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An offprint from
Jewish Identities in the
New Europe

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PUBLISHED FOR
THE OXFORD CENTRE FOR
POSTGRADUATE HEBREW STUDIES

London · Washington
Littman Library of Jewish Civilization
1994

CHAPTER SIX

The Jewish Jew and Western Culture: Fallible Predictions for the Turn of the Century

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RATHER than addressing directly and exclusively the theme of Jewish identities in the new Europe, I shall concentrate instead on what I surmise is the future course of those Jews who are intensely committed to Torah and the Jewish tradition, and at the 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 volume.

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 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 subtitle, ‘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 has been 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 his or her grandparents. Sergio DellaPergola's figures and graphs presented elsewhere in this volume confirm that impression. In the diaspora, assimilation and intermarriage are decimating our communities. Low fertility rates and the ageing 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 how to react. In the United States, the lack of *adequate* Jewish education and the erosion of Jewish identity are weakening our ties to Israel (and, consequently, all other Jews); witness the relatively narrow base of contributors to the United Jewish Appeal, the declining memberships of Jewish organizations, and the surprisingly small proportion of American Jews who visit Israel.

Fortunately, there is another side to the ledger, though even that does not offer much consolation. The Orthodox community, whose demise Marshall Sklare confidently expected in *Conservative Judaism* several decades ago, has rebounded with renewed strength. The *haredi* (strictly Orthodox) community, especially, has demonstrated great vigour and self-confidence. Indeed, there is a noticeable process of radicalization, and along with it 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, a few years ago, the French political commentator Jean-Paul Revel wrote in his *How Democracies Perish*: 'Democracy may turn out to be a historical accident, a brief parenthesis that is closing before our eyes'—and then came 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 Pollyanna-ish and relaxed, happy view of where we are going. Unfortunately, his data were wrong, and his predictions have already been proved 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': we are still alive, but *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 Jewish Telegraphic Agency report of 19 June 1992 informed us that two Jewish women who were 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.

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 absorb that culture to an alarming degree. This is but an intensification of a phenomenon that can already be observed. As a result of this dual movement, the demographics of 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 groups will increase, so that the spectre 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 (according to the recent American Jewish Committee report, '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 the foreign policy of their respective countries.

And the Modern Orthodox, the subject of this paper, those who are located at the epicentre 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 overall, 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 healing an ailing Jewish identity. Intensive application 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 the Second World War nor the drama of the founding of the State of Israel. Jewish philanthropy will likewise 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, at 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 *kolel* system—whereby young men, including married men with children, continue their talmudic studies into their 30s and 40s thanks to support from the community, but especially from parents and in-laws, requires an ongoing source of wealth, with new infusions every generation, or massive government 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 up from behind and pull the hood of contemporary culture over its unsuspecting and reluctant victims—even if they are *haredim*. 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 centre, 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 strict Orthodoxy 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 intimidated by the Right that they refuse to acknowledge that they do indeed constitute an entity that is 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 purist in their ideology, and this gives them a sense of certainty and confidence. Moderates, who are aware of the complexities and the greys 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 centre does possess strengths which must not be overlooked: mostly, it has finally found its voice. At Yeshiva University in New York, 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 centre 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.

My own 'fallible prediction' for *beyond* the turn of the century for the Modern Orthodox community thus includes the following items:

1. 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.

2. A rather larger number will defect to the Right, thus leaving the centre smaller but more cohesive and less plagued by inner tensions.
3. An increasing number of defections from the Right to the centre will add to the latter's strength.
4. The centre, 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 teaches that optimism and pessimism are not only assessments and projections without practical consequence, but statements of faith or 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'.