

CONFERENCE ON
Jewish identity
here and now

Edited by

Lucy S. Dawidowicz and Milton Himmelfarb

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ROBERT I. HILLER

I am beginning to see, as a result of my experience with individuals in the community and on college campuses, that the young people Rabbi Israel has talked about do not have time to worry about the problem of their Jewishness, that is, Jewishness is not their problem. Here I agree, that the problem of the survival of Judaism — the crisis — lies with the Establishment. What does the Establishment have to offer these young people who have come home, trained and culturally conditioned by Yale? How can we get them to identify with the Jewish community? The problem will be easier to grapple with if we realize, first of all, that we are dealing with three different types of individuals, not just one. First, there are the young people who come into the community wishing to identify themselves with the community. They quickly affiliate and participate. Second, there is the larger group which I would call the neutral group, that is those who are neither here nor there. These people can be influenced. The third group, a smaller one, moves out of the community and does not wish to be spoken with.

I think that it is important for the Establishment to take a good look at the needs of the first two groups. There is a new client in the Jewish community and this client no longer is the person who needs social-welfare assistance. For the client is actually the community itself. We must pay attention to this fact. When I talk about this "we," I am talking about all of us who are involved in institutions within the community. We must begin to look at the service or the substance of what we have to offer. I think that there are areas that can be developed through the modification of existing institutions or the creation of new ones that will be attractive to this young group returning home from college. We must keep in mind that the colleges of today have given them some kind of underpinning — a set of values to which they would like to respond. If we are to reach them we have to be attuned to this set of values. These values should be examined in terms of authentic Judaism.

I would like to suggest that things are not so bleak as some of us may feel, that the people coming to the community are at least neutral and can be attracted. Our Establishment needs looking at. What is it trying to do? How good are some of the things it is trying to do?

We are beginning to attract the interest of young people through agencies and organizations that are under Jewish auspices and express Jewish values. These agencies have taken on major projects in the antipoverty program which are in line with the values of the agency and of community institutions. I believe that there are many other such type of modification and change that can be developed from within our existing Establishment.

I believe we need experimentation and I believe we need a very good, critical examination of a lot of what I am convinced is deadweight and which can be put to much more positive use.

NORMAN LAMM

I think it is worth considering that group which is most firmly rooted in its Jewishness. All of us are concerned about all Jews. We want all Jews to be perpetuated and, if at all possible,

to continue without any diminution in numbers. Nevertheless, I think there is something to be said for the idea that the continuity of Jewry and Judaism is, in the long run, going to be carried on by a minority and not the majority. I am referring, of course, to the idea of the "saving remnant" who have the creativity — in commitment, loyalty, willingness to sacrifice — to carry on. As you go through the history of our people, you will find that there were few generations in which the majority of the people were strongly committed. Usually, you will find that it was a small, often despised group who had sufficient energy, sufficient enthusiasm to carry along the rest of the people. I am not saying that the rest of the people will necessarily disappear, but that the fate or the destiny of the entire people will usually be contingent upon that small minority willing to risk everything for what it believes.

What are the qualifications for this kind of minority, this "saving remnant"? First, the intensity of its commitment. Second, its willingness to segregate itself from the flock. I do not necessarily mean the hasidic type of ghetto that we have in Brooklyn or Manhattan. For there are some very modern, worldly, university-educated people who nevertheless choose voluntary segregation by setting themselves apart in a specific and well-defined subgroup. The third qualification is one which, to my chagrin, rabbis are generally ashamed to mention: the question of birth rate. (The only person I know who has touched upon it is Milton Himmelfarb in Commentary.) I wonder if we fully realize the significance of the fact that the only group today in modern Jewry that is really reproducing itself is the very Orthodox one. Generally, the size of their families contrasts sharply with other Jewish groups. They have five, six, seven, or even eight children while the other families have only two or three. Therefore we cannot overlook this "pre-Emancipation" group. It would indeed be a pity simply to dismiss them as a fringe group having no relevance at all to the contemporary Jewish situation. For we may find that ultimately this group will outvote the rest of the community by dint of sheer numbers as well as the intensity of their Jewish concern.

I have not been speaking about this group necessarily because they are Orthodox or because of their particular commitments or philosophical premises. If you can find another group that fits into this category of the strongly committed I will accept them also.

MAURICE FRIEDMAN

I am not against the idea of a "saving remnant"; I think that we are trying to serve such a function here. But our new situation is such that we will never be able to cut ourselves off from an active concern with the broader group. Can we remain in touch with it and still not turn our job into one of communicating so well that we communicate down instead of up?