

Anti-Semitism 1974: Its Meaning For Jewish Communal Services*

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THE ways in which Jews choose to fight anti-Semitism reflect, among other things, the perception which Jews have of the society in which they happen to be living. That is the primary link between the subject of anti-Semitism and the business of all Jewish institutions of health, education and welfare.

Jewish community centers, hospitals, family service agencies, educational institutions, welfare federations, cannot set their full course by asking such question as "What is a Jew?" or "What is our Jewish function?" They must also ask: "What is an American Jew?" and "What is the nature of American life that affects Jews, as Jews?" If the Jewish agencies do not deliberately ask these questions, they are nonetheless continuously involved in reacting to them in practice, however carelessly. Those same aspects of American life, which affect the Jews as Jews, are the central issue-ground for agencies concerned with anti-Semitism.

Our understanding of anti-Semitism has had to be revised in the last several decades and, in the light of changing American conditions, needs review and revision again. We have, in recent history, invested the term, anti-Semitism, with such specific content that it more often interferes with than helps understanding.

There is reason for that. In the past century or so, the "Jewish Question" has seemed mainly to be a question of the civil rights of the individual Jew. The "liberated" European Jew was in the

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process of pulling out of the ghetto, of joining the rest of the population on a basis of equality. The thrust for Jewish rights became the Shylock cry: "When we are pricked, do we not bleed?" The civil rights theme held that we are not as a group really different from everyone else; therefore we should not as a group be treated differently from anyone else. The strategic emphasis was on the similarity of the Jew to others.

The defense, therefore, was to stress that similarity. The *Centralverein*, the German Jewish defense agency, founded just before the turn of the century, stated its mission in this fashion: "We intend to express openly before the whole world how we feel and what we think. The systematic slanders will not cease therewith to cover us with their poison. But the neutral will not deny their sympathy to a serious and respectably conducted defense, and those who today do not know us, who are unable to get to know us because our entire life is strange to them, will testify for us: 'these Jews of Germany are not less loyal citizens than we, just as self-sacrificing patriots, just as noble human beings.'"

As the European pathology pressed upon America, American Jews organized to develop a similar defense. In 1930, Sigmund Livingston described the nature of that defense as it was being shaped: "to educate the great mass in the truth concerning the Jew and to demolish the foibles and fictions that are now part of the mental picture of the Jew in the public mind." The enemy was that false "mental picture of the Jew" as *dissimilar* in negative ways. If that false picture could just be erased, then the

civil rights of the Jew would no longer be in jeopardy.

But, of course, despite a torrent of literature, films, film-strips, speakers bureaus, conferences, editorials and sermons, that "mental picture of the Jew" did not disappear. After decades of such efforts, after a War against the Nazis, and during a period of national calm, it was found that about a third of the American population still held some deep, systematic and coherent set of negative stereotypes about Jews; there were few Americans who held none. There undoubtedly had been some erosion of these attitudes since the 1930's, but for practical purposes, it was not a significant erosion.

We have since stopped equating the state of Jewish security with the state of the "mental picture of the Jew in the public mind." Jewish security is defined as the ability of the Jew to live as Jew without danger or disadvantage. There are two main ways in which that security can be threatened, and neither of them is genetically related to the negative stereotype. One has to do with the violation of Jewish civil rights, with or without false stereotypes. The other — the growing edge of anti-Semitism—has to do with an anti-Jewish hostility which is founded on accurate, not false images of the Jew. These two different kinds of problems for Jewish security might be briefly reviewed by sketching two current illustrations.

The Security of the Jew as Citizen: A Review

One case is the occasional emergence of the American Nazis. This case is chosen not because of the importance of the American Nazis, but because the illustration lends itself so poignantly to this purpose. Whenever the Nazis appear to display their sickening literature and

uniforms, there is always an impulse to demand that they be arrested, and enjoined from speaking or distributing their literature. The basic community relations agencies resist this impulse, and are promptly charged by some with acting in a tradition of a) cowardice, b) complacency and c) assimilationism.

In wry fact, these agencies are acting in quite an opposite tradition. They are acting with some contemporary knowledge of anti-Semitism, which explicitly pulls away from the *Centralverein* and earlier American, rather craven tradition that: "we will be all right if people like the Jews; people will like the Jews if they know that we are *similar* to them as a group." This is a consistent logic, at least because the only danger of the Nazi *defamation* of the Jews is that it will convince people that Jews are *dissimilar* in ways that should make people dislike them.

It should not be (but probably is) necessary to say at this point that of course Jewish agencies should angrily take every reasonable step to combat this defamation, for various reasons including self-respect. But such activity is irrational when it promotes conditions which will help Nazism rather than hurt it. For this is the distillation of what we have learned: The chief danger to American Jewish security is *not* the defamation of the Jew. It is less important that people like or dislike Jews than that they are (internally or externally) constrained to treat Jews with civil equality, whether they like Jews or not.

That is one of the rocks on which effective Jewish defense stands. There may have been more Germans than Americans in 1930 who disliked Jews, but the difference in numbers was not significant. A near-majority of Americans held some systematic set of negative beliefs about Jews. The difference between Germany and the United States was *not*

the extent of anti-Jewish defamation, but other conditions existing in those two countries. The difference between surveyed followers and non-followers of Coughlin's anti-Semitic movement was not a difference in the extent of negative images about Jews. And for a critical mass of surveyed Americans, it just wouldn't make any difference whether a politician wanted to pass Nuremberg laws against the Jews. They wouldn't vote for him on that account, and they wouldn't vote against him on that account. If he gave them something they wanted badly — lower taxes, food, whatever — they would vote for him on that account, and take the Nuremberg laws as well. Their involvement in active anti-Semitism would initially have less to do with their animus towards Jews than their lack of commitment to democratic constraints.

These democratic constraints are, of course, an interlocking web of commitments to the inviolability of the individual human being. They have to do not with what men should do for each other, but with what men cannot do to each other: restrain thought or belief, or the expression thereof; invade privacy; restrict movement or personal behavior, and so forth, including the "due process" that no arbitrary distinction be made between one person and another with respect to these prohibitions. (Equal opportunity in access to economic life has come to be added to the boundaries of this body of constraints — again, not so much as a standard of how much each person should achieve in fact, but as a matter of prohibiting direct interference with each person's effort to achieve what he or she will and can. So, the constraints do not circumscribe the total area of what one might call "social justice", but rather, discrete conditions of political freedom. The Nazis can subscribe to, and have subscribed to many areas of "social justice", such as combating pov-

erty and unemployment; they do not and cannot subscribe to the constraints of political freedom. By the same token, the main focus of Jewish *defense* has to do with political freedom rather than with the total area of social justice).

Our society's commitment to these constraints are, at best, built into its laws and institutions. Some of the population is not so much directly committed to these constraints, as they are committed to the general idea of upholding society's laws and institutions. For example, a hardened and complete system of official segregation was broken in the South by the weight of legal institutions, against the fervent desires of the overwhelming mass of Southern whites. Prejudice against the blacks was virulent, and had not seriously diminished. Studies indicated that the people who were most ready to accept desegregation were *not* the people who had more favorable attitudes towards blacks, but were those who had the greatest commitment to the society and its legal institutions.

What is the current state of those conditions which sustain democratic constraints? In line with the previous discussion, the measure is not so much the threat presented, but the manner in which the society handles the threat. "Watergate" now stands for a sinister attempt to break the spirit of those constraints at the highest level of government. The attempt did not fail because it was clumsy: it was wrecked against the various institutions which our society has built for that purpose. The newspapers and mass media emerge with unimpaired freedom. The law and the courts have upheld that freedom, and have upheld the integrity of other societal and governmental agencies combatting the White House conspiracy. The public has been supportive.

There has developed no cogent extremist political movement in America which has either targeted the Jews or

called for the abrogation of democratic constraints in general. The level of old-fashioned anti-Jewish defamation has risen somewhat in fringe circles, but the conditions of constraint which forestall active anti-Semitism have remained firm, even under the provocation of the oil embargo crisis. Complacency is never a sensible stance to take towards the possible rise of political extremism, and anti-Jewish defamation can be expected to follow in the wake of political extremism. But the fact is that at the moment there seems to be no imminent threat to the civil rights of the individual Jew, to the Jew's legitimacy as American citizen.

The Security of the Jew as Ethnic Group

The other rock on which Jewish security stands is not individual civil rights, but group status. And here, the American Jews have been finding themselves on shakier ground. The initial illustration, in this case, is the resistance often offered when it is proposed that Jewish ethnic studies be added to Black, Latino, Asian ethnic studies in the public schools. The resistance is often overcome, but it is there. One actual and typical remark: "Come on now, the Jews have had their chance all these years, they are doing all right..." Translated, this kind of remark means; 1) Ethnic identity and studies are only valid for disadvantaged groups; 2) not disadvantaged, the Jews don't have an ethnic identity which is important to uphold; 3) it is annoying of the Jews, therefore to make such a proposal.

It is significant that this kind of hostility towards the Jew is exhibited most notably by people who are most committed to the liberal concept of civil rights, who hate the Nazis, and who would be outraged by and fight defamation of the Jew or any attempt to pass Nuremberg laws,

discriminate against individual Jews in employment, etc. *Their* participation in this anti-Jewish hostility most clearly marks its singular nature.

For example, one unexceptionable liberal in a recent *Village Voice* article called "Can a non-Jew talk to a Jew?" wrote: "My feeling is that Jews are doing better in America than any other ethnic group (for good reason: they are the most gifted) except the rich WASPS. They should relax and enjoy their success..." Again, the implication is that the only concern of any ethnic group should be that they "are doing well," either in economic or civil rights terms; and that therefore they should relax their stubborn particularism.

The same writer quotes a political figure as saying to him, in reaction to what seemed to them an irrational defense by American Jews of Israel: "Those damn Jews." The writer continues: "This man, were it necessary, would be on the barricades with Jews if they were in jeopardy. He was merely expressing the kind of irritation I felt."

That "kind of irritation" goes beyond annoyance at American Jews who foolishly charge every critic of Israel with anti-Semitism. This is not a selective irritation, but an irritation at the corporate "damn Jews" who insist on maintaining their "tribalistic" ties even though the American society is now offering them everything. It is the same kind of irritation displayed by those who do not understand why the Jews should want their own ethnic studies. It is the same irritation displayed by those in Community Chests who do not quite understand why the Jews insist on maintaining their "middle-class" welfare agencies. It is the same irritation displayed by those who do not understand why Israeli Jews are not rushing to establish a "democratic, secular" state in the place of a "Jewish state."

In his own way, the *Village Voice* writer is harking back to the landmark cry of Clermont-Tonnere, champion of Jewish civil liberty at the time of the French Revolution: To the Jews as individuals, everything; to the Jews as a nation, nothing." Here, not the legitimacy of the Jewish citizen, but the legitimacy of this Jewish group is being questioned. While the civil rights theme centers around the *similarity* of the Jewish groups to others; the ethnic group theme emphasizes the legitimate *dissimilarity* of the Jews. This hostility towards the Jew is not based on *false* negative stereotypes but on an *accurate* image of the Jews as insisting on their group difference. This "kind of irritation" at the Jews was expressed by the Greeks, by the Visigoth kings, by the Christians, by the European universalists, by the Russian Communists. And the conditions which afforded Jews group legitimacy in America seem to be changing.

Those American conditions had to do with immigration; a broad pattern of heterogeneity; and the lack of an ideological drive to eliminate groups which interposed between the individual and the beneficial universalist state.

But the homogenizing force of contemporary America is strong, despite some flowery rhetoric to the contrary. All those "industrial-urban-mass-society" effects which have been levelling out regional and other groups, are still in operation. And we are in the first full flush of a post-immigrant era.

Of course, if there really *is* some ethnic renaissance and resurgence in America, then this tendency would be checked. But there are many indications that this so-called ethnic renaissance is a paper tiger. Most of those multi-ethnic cries are in reality political cries. That may even be true of the black ethnic drive in America. One remembers the year when the black high school youth around the

country were demanding classes in Swahili. They won their demand, more often than not, but then were not notably interested in studying Swahili. They had won a political victory, which was important for them. But their campaign was part of the pattern which says: "disadvantaged groups should have their ethnic identity recognized and their ethnic pride enhanced — until they are no longer disadvantaged; then they will become equal, de-ethnicized, universal citizens like everyone else." (That is the premise of the various "affirmative action" programs as well. The real danger of these programs, when they are abused as "quotas" is not really that they will freeze American life on a group basis, but that their effect will be to disregard and level out even *individual* differences, and thus finally negate the legitimacy of any kind of differences among people, group or individual. And there we find the scent of the ideological tendencies in Europe, in the Soviet Union, which have opposed the legitimacy of ethnic groups.)

The empty nature of a "white ethnic" renaissance is even more marked, despite the interim persistence of certain fringe ethnic traits, and of some low-income pockets of ethnicity. At one regional "white ethnic" conference sponsored by a Jewish agency, an Irish-American attendant commented: "I think the Jews are desperate to create a general ethnic revival, for which the chances are not likely, because the Jews may end up being the only distinct ethnic group in America, and you are afraid of that possibility."

That may be an exaggerated, but not a mistaken appraisal.

The thrust of civil rights is to de-group people; the thrust of ethnic vitality is to re-group people. There is a kind of practical tension between these two directions, the kind of tension which it is

necessary for a democratic society to maintain in some balance. Only in that way can the principle of tolerating human difference, whether individual or group, be fully served. The Jew is a prime tester of that principle, and of such a democratic society, because the civil rights and identity of the individual Jew is so stubbornly tied to the status of his community (not merely an assemblage of individuals who have civil rights but a separate group with a distinctive existence of its own). This "double legitimacy" is almost uniquely a requirement for Jewish security. One freedom buttresses the other; the loss of either freedom imperils the other and leads down the same road to disaster.

The Involvement of all Jewish Communal Service Agencies

The conditions which will support and foster the legitimacy of the Jews as a group are of direct concern to all Jewish welfare and educational agencies. These conditions have to do, after all, with a central business of these agencies: the ethnic identity of the Jew. But, in pursuing this concern, the Jewish agencies must also take into account the tension that is to be maintained between that concern and the concern with those conditions which protect the civil rights of the individual American Jew. It is not clear how this tension can be maintained, and, more specifically, how the conditions which relate to ethnic group legitimacy can be kept from deteriorating, if the above assessment is correct. But the policies and practices of Jewish welfare and educational agencies will not only shape the Jewish reaction to these changing conditions but may be a factor in shaping the consciousness of America with respect to these conditions.

In other words, this is a time when all Jewish institutions, in their own peculiar

settings, have the responsibility to *act on* American conditions, and to *act on* the American Jewish consciousness, by deliberately adopting policies and practices that are consistent with the concept of double legitimacy: the Jew as a free individual, integrated with other Americans in the common course of American life, and the Jew as a separate community.

For example, in emphasizing the legitimate separateness of the Jewish community, it is probably necessary to resist the temptation to excise separate Jewish institutions or institutional practices too precipitately, whenever the growth of the welfare state seems to be making them vestigial. There has been debate as to whether Jewish family service agencies will make sense in a society in which Jews will be subject to the same welfare benefits as everyone else, including family counseling and psychiatric consultation. From the vantage point of considerations raised here, it might be advantageous to maintain the institution, even under those conditions.

A more practical policy crunch may come when the Jewish community wants to supplement the welfare help that Jews may get as American citizens. Usually, if an aged indigent receives such an outside income, it is subtracted from his basic welfare grant. Why should not the Jewish community be able to extend its basic communal services, above and beyond the benefits of the common welfare state, as an expression of its communal tradition?

There is nothing new about this general question. What is being suggested here is that the concept of double legitimacy be applied as one dimension of the discussion. What is also being suggested is that this is a *common area* of concern for Jewish defense agencies and Jewish communal service agencies. This is the kind of question which affects the legitimacy of ethnic group life, and which will

symptomatically affect the state of anti-Jewish hostility (anti-Semitism) on that level.

For example, using the illustration of welfare supplementation, the question will be raised: Why should Jews get more assistance than anyone else? In a sense, that's the wrong question. There is no reason why Jews should get more assistance than anyone else, but there is reason for the Jewish community to provide that extra assistance, if it wants to. After all, there was no general reason in earlier days, before there was a serious public welfare system, for Jews to receive help from their community, while some others had no such help. But that pattern existed, and no one objected to it. Today, there would be objection in the general community, an indication of one of the new conditions in America. And there would be objection as well, from Jews, who themselves do not see the significance of the overarching issues: the legitimacy of the Jewish group, its institutions, and traditions.

If the objections in this case are elaborated, they will spell out a more sophisticated design: "The society should not be fragmented. If groups tend to take care of their own, then they will be less involved in the communal endeavor of taking care of everyone. Therefore, there should not be the interposition of groups between the individual and government." But the course of that seductive logic leads to the demolition of all such groups and to hostility towards those groups which stubbornly refuse to disappear. But the ability of a society to tolerate the existence of such groups, beyond developing a taste for chopped liver, is an important test of that society. The contribution of the Jewish community, in that regard, is to inform the larger society by its insistence on survival as a functioning community. Of course, to stay with our touchstone of "double

legitimacy", it is also required that the Jewish community become part of the general communal endeavor to raise universal levels of care and welfare, in which Jews will participate as citizens. In America, insistence on maintaining Jewish community traditions as institutions cannot be synonymous with withdrawal.

The exact nature of the response of different Jewish communal agencies will obviously have to be different. Jewish hospitals may have one way in which they reserve a particularistic Jewish function, and still participate in the general health services of a city. So, in a different way, with a Jewish community center and the general recreational facilities of a city. But the same touchstone considerations would apply. Questions raised by H.E.W. or community chests about the "make-up" of hospital or Center policy-making boards should not allow the matter of ethnic integrity to be *swallowed* by general and abstract civil rights issues. And always, now, the crunch is provided by the question of general welfare funds. For example, should Jewish homes for the aged be able to fully participate in federal funds for that purpose without ceasing to be essentially a Jewish communal and sectarian agency? This is really a variation of the earlier question about welfare supplements.

Some of these questions will obviously raise the traditional church-state questions, but will raise them in a new context. All of these questions fall into a common area of concern for all Jewish agencies and institutions: the nature of conditions in America which relate to the security and survival of the American Jew.

There is a discussion about Israel which also belongs in this same common area. The principle of Israel is, among other things, a principle of Jewish separateness. Those who call piously for the

"Jewish State" to wither away, to be replaced by a secular state, on the model of America, in which Jews can exist as individuals among other equal individuals, don't understand the failure of the European Jewish experience, which led in tragic modes to the creation of Israel, or the difference between the Middle East as a region and America as a nation. By the same token, the American Jewish experience is different from the European Jewish experience; American Jewish life and Israeli Jewish life have some significant areas of difference, just as they have some fundamental areas of similarity. The heart of the differences lies in the concept of double legitimacy, which applies to American Jewry and American conditions; and does not apply in the same way to Israeli Jewry and Israeli conditions.

The necessity then is for American Jews to split their concentration again. In the necessary preoccupation of American Jews with the immediate and urgent crises of Israeli Jews, there is sometimes an impulse to overlook the special needs of the American Jewish community. Indeed, there is sometimes an impulse for some, who sense changing American conditions and signs of anti-Jewish hostility, to embody their withdrawal from the American scene in the form of a total preoccupation with Israel, or with the plight of the Soviet Jews.

But there are reasons to resist that impulse. One reason, to be sure, is just a matter of short-term expedience. By one of those twists of Jewish history which is hard to see as accidental, the United States, at the moment and for some years to come, is crucial to the survival of Israel. So is the body of American Jewry. When we talk about taking action "for Israel", one of our considerations "for Israel" is the very practical maintenance of a strong and active American Jewish community.

But, beyond that, the survival of the American Jewish community has its own value and imperative. In another specific intertwining of Jewish history and human history which it is hard to believe is accidental, the survival of the American Jewish community is partly attendant upon certain general conditions of American society— and the significant survival of the American society itself may be attendant upon those same conditions. To put it bluntly, the Jewish future in America has a significance for the American future itself. And vice versa.

So, from that vantage point, it would seem incumbent on all Jewish institutions, in their own appropriate ways, to make sure that their programs and activities do not neglect a major focus on American Jewry, and on the specific sets of conditions in American society which particularly apply to the survival and security of American Jewry.

This imperative should apply to fund-raising agencies, which are, whether they intend to be or not, prime educational forces in the Jewish community. They are the agencies which have a prime capacity to shape the image of total "Jewish need" for the Jewish community.

And the formal institutions and agencies of Jewish education in America have that responsibility as well. The American conditions which relate to the survival and security of the American Jew should be a systematic part of every child's education, and a continuing part of adult Jewish education. This is not on the one hand just a matter of discussing general "anti-Semitism", or "Nazism", or "Arab propaganda." Nor is it, on the other hand just a matter of discussing general Jewish social values as they apply to the American scene. That spectrum of social values is not coterminous with those specific sets of conditions in American

society which provide for the freedom of double legitimacy.

In answering the question, "Is anti-Semitism 1974 real or imagined," the Jewish community must first pose a more sophisticated question: "What is the state of those conditions which are likely to create anti-Jewish hostility?" The attached questions are: "What are the manifestations?" and "What can be done about it?" With respect to any direct threat to the civil status of the Jewish citizen, the manifestations are minimal, and the conditions remain generally favorable, but those conditions are so volatile in the modern world that the

Jewish community should be more broadly conscious of exactly what they are, and be more deliberately supportive of them. There *are* growing manifestations of a threat to the ethnic group status of the Jewish community. While it is not yet clear how all the conditions relating to that threat can be affected, it is clear that the policies and practices of almost all Jewish communal agencies and institutions are involved. These policies and practices provide a common ground of issues, deserving the kind of common exploration which they have not yet had.