

The Fate of the Jews

By MITCHELL SILVER

ISRAELIS refer to the current stage of conflict with the Palestinians as “*hamatsav*,” the situation. The Israelis’ military might, powerful American ally, and moral obtuseness, make this “situation” radically unlike most past Jewish predicaments. But in its complexity, portent and uncertain future, it is a common Jewish plight. There is a sense in which Jews, more than most peoples, have always been in a “situation.” If any people merit the description of being in “perpetual crisis,” Jews do.

The historical fate of the Jewish people has been a live question for thousands of years. What will become of the Jews? What should become of the Jews? What meaning should be attached to what does become of the Jews? These are questions that both Jews and non-Jews have long asked. But Jews ask them differently than do neutral observers, for they have an obvious and direct stake in the answers. Of course, individual Jews have often played the roles of detached sociologist, analytic historian and objective cultural prognosticator, describing the condition of Jewry and predicting what will become of the Jews the way impartial scholars might. Individual Jews have also, like all humans, wondered about and tried to influence their personal fates, and have had to take into account the fact of their Jewishness as part of their speculations and calculations.

But Jews have also made their communal destiny a *collective* central concern. What happens to “the Jews” is an issue for Jews beyond the question of what happens to individual Jewish people. Moreover, it has not just been a worry about whether things will turn out good or bad for the Jews; it has also been about what constitutes good and bad outcomes, and about what Jewish institutions should do to promote the good outcomes, even among those who agree that a particular fate is indeed desirable. In other words, there has always been a “situation” — conditions fraught with danger, meaning and choices for the Jews — and Jews have made the discussion of this situation an enduring collective project. Within the Jewish community, this discussion has practical purposes: What’s to be done?

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What should *we* do? What is our specifically Jewish collective task?

The understanding of the Jewish condition and its implications for proper Jewish action have not always been *sharply* contested. While these issues were hotly disputed through various periods of ancient Israelite history and have been controversial throughout the modern era, too, for 1,700 years there was a dominant (never, however, completely uncontested) Jewish understanding of the Jewish situation, an understanding that both explained the situation and prescribed how to behave within it. From the loss of the homeland in the second century to the Enlightenment and emancipation of the 18th and 19th centuries, there was a common Jewish ideology of the Jewish condition: Jews were in exile in accordance with God’s plan. The pain of exile was a just punishment for Jewish sins, but the exile was not simply punishment. It served God’s universal purposes. The exile was an instrument in realizing God’s intention to establish a reign of peace and justice. From the Jewish people a Messiah would emerge to inaugurate the days of peace and justice. Ending the exile and suffering of the Jews would be part of the messianic work. In addition, the Messiah, with the help of the Jewish people, would lead humanity in the project of universal salvation. Rabbis could argue over details, but that was the traditional consensus view of the fate of the Jews.

There was also a consensus as to what Jews should be doing while waiting for God to send the Messiah: not much. Patience and piety were the virtues Jews needed in this schema. Patience, because God seemed to be taking his time in the realization of his plan, and piety because that is what God asked of the Jews, maybe even needed from the Jews, to fulfill the plan. Jews were giving the starring role in the divine plan. Chosen by God to demonstrate true piety by scrupulously living a Torah-guided life, Jews were the world’s best exemplars of a holy life, a nation of priests. While it was for God to pick the moment for initiating redemption, and there were admonitions against trying to “force the end,” Jewish piety, in various formulations, was thought to be of help in speeding the day of redemption. Mystical trends often suggested that more

could be done to bring Messiah besides standard piety. But the overwhelming traditional recommendation to the community was clear: patience and piety should be our rule. Equally clear was Jewish destiny: God will redeem the Jews, end their exile, resurrect their dead, and establish a universal realm, led by Jews, of peace and justice.

THE modern age shook this consensus. It took the entire 19th century, but by 1900 a different Jewish conception of Jewish destiny was ascendant and appeared on the verge of sweeping away any remnants of the traditional view. The new view came in many varieties, but they can all be classed under the rubric of "assimilationism." Jews were to blend into the general population and shoulder the same responsibilities, share the same fate, as their gentile neighbors. Some assimilationists thought that civilization was entering a post-religious age, when distinctions between Jew and Christian would melt away, leaving only secular national groups. Depending on where they lived, ex-Jews would lead the same lives as ex-Christian Germans, or ex-Christian French, or ex-Christian English or ex-Christian Americans, etc. There would be no separate Jewish destiny. Some post-religious assimilationists went beyond envisioning a merging with secularized national groups and looked forward to merging into a post-national common humanity. These socialist internationalists were in some ways the most radical assimilationists of all (although there were, as readers of *JEWISH CURRENTS* well know, some Jewish socialist internationalists who retained a nationalist agenda).

Liberal religious conceptions did not include giving up the separate Jewish faith, although they dispensed with a separate Jewish fate. Retaining their (reformed) distinctive religion, Jews would abandon their distinctive peoplehood. Although this was not strictly a post-religious conception, it nevertheless put religion at the periphery of identity. Being a Jew would now determine where and how you worshiped, but not how you lived. Society was envisioned as having many forms of worship in a future of complete freedom of conscience; Judaism no more separated one from the life of the community than did Deism, Unitarianism, Universalism, or the plethora of Christian sects. Indeed, having a religion made one more rather than less like one's neighbors. Although the Conservative wing of the liberal religious movement did not theoretically abandon the notion of a separate Jewish nation, in practice it was as assimilationist as Reform Judaism, and

its practice reflected the assimilationist ideology of the overwhelming majority of its adherents.

The late 19th century saw the emergence of a competing diagnosis of the Jewish situation and a competing prescription for Jewish life: Zionism. In some ways Zionism can be classed as an assimilationism. Most versions of Zionism wanted the Jews to become like other peoples, a "normal nation." But what Zionists wanted was an assimilation into the family of nations, not a blending of Jews with others, not the disappearance of a distinctive Jewish people. Indeed, it was the Zionist belief in the impossibility of the latter that was at the heart of most Zionist analyses of the Jewish condition. According to Zionist doctrine, Jews were destined to exclusion and persecution unless they constituted themselves as a sovereign people in their own homeland. So while there is a perspective in which Zionism appears assimilationist, for the most part it must be seen as the post-religious alternative to assimilationism. Jews were to remain a people apart, but as a free, independent people, shaping their own destiny.

While at different times one or another of these visions was dominant, none of them can claim supremacy today. What is striking from today's perspective is how each of these three visions — the traditional, the assimilationist and the Zionist — is still in the field and can plausibly argue that it has been vindicated by history.

With the Czarist pogroms, Stalinist persecution and especially the Holocaust, Zionism's Diaspora pessimism proved prophetic beyond the Jews' most horrid imaginings. Zionism was also able to realize its project, scoffed at by most Jews in Zionism's early years, of creating a vibrant Jewish homeland. A large majority of contemporary Jews would claim to be Zionists, or at least in strong sympathy with Zionism.

But the apparent triumph of the Zionist vision is tempered by the reality of contemporary Israel. A haven from anti-Semitism abroad, Israel has yet to become a safe place for Jews to live. Hebrew-speaking and rich in general culture, it has disappointed many as the sustainer of Jewish values and traditions, and especially as the champion of Jewish notions of justice. It is no light unto nations. And although it is home to five million Jews, millions more have declined to cast their fate, as individuals or as Jewish communities, with the Israeli nation. Israel may be a long-lasting, important factor in the Jewish future, but it is not equivalent to the Jewish future.

In spite of the catastrophes of 20th-century Diaspora Jewry, assimilationism remains a viable vision of the Jewish future. Of all contemporary nations, America

has the largest population of Jews, and American Jewry's assimilation has been extravagantly successful. Anti-Semitism is a marginal phenomenon scorned by most Americans. Jews are welcomed in all significant places, at every level of society. Neither political power, social acceptance, great wealth nor public honors are denied them. Judaism is treated as an American religion, with chaplains in the army, on university campuses and in government legislatures. Military cemeteries display their *mogen dovids* alongside Christian crosses. No American ethnicity is as well placed in American life as today's Jews. And while America may be an extreme case, it is not wholly exceptional. West European Jewry is well integrated and successful, and even the Jews of Eastern Europe are making encouraging progress in their quest to become part of their national societies.

ASSIMILATIONISM can make a case that it is and ought to be the wave of the Jewish future. But the case is not unproblematic. Past assimilationist attempts, notably in Germany, looked promising, too, before becoming nightmare disasters. Troubling pockets of anti-Semitism remain stubbornly resistant to eradication. More significantly, assimilationism's appeal to American Jewry is in question. The "multiculturalist" impulse to maintain an ethnic identity beyond "American" has influenced American Jews, but there is also a strong desire among American Jews, inspired by authentic, specifically Jewish ideas and emotions, to resist full assimilation into a generic American ethnicity. "Jewish continuity" ranks with concern for Israel as the most important concern of organized American Jewry. This anti-assimilationism is more than the original liberal religious intention to retain a separate mode of worship. It is a desire to maintain a substantial panoply of distinctive cultural forms. Assimilationism may be the fate of the Jews, but clearly not all Jews embrace that fate or think it inevitable.

Remarkably, and against all social thinkers' expectations, the traditional view, complete with Messiah, the dissolution of the Diaspora, and the establishment of God's reign of justice, is a robust, albeit minority, ideological trend among contemporary Jews. Not only have the ultra-Orthodox communities failed to wither, they thrive and receive new recruits from the other sectors of Jewry. Liberal Judaisms feel the pull of the traditional view: Modern Orthodoxy is increasingly less modern, Conservatism tries to conserve more and more traditional religious ideas (despite some counter-trends) and Reform has been unreforming for decades.

The West Bank settler movement (albeit with a modern, politicized, fundamentalist, ultra-nationalist twist) has made the traditional religious view of Jewish fate a powerful social/political force in Israel.

Hence the traditional view is alive and well. But it is not triumphant. A large majority of Jews, in America, Israel and elsewhere, are still firmly rooted in the secular world of science and rational thought, and it is difficult to imagine the traditional view ever again becoming the dominant Jewish ideology. The surprising tenacity of the traditional religious view, and its appropriation by current reactionary movements, should not lead us to conclude that it is on the verge of regaining its hegemony among the Jewish people.

What philosophical intervention should secular Jews make in this unsettled ideological scene? Is there a secular Jewish vision of the future of "the Jews"? With-

want a pluralistic Jewish world. That doesn't mean that there are not some Jewish practices that we would gladly help sweep into the dustbin of history. It does mean that we aspire to a Jewish future that would sustain many types of Jewish communities, organizations and cultural forms. Any monolithic Judaism, even if our vision of a secular progressive Judaism were that monolith, should not be the Jewish future we desire.

Second, secularists should want to see a stable and flourishing Israel that embodies Jewish pluralism. This requires a just resolution of the conflict with the Palestinians, and a turning away from the madness of the settler enterprise and fantasies of lasting security through permanent military dominance. It also requires a dismantling of the theocratic strain in Israeli governance. That done, there is a good chance that Israel will become the center of a cornucopia of Jewish cultural forms, many of which will be of a new, vibrant and secular variety.

Finally, secularism's vision of the future will be broadly assimilationist. Although we want a continuation of identifiable Jewish communities, we do not seek to be a people apart. Jews should be integrated with the peoples around them, in continual social intercourse and mutual cultural enrichment. We are of the human family and want close, loving family relations with all of our family members. But unlike classical liberal religious assimilationism, which sought to eliminate cultural markers while maintaining religious separatism, we secularists want our identity to be marked by an array of cultural features that go well beyond our metaphysical beliefs and particularistic ritual practices. We aspire to a Jewish community that shares historical, aesthetic and moral traditions that permeate many areas of our lives and make us a people yet do not cut us off from our gentile neighbors but rather make us interesting and productive contributors to the larger culture.

Will this be the fate of the Jews? *Ver veyst?* Is it possible and worth striving for? That is the question.

out the collapse of any of the major alternatives, or a dominant ideology to challenge, secular Jews will have difficulty finding clear ground on which to build their vision or a definitive foil to help shape it. Still, there are a few things that might be tentatively said.

First, secular Jews need not and should not offer a prediction of the Jewish future. It is for dogmatic religion or rigid, pseudo-scientific, ideological theories (frequently functionally equivalent to dogmatic religion, as has been oft noted) to predict the future. Secularists, like any observers, may point out trends and describe some of the possibilities they see, but we should eschew any dogmatic belief that some kind of future is assured. Indeed, I would argue against having confidence that we can make any significant historical forecasts that are even probable.

But we should develop a vision of the Jewish future, a vision open to continual re-vision, a vision that constitutes a hope and a work plan. Let me suggest some general parameters for such a vision. First, a secularist should

CORRECTIONS

• July-Aug. issue, p. 29: Joshua Rubenstein's name was misspelled in the review of the book he co-edited, *Stalin's Secret Pogrom*.

^a July-Aug. issue, p. 35: The account of the X and Y chromosomes during conception was incorrect. The relevant sentence should have read, "During conception a male sperm cell furnishes an 'X' or [not and] a 'Y' chromosome to fertilize an egg containing one [not two] 'X' chromosome." Our thanks to Aaron E. Freeman for noticing the error.