

"THE JEWISH JEW AND WESTERN CULTURE"

Fallible Predictions for the Turn of the Century

I shall not be speaking directly and exclusively about the conference theme of "Jewish Identities in the New Europe." Instead, I shall concentrate on what I surmise is the future course of those Jews who are intensely committed to Torah and the Jewish Tradition, and at same time do not wish to segregate from other Jews, do not want to ignore worldly culture, and who *do* believe--as a matter of principle and not merely convenience--that critical engagement with the environing culture and a profound feeling of fraternity with fellow Jews regardless of their own differing convictions is what, to borrow the prophetic style, "the Lord doth require of us." My intention is that because such a group undoubtedly exists, in greater or lesser measure, in Europe, my words will be germane to the situation in the "New Europe" as well, and that my American experience will not prove irrelevant to the subject of this conference.

I speak as one of this self-same group: as a religious, Orthodox Jew, who believes that without Torah there is no future for *Am Yisrael*, but who wants *all* Jews, no matter what their religious or ideological orientations, to survive and thrive; whose firm commitment to his own vision of Judaism and Jewishness sometimes makes him impatient but never intolerant of other, competing views; and whose outlook is best summed up in the words *Torah Umadda*, the integration or confluence of religious commitment and worldly learning. Hence, my title: "The Jewish Jew and Western Culture."

The sub-title, "Fallible Predictions for the Turn of the Century," can be explained only on the basis of my outrageous lack of modesty; for the Talmudic Sages taught that since the destruction of the Temple, the gift of prophecy was taken from the prophets and given to children and fools...

The polarization of the Jewish community is by now a truism. On the one side, a high mobility rate and the displacements of war have produced a situation whereby, as one scholar estimated a number of years ago, perhaps one in a thousand of us speaks the same language and lives in the same place as did our grandparents. Prof. della Pergola's figures and graphs presented earlier in this conference confirm that impression. Assimilation and intermarriage are decimating our communities in the Diaspora. Low fertility rates and the aging of our population confirm the grim impression of where we are heading. The traditional Jewish family structure is crumbling, and the organized Jewish community

is uncertain as to how to react. The lack of adequate Jewish education and the erosion of Jewish identity in the U.S. are weakening our ties to Israel (and, consequently, all other Jews); witness the relatively narrow base of contributors to the UJA, the declining memberships of Jewish organizations, and the surprisingly few American Jews who visit Israel.

Fortunately, there is another side of the ledger, though hardly enough to offer much consolation. The Orthodox community, whose demise was confidently expected several decades ago, has rebounded with renewed strength. The Haredi community has especially demonstrated great vigor and self-confidence. Indeed, a process of radicalization has set in and become noticeable. Along with it has come a growing antagonism towards the non-Orthodox (and the Modern or Centrist Orthodox as well).

What does the future hold? As one who is neither a futurologist nor the son of a futurologist, I know, as Alfred North Whitehead has reminded us, that "It is the business of the future to be dangerous"--especially for overconfident prognosticators. For example, some 4 years ago, the French political commentator Jean-Paul Revel, in his *How Democracies Perish*, wrote: "Democracy may turn out to be a historical accident, a brief parenthesis that is closing before our eyes"--and that, before Gorbachev, perestroika, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the collapse of the Communist Empire...

To illustrate the special danger of prophecy regarding the future of Jewry, recall that but a few years ago, Charles Silberman, in his *A Certain People* offered a pollyanish and relaxed, happy view of where we are going. Unfortunately, his data was wrong, and his predictions have already been proven false.

The pessimists fare no better. Jeremiads about the inevitable decline of the Jewish people usually give rise to naught but a yawn. About three decades ago, *Look* magazine--unaware of the wise insight of the late scholar, Simon Ravidowicz, that Israel is "an ever-dying people"--published a famous issue on "The Vanishing Jews of America"; since then, we are alive and *Look* magazine has vanished.

Given the perils of forecasting about Jews, is there anything we can say with a measure of confidence about the short-range--say, the turn of the century?

In general, a sober outlook leads neither to utopia nor to doom. The religious complexion of a community generally responds more to inertia than to revolutionary change. I recommend, therefore, the stance of a "worried optimist."

According to this view, polarization will get worse. Those on the fringes will assimilate more rapidly, and those now considered part of the amorphous "Left" will move to the periphery. An example: A recent (19 June 1992) Jewish Telegraphic

Agency report informs us that two Jewish women who are candidates for two vacant Senate seats in California appeared before the San Francisco Jewish Democratic Club. "Neither mentioned the 'J' word." All were Jews--hosts and candidates alike--yet there was no mention of Jews or Judaism or Israel. I take this as both symbolic and symptomatic of where the Jewish community's liberal segment is going Jewishly.

At the same time, the Right will move ideologically to more extreme positions, if only as a continuing reaction to the deracination of the assimilating segment of the community which includes much of the "Establishment" leadership. Thus, Right-wing "Jewish Jews" will be progressively more alienated from Western culture while the less Jewish Jews will be absorbed by it to an alarming degree. This is but an intensification of a phenomenon we have already been observing. Consequently, as a result of this dual movement, the demographics on the Left will continue to plummet while the Right grows, but not enough to make up for the deficit of the disappearing Left. Inevitably, tensions between both clusters of groups will increase so that the specter of the fragmentation of the world Jewish community into "two peoples" will represent a credible danger. And for all groups, Jewish education threatens to become less available and certainly more expensive (so, according to the recent American Jewish Committee report on, "The High Cost of Jewish Living"). Thus, Jewish life in the Diaspora will be more tenuous, more difficult, more menacing, even as--especially in the United States--Jews will have less influence on American foreign policy.

And the Modern Orthodox, the subject of this paper, those who are located at the epicenter of this developing earthquake, will be subject to even greater external pressures and internal dissent. I suspect that this will hold true for European Jewry as well as American Jewry, *mutatis mutandis*.

What does this augur for the long range prospects of the Jewish community? As John F. Kennedy said some thirty years ago, "Things will get worse before they get better." The core of nationalist, secularist, cultural Jews will undoubtedly continue as such, but their numbers will certainly be much smaller. Some few will begin to turn inward, for one reason or other, and grow more intensively Jewish. But over-all, the non-Orthodox will grow demographically smaller and ideologically more diffident. None of the cultural and political band-aids will be of much use in shoring up a shrinking Jewish identity. The use of the Holocaust to confirm and strengthen Jewish identity will prove a poor palliative. Israel and Zionism are already losing their power to inspire a new generation of Jews who knew neither the horrors of World War II nor the drama of the founding of the State of Israel. And Jewish philanthropy too will not be able to sustain the psychological and spiritual mechanisms that make for a positive Jewish identity. Indeed, in all three cases, the situation is reversed: those who have strong identities as Jews are the ones who are sustaining the memory of the Holocaust, advocating Israel and Zionism, and contributing to Jewish philanthropy!

Certain variables must, of course, be taken into account. Growing anti-Semitism, an eventuality that must never be discounted, can draw Jews closer to each other and to Judaism. Equally important, one must never dismiss the possibility of a Jewish religious revival. The emergence of the transcendent and the yearning for it is highly unpredictable; despite all attempts by historians and sociologists to "explain" their causes, they usually remain at least significantly mysterious and as impervious to our cognitive incursions as is the soul of man himself. But the sad reality remains that non-Orthodox American Jewry is and will for a long time remain in serious trouble.

Meanwhile, on the other end of the spectrum, the move towards the Right in Orthodoxy has probably crested. Even before the Reichmann bankruptcy, there was serious question as to the economic viability of the whole social and educational structure of the Haredi world. The Kollel system--itself a remarkable illustration of what dedication to scholarship on a popular scale can accomplish--requires an ongoing source of wealth, with new infusions every generation, or massive governmental support as in Israel, two prerequisites on which the Haredim certainly cannot count indefinitely. Moreover, since it is impossible to survive economically without technology, they will find it impossible to thrive as a cognitive minority that totally spurns Western culture; technology brings along with it a certain amount of intellectual and cultural "baggage" that simply cannot be ignored. Modernity, if not confronted, has a tendency to come from behind, as it were, and pull the hood of contemporary culture over the unsuspecting and reluctant victim--even if he is a Haredi.

Hence, one can expect profound changes in the Haredi world, with militancy increasing as the threats to its integrity increase, and as defections to other groups grow.

The Center, the sector most affected by the tension between "Jewish Jews and Western Culture, " is comprised essentially of two groups: the Modern or Centrist Orthodox, those characterized by a commitment to Torah along with worldly culture (*Torah Umadda*), and the "nominal" Orthodox, most of whom used to be known as the "non-observant Orthodox." In the United States, this last group is declining, although remnants of it are still visible and viable in many areas. In England, where this group is effectively the Establishment, both assimilation and Haredism are increasing at its expense. It is hard to describe, let alone predict, the role of the Modern Orthodox in a community where the leaders of this very group are so fearful of the Right that they refuse to acknowledge that they constitute an entity and are effectively functioning as Modern or Centrist Orthodox Jews.

This points to a weakness that is part of the general character of moderate movements: they lack passion and are easily intimidated. Extremists by nature tend to be simplistic and purists in their ideology, and this gives them a sense of certainty and confidence. Moderates, who are aware of the complexities and the grays and uncertainties of life, tend to be demoralized by those on the extremes. In our case, there is a constant fear of delegitimization by the Haredim. As a consequence, the moderates are beset by internal frictions as they are tugged in opposite directions by competing factions.

Yet the Orthodox center does possess strengths which must not be overlooked: mostly, it has finally found its "voice." At Yeshiva University, the concept of *Torah Umadda* was once shunned as a topic of research or even conversation, despite the fact that it was a living reality in the lives of faculty, students, and the community behind them; nowadays it is forthrightly discussed. Moreover, it is not confined to rhetoric but is increasingly adopted as a meaningful ideology of Judaism, and is accepted *de jure* and not only *de facto*. It has, thankfully, drawn sufficient attention to itself to become the object of much lively controversy, and is being elaborated and criticized and defended and applied in publications and conferences. Organizationally, the moderate and modernist group in Orthodoxy is "getting its act together" and beginning to shed its shyness and diffidence.

While one should not expect the spectrum to be abolished, it appears that the Center will gain strength. And if the external world begins to tend towards moderation, away from the militant secularists on the one side and the Ayatollahs on the other, the moderates in Orthodoxy will benefit.

Our "fallible prediction" for *beyond* the turn of the century for the Modern Orthodox community thus includes the following items:

- a) the most "left" group of Orthodoxy will break off and unite with those "traditionalists" who recently left the Conservative movement; but they are and will remain few in number and influence
- b) a rather larger number will defect to the Right, thus leaving the Center smaller, but more cohesive and less plagued by inner tensions
- c) an increasing number of defections from the Right to the Center will add to the latter's strength
- d) The Center, which now appears rather weak and in disarray, really *does* speak for a "silent majority," and that group will be less silent as it recaptures its old self-confidence

Is that wishful thinking?

Perhaps. But experience has taught us that optimism and pessimism are not only assessments and projections without practical consequence, but statements of faith or the lack of it; and the way we foresee events is often a self-fulfilling prophecy.

I stake my stand on this proposition. I believe that the cause represented by the institution I head and the philosophy I espouse will, ultimately, prevail--in the United States, possibly in the New Europe, and eventually even in Israel--partially because I and my colleagues believe it--and despite enormous pressures.

That is why, as I said at outset, I am a "worried optimist."