its own national ethos. Even if, as I hope, its culture rises above the parochial, I, as a historian, must reckon with the possibility that Israel will at best fashion a secular humanistic faith rooted in traditional folkways. Such a faith cannot be ours. Certainly it is not my intention to dismiss as trivial the achievements of the Israelis, but the new Jewish state cannot speak for us, dream for us, or contain us religiously. We are a kingdom of priests who have never abdicated. We do not believe in a vicarious Judaism. No land, not these United States, not Israel, not any country, can sum up all of our hopes for humanity.

I am tired of being the eternally Wandering Jew. Can I not hold onto this little plot of ground that we call Israel? Do

I not have an everlasting heritage in this good and fair land that history knows as the United States of North America? If not, then what have I left? You all know the answer as well as I. There are no guarantees of permanence or prosperous viability for any Jewish settlement, not for Israel and not for this great Jewry of ours on these Western shores. Great empires rise in a generation and fall in a generation. In our own day, we have seen the decline and even the annihilation of nearly every Jewry on the European, African, and Asian continents. Some were a thousand years in the making. Chariots cannot save us, horses cannot save us, Israel cannot save us, unless the whole tiny contracting Jewish world becomes one Israel. The only Israel upon which we can lay all our hopes is *Kelal Yisrael* (the Whole of Jewry). From the vantage point of our own American republic, we Jews here must respond to the challenge of historical circumstance—we must reach out to exercise hegemony over World Jewry and at the same time prepare new homes for our people. Ultimately every Jewry meets its fate; this is the inexorable law of history. But there must always be a new spot somewhere else in the world where Torah, learning, tradition will live on this earth as long as one single Jew survives. To provide for it, to prepare for it, is our most sacred obligation to our deathless people. Our only salvation as a religious community lies in our omniterritoriality. The Talmud and Rashi made this crystal clear: “God so loved the Jews that he scattered them among the nations that they might not all be destroyed at one time” (*Pesachim* 87b with Rashi’s comment).

And yet our kingdom is not of this world. It lies not in any physical state, not on any Mount Zion. Yet Zion is salvation: it is the next hill across the horizon. “I lift mine eyes unto the hills.” What is Zion? It is the will to survive: לא אמות כי אחיה . “I shall not die but live and declare

the works of the Lord.” Zion is the dogged determination to help every Jew everywhere: to teach him our ancestral way of life, to emphasize our age-old heritage, our respect for learning, our common faith. It is the determination to give him the best of what we have inherited and to pass on this new American Jewish culture that it may become another link in an unending chain of Jewish tradition.

But Zion is even more than all this. It even towers majestically over the Jew and the Jewish people and dwarfs their petty historical aspirations. When the last word has been said, it is an irrepressible faith in the future of a divinely inspired world where every human being, black and white, Jew and Gentile, is entitled to a place in the sun. It is the trumpet of truth for a kingdom of priests who are no hireling ministry .It is a ringing prayer and a fervent hope that a day may yet come when they will not hurt nor destroy in all this holy mountain, for the earth, the whole wide world, with its love and hates, its joys and tragedies, its laughter and tearful sobs, will yet be full of the knowledge of God as the waters cover the seas.