
Whatever Happened to the Jewish People

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In memory of Charles S. Liebman

HOSTING MIKHAIL Gorbachev at their first summit in Washington, D.C. in December 1987, Ronald Reagan regaled his guest with a description of a mass rally held in the city just two days earlier to demand unrestricted emigration rights for Soviet Jews. Over a quarter-million Americans, mostly Jews, had gathered on the Mall, some coming from as far away as Hawaii, to march under banners demanding “Let My People Go.” So moved had Reagan been by this display of ethnic solidarity in the name of democratic rights that he spoke about it for five long minutes as his visitor uneasily tried to shift the conversation to a safer topic, like arms control.

Today, less than twenty years later, it is almost inconceivable that the American Jewish community could muster the will to mount so massive a show of unity. It is not just that, at the moment, no large-scale crisis seems to engage the American Jewish psyche. Rather, something vital in that psyche has changed. Mounting evidence now attests to a weakened identification among American Jews with their fellow Jews abroad, as well as a waning sense of communal responsibility at home. The

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once-forceful claims of Jewish “peoplehood” have lost their power to compel.

“ISRAEL IS a people like no other, for it is the only people in the world which, from its earliest beginning, has been both a nation and a religious community.” Thus, some 65 years ago, the philosopher Martin Buber summed up an age-old peculiarity of the Jews. The classical formulation is in the biblical book of Exodus, where the children of Israel are commanded to serve at one and the same time as “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

For the most part, Jews have always understood that the two sides of this dual identity—the religious and the ethnic/national—are inextricably intertwined. As between the two, indeed, there are striking examples of a precedence being given to the dimension of peoplehood. Rabbinic exegetes over the ages, for instance, found significance in the sequence of commitments undertaken by Ruth the Moabite to her mother-in-law Naomi: “Your people shall be my people, and your God my God” (Ruth 1:16). For Ruth, the prototypical convert, first came an embrace of the Jewish nation, second came a declaration of faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Jewish liturgy, similarly, situates the collective Jewish “we” not in the religious community but in the nation, as in the standard devotional phrase thanking God “Who chose us from all the peoples [*amim*].”

Embedded in notions of Jewish peoplehood are strong familial or “tribal” associations. But the openness of the Jewish people to converts makes plain that the familial bond is itself a function not solely of biology but of a shared history, a common fate, and, for much of Jewish history, closely similar religious customs and practices. Through centuries of life as a minority group, Jews could thus function as something of a global polity. Leaders of far-flung local communities, both lay and rabbinic, maintained contact with each other, coordinated action, and, insofar as possible, strove to provide mutual assistance.

During the modern era, currents in society at large and within Jewish communities themselves began to erode this structure of world-wide allegiance. A conceptual unraveling set in with the Enlightenment and the emergence of modern nation-states. As Western countries undertook to confer legal equality on their Jews, the latter gradually ceased to view themselves as members of an autonomous people and began to redefine their distinctiveness as wholly or predominantly a matter of religious confession alone.

But ethnic cohesiveness hardly disappeared. In the United States, as many Jews of an older generation can still attest, an active concern with the fate of Jews around the world often survived the waning or even the disappearance of religious practice. During the 19th century, Jews motivated by bonds of peoplehood lobbied the U.S. government to intervene on behalf of imperiled fellow Jews abroad; during World War I, they established the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee to channel funds for the same purpose. Over the decades, American Jews created a large network of philanthropic federations and a panoply of aid organizations, “friends of” societies, lobbying groups, and political-action committees. Each was an expression of a commitment to the Jewish people in its many habitations.

The second half of the 20th century marked a high point of this spirit of engagement as increased consciousness of, on the one hand, the horrors of the Holocaust and, on the other, the significance of emerging Jewish statehood unleashed strong feelings of ethnic identification. On the eve of the Six-Day war in June 1967, American Jews rallied to render massive financial and emotional support to an embattled Israel; around the same time, they launched their epic struggle to free imprisoned Soviet Jewry, a struggle whose zenith was reached two decades later in the Washington demonstration that would so capture the imagination of Ronald Reagan.

THEREAFTER, THINGS began to change. They have done so most notably with regard to Israel—despite assertions by critics that the Jewish community continues to command vast powers of internal mobilization on this front. The change is easily traced in surveys of shifting attitudes. In 1989, a national survey conducted for the American Jewish Committee found 73 percent of Jews agreeing that “caring about Israel is a very important part of my being a Jew”; in 2005, a mere decade-and-a-half later, the corresponding figure had fallen to 57 percent. Younger adults, moreover, exhibit weaker attachment to Israel than do their elders.

Nor it is just a matter of Israel. According to the 2000/2001 National Jewish Population Study, younger adults are significantly less likely than their elders to agree strongly that “Jews in the United States and Jews around the world share a common destiny” or that “when people are in distress, American Jews have a greater responsibility to rescue Jews than non-Jews.” Responses to the simple statement, “I have a strong sense of belonging to the Jewish people,” are especially telling. The proportions strongly agreeing drop steadily from a high of 75 percent among those aged sixty-five or over to a low of 47 percent for adults under thirty-five.

The effects of these attitudinal shifts are likewise easily traced. The late 1980’s, a period marked by the first Palestinian *intifada*, appear to have ushered in a period of creeping disaffection from Israel within sectors of the American Jewish community, and prior levels of support have never since been matched. During the second *intifada*, which began in 2000, a demonstration in Washington at the peak of the wave of Palestinian suicide bombings of Israeli civilians could muster only a relatively meager turnout.

What is true of public displays of unity is also true of levels of giving on behalf of causes that explicitly address the needs of the Jewish people as a whole. The year 1985 (a year characterized neither by an emergency in the Middle East nor by massive emigration to Israel requiring large infusions of aid) saw a total of \$656 million raised by American federations of Jewish philanthropy. Simply to have kept pace with inflation, this amount should have grown to a figure of \$1.19 billion by the time of the 2005 annual campaign. Instead, and notwithstanding continued wealth creation among American Jews, total campaign receipts increased to only \$860 million, a shortfall of 18 percent. In this same time frame, the total size of allocations to Israel dropped on an inflation-adjusted basis by almost two-thirds.

Apart from the fall in dollars, there has also been a steep decline in the numbers of those giving. In the decade 1990–2000, the proportion of Jewish households participating in the federations’ annual fund-raising campaigns fell by a third. Although federation leaders say that increased generosity can compensate for lower numbers, in fact both dollars and donors have been in decline—two conjoined signs of the waning attractiveness of a united Jewish appeal to a united Jewish people.

HOW TO explain this fraying of bonds? Several social forces are clearly operating at once; most of them, ironically enough, reflect well on the openness of contemporary American society and the relatively secure situation of Jews within it. The most blatant is the dramatically higher rate of intermarriage as compared with earlier generations. Of Jews now marrying, nearly half are being wed to non-Jewish partners. Whether as cause or consequence, the intermarried tend to have fewer Jewish neighbors, fewer Jewish friends, lower levels of membership in Jewish institutions, less attachment to Israel, and less allegiance to the Jewish people. As for Christians who marry Jews, they tend to understand Jewishness narrowly, as a matter of religious practice and faith rather than as an ethnic identity.

The new fluidity in relations between Jews and Gentiles can be seen not just in marital patterns but in other areas as well. Although two-thirds of Jewish baby-boomers still have mostly Jewish friends, two-thirds of their children, now young adults, have mostly non-Jewish friends. They also have fewer Jewish neighbors and co-workers than did their counterparts three or four decades ago. In sum, the social interactions of younger American Jews are far more likely today to be mainly with non-Jews, a reversal that, welcome as it is on many obvious grounds, is fraught with consequences for identification with the Jewish collective.

Other factors peculiar to America play a role here. Jews in the United Kingdom, France, Argentina, Australia, and South Africa, more acutely aware of their minority status, tend to be more connected to a transcendent notion of Jewish peoplehood (and also more bound to the state of Israel). Even Canadian Jews outpace their American counterparts in this respect. But, for a variety of reasons, contemporary American society seems less hospitable to the perpetuation of strong bonds of peoplehood.

Why is America different? For one thing, despite the modish talk about multiculturalism and

the requirement to honor “diversity,” ethnicity is in fact a weak and weakening form of identification here, at least among white people of European descent. The flurry of group celebration that was characteristic of the 1970’s had no discernible effect on actual group cohesiveness. As the sociologist Herbert Gans observed back then, much ethnic assertion was “symbolic,” with people looking for “easy and intermittent ways of expressing their identity, for ways that do not conflict with other ways of life.” As a result, Gans concluded,

they refrain from ethnic behavior that requires an arduous or time-consuming commitment either to a culture that must be practiced constantly, or to organizations that demand active membership. Second, because people’s concern is with [personal] identity rather than with cultural practices or group relationships, they are free to look for ways of expressing that identity which suits them best, thus opening up the possibility of voluntary, diverse, or individualistic ethnicity.

Over the past decades, internal solidarity among all American white ethnic groups has continued to fall off. In fact, American Jews display *higher* rates of group allegiance, and lower rates of intermarriage, than do, say, Italian-Americans and Polish-Americans, two groups whose ancestors arrived in America around the same time as the mass migration of East European Jews. Nevertheless, most of the once-traditional props of Jewish peoplehood in this country—large immigrant populations, neighborhoods, Yiddish-inflected folkways, a distinctive cuisine—have faded from the scene. American Jews are now regarded, and appear largely to regard themselves, as part of the undifferentiated mass of American whites, not as a distinctive group in the multicultural “rainbow,” a term that in any case mostly encompasses blacks, Hispanics, and Asian-Americans. Or, worse, Jews are portrayed by critics of prevailing American arrangements as partners and allies of the “hegemonic monoculture”—today’s term for what was once known as the (white) ruling class.

Then, too, recent cultural patterns in the United States have profoundly altered the general relationship between the individual and the group. As documented by Robert Putnam in his influential analysis *Bowling Alone* (2000), the social “glue” connecting Americans has weakened. So, too, has the engagement of Jews in their own civic activities. American Jews now volunteer less than they once did for communal endeavors, and they join Jewish

organizations at considerably lower rates. In a striking finding of the 2000/2001 National Jewish Population Survey, the major Jewish membership organizations suffered a nearly 20-percent decline in affiliation over the decade of the 1990's alone.

To be sure, other indicators of Jewish involvement have remained stable, or have actually improved. Membership in both synagogues and Jewish community centers has held steady, and measures of ritual observance, like attendance at a Passover seder or lighting candles on Friday evening, have also held their own or better. American Jews have also increased their participation in educational programs at all levels. But this heartening development has not noticeably contributed to augmenting their ethnic cohesion or their sense of peoplehood. Instead, it has gone hand in hand with its diminishment.

To see why, we need to consider another factor—namely, the distinctively American inclination toward congregationalism, individualism, and unfettered experimentation in religion. All of these serve to promote variety rather than uniformity, clearly lending creativity and vitality to the American religious scene—but no less clearly leading to fragmentation. The same holds true for American Judaism in all of its denominations, except perhaps for the Orthodox. Nowhere else in the world are the Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist branches so powerful and energetic as they are here. But this vitality, which has succeeded in attracting about three-quarters of all synagogue-affiliated Jews, has arguably also contributed to detaching them from their coreligionists elsewhere, and especially in Israel, where versions of Orthodoxy dominate and shape the received idea of Judaism held even by those who do not attend synagogue or adhere to Jewish religious practice.

If, moreover, American religion tends to the innovative, it also tends to the private and the spiritual. Here, too, American Jews have proved adaptive—especially lately, when they have been eagerly abetted by their rabbis and educators. Contemporary American Judaism is replete with the language of spiritual quest, personal “journeys,” and searches for healing. At worship services, it is common for rabbis to speak of the Sabbath, for example, not as a sign of the everlasting covenant between God and the Jewish people but as a means of private emotional release, urging congregants to treat the day as a time for reviewing their personal experiences of the week just past and for letting go of their everyday cares. Similarly therapeutic notions inform many of the educational offerings now available to American Jews, from the lowest grades

through university courses and adult programs.

Finally, one should mention the new “globalist” consciousness much touted by Western and especially European intellectuals. In the name of eliminating “boundaries” between and among people, whether national, ethnic, or religious, this quintessentially postmodern movement celebrates the trans-national, trans-cultural individual. It urges us to sample civilizational offerings wherever they may be found, and from these to assemble our own private identities. Rejecting “essentialist” claims of all kinds, it upholds the virtues of “hybridity,” stressing that even the most homogeneous-seeming cultures are but manufactured admixtures of numerous influences. Absorbed into the mindset of educated Jews, this cluster of ideas works powerfully to undermine the concept of a distinctive Jewish people with its own culture, its own separate interests, and its own unique obligations.

ALL OF THESE factors have vastly complicated the task of mobilizing American Jews to take concerted action on behalf of specifically Jewish causes. Many, insofar as they are moved to action at all, seem to reserve their fervor for the approved “universal” causes of our time—Darfur, relief for victims of Katrina, domestic poverty, and the like. Although rabbis, educators, and Jewish agencies strive to link such non-sectarian causes to traditional Jewish teachings, they tend to become tongue-tied when it comes to urging attentiveness to distinctly Jewish needs.

Outside the organized community, some positively decry any preoccupation with specifically Jewish causes as unseemly, or retrograde. The well-known economist Jeffrey Sachs, for example, now the director of the UN Millennium Project, recently chastised Jewish donors for being fixated “on local and parochial concerns” instead of learning to “give globally.” A writer in the liberal magazine *American Prospect*, even while acknowledging that “an estimated two-thirds of giving by Jews goes to non-Jewish causes,” fretted that “in subsidizing trips to Israel and funding Jewish day schools, . . . Jewish philanthropists are retreating into a narrow tribalism.” Once condemned as “rootless cosmopolitans,” Jews, it seems, are now to be condemned for caring too much about their own. As between the two caricatures, it would be hard to see which is the less justified.

In any case, Sachs and the others are beating on an open door. Exquisitely sensitive to the new mood, Jewish professionals have moved not to resist but to accommodate it. Once upon a time, for

example, the slogan of the United Jewish Appeal was “We Are One.” Almost as ubiquitous was “Keep the Promise,” a modern-day equivalent of the age-old rabbinic injunction, “Every Jew is responsible, one for the other.” This language reflected the beliefs not only of fund-raisers but of donors—and was, to boot, recognizably Jewish in its idiom. (One can hardly imagine the United Way or Catholic Charities adopting the slogan, “We Are One.”)

Today, however, the collective rhetoric of peoplehood is conspicuously soft-pedaled, if not quite abandoned altogether. The United Jewish Communities (UJC), the renamed umbrella organization of federations of Jewish philanthropies, now raises funds under a new slogan: “Live Generously: It Does a World of Good.” Rather than appealing to a donor’s sense of group responsibility, the tag line solicits in the name of individual virtue—giving out of the spontaneous goodness of one’s heart.

And what is the Jewish “world” that is to be benefited by this generosity? Mostly, according to the UJC, it is a world made up not of institutions but of needy individuals: Jews in America “living below the poverty line,” Israel’s “lower-income populations,” the “Jewish elderly in the former Soviet Union [who are] alone, hungry, and deciding between rent and medicine,” and “Jews of all ages and affiliations” requiring educational subsidies or special programs. Nowhere in the UJC’s catalogue of needy sub-populations is there any mention of support for the state of Israel, or for Jewish communities in their totality, or for overarching Jewish causes. Rather than a single collective whose religious civilization must be nurtured, whose cultural institutions merit constant support, whose future generations will have to be educated, the Jewish people is imagined in terms of thousands of otherwise disparate but needy individuals in the here and now.

DOES ANY of this matter? What exactly is lost by a redefinition of Jewry in terms of individuals rather than in terms of a single people, and of Judaism in terms of personal and private identity?

Our own answer is unabashedly “essentialist”:

seeing Jews as a global extended family, exhibiting concern on these grounds for one’s fellow Jews, are authentic expressions of what, from biblical times forward, it has meant to be Jewish, and to act responsibly for the sake of the Jewish future. Jews are not solely the agglomeration of adherents of a particular faith, each seeking personal meaning; they are a people whose primary mark has been the conviction of a unique corporate role in history—the mark, to use classical theological language, of chosenness. To retreat from peoplehood is to repudiate what has been at the core.

Even from the point of view of the individual, the loss of this core can be devastating. To see oneself as part of a larger collective entity is to situate oneself in a history of 3,200 years and more, imparting a sense of transcendent connection, purpose, and destiny. It buttresses faith, enhances religious activity, lends significance to communal affiliation. For a sense of how intrinsic, how almost innate, this connection to peoplehood was within living memory, and how thoroughly inseparable from specifically *religious* ideas, here is how Eugene B. Borowitz, a Reform theologian, wrote about it in 1965:

Jewish peoplehood is an indispensable part of Jewish religious thought and Jewish religious practice. A specifically *Jewish* religious life . . . means, therefore, life in and with the Jewish people, the Covenant community. . . . When at least ten Jews congregate to pray, they . . . represent all Israel, past and present, here and everywhere.

In slightly altered terminology, one could cite abundant sources to the same effect from secular Jewish authorities no less impelled by the idea of a communal Jewish mission. But whatever the language in which the idea of peoplehood is couched, it is impossible to believe that many forms of Jewish collective endeavor can survive without it. In the end, the decline of Jewish peoplehood is symptomatic of a decline of morale, of national self-respect. A people no longer proud of what and who it is, no longer dedicated to caring for its own, cannot long expect to be held in high regard by others, or to move the world by its message.