

# GLOBAL OVERVIEW OF THE JEWISH CONDITION TODAY: THE DESTABILIZING EFFECT OF CRISIS ON THE JEWISH WORLD

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*Today we are confronting many crises simultaneously: terror in Israel, resurgent anti-Semitism, escalating Jewish hunger, and a Jewish population in decline. Yet, the Jewish world has never been more prepared to meet these challenges. We must have the courage to recognize just how great the challenges are and to act in time.*

The calendar recently arranged some instructive lessons for a Jewish world beset by crisis. In a rare occurrence, the Shabbat on which we read the Torah portion of *Miketz* fell on December 7<sup>th</sup>.

The portion tells of Pharaoh's dream, interpreted by Joseph as predicting seven years of plenty for Egypt to be followed by seven years of famine. Joseph laid out the future and proposed a solution. Pharaoh acted on this advice to forestall the threat to his people, appointing Joseph to prepare the country for the challenges ahead.

December 7<sup>th</sup> represents a different approach to dealing with impending crisis. It was on this "date of infamy" in 1941 that the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. The attack shook American people from a peace of mind borne of the isolationist belief that Hitler was Europe's problem and that Japan was Asia's. FDR might have understood the growing danger, but the country at large ignored the threat until world war was thrust upon it.

## FROM PLENTY TO FAMINE

For world Jewry, the 1990s were a time of plenty. With communism gone, we were able to reclaim a lost Jewry through Jewish emigration and by restoring Jewish life in the FSU itself. Changing geopolitics ushered in hopes of lasting peace for Israel and a new era of prosperity for the Jewish State. All this occurred amid great optimism here in America.

How abruptly that plenty was transformed

into hardship. Half a century has passed, indeed, since the Jewish world last faced so intense and protracted a period of crisis.

## Israel's Burdens

The terrorist war against Israel will likely become symbolic of this time. Israelis have paid a high price. The almost 700 dead and 5,000 wounded represent a staggering proportion of Israel's population, equal to over 30,000 American dead and 220,000 injured. And for each of these casualties there are relatives and friends who are bereaved or who endure their loved ones' pain. Trauma's immediate effects are often plain. Only time will tell how today's experiences will darken lives, particularly those of children, in years to come.

Then there are the other Israelis, those who simply carry on despite their anxiety over what the next terror attack may bring. Most cope. But for others, especially those isolated by infirmity, age, or language, life is a daily battle against fear.

Israelis have proven resilient in the face of this assault. Yet, their resilience is also being taxed by a recession—now entering its third year—sparked by the collapse of tourism and exacerbated by the end of the high-tech boom that had fuelled Israel's growth. Unemployment is approaching 300,000, salaries are falling, and resurgent inflation is eroding buying power. While poverty now afflicts over 580,000 Israeli children and 210,000 elderly, the government—forced into deep budget cuts—is straining to help.

Israel faces all of this—and the prospect of becoming embroiled in a war in Iraq.

### **Anti-Semitism and the Wider Terrorist Threat**

If Israelis have borne the brunt of Palestinian aggression, its effects have been felt far and wide. Fanned by tendentious media coverage of Israel, anti-Semitism has returned with a vengeance across Europe, both in the salons of the fashionable elite and on the streets. Attacks against synagogues and against Jews have struck even in the free, Judeophile United States, while our campuses have again become a battleground as left-wing and Islamic groups target Jewish students and organizations.

Reminiscent as this trend may be of the traditional enmity we endured, it is reflective of a more recent phenomenon: fundamentalist Islam. Immigration has brought large numbers of Moslems to the West—to France, Britain, as well as the United States—and many of them are now taking up the cause of Islam in their new homelands.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict offered a pretext for the violent ones among these immigrants to attack their Jewish neighbors. The more sophisticated among them pose a still greater danger, as they flex political muscle to undermine the Western support on which Israel depends.

Islamic fundamentalism, indeed, has filled the void left by communism as the major threat to us as Jews and to the free world. The “Jewish-Crusader coalition” is in Al Qaeda’s sights. The events of September 11 and the attack in Bali are only the most shocking manifestations of a hatred for the Western way of life that knows no bounds.

The terror so many Westerners once saw as Israel’s problem is now a problem for the entire West. But even the Moslem world is not immune. In Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, and Egypt, fundamentalism threatens more or less pro-Western regimes, endangering, among others, these countries’ remnant Jewish communities.

### **The New Jewish Poor: the FSU and Argentina**

These multiple and interrelated political developments have shaken our collective composure. Once more, the world is a dangerous place for Jews. It is also one in which raw Jewish need is again demanding our urgent attention.

Only a few years ago, we seemed to be conquering the problem of Jewish hunger. Yes, there were pockets of Jewish poverty at home. And yes, there were tens of thousands of hungry Jewish elderly in the FSU and across Eastern Europe. But then, at the peak of our plenty, these needs seemed manageable.

Those relatively modest needs have since mushroomed. In the FSU, the immense hardship that is communism’s lingering legacy has left 250,000 impoverished Jews dependent on the Jewish world for life’s essentials. They simply have nowhere else to turn—no state-run social safety net, few family members, and no network of voluntary services.

Nor are the elderly the only Jews in dire straits. Amid the FSU’s widespread general poverty, thousands of Jewish children are threatened by inadequate diets, whereas others desperately require nurturing care that their parents cannot provide.

The challenge in the FSU is an enduring one, the unavoidable long-term price we must pay to reap the blessings that communism’s collapse yielded. However, new crises of poverty have erupted too, most tragically in Argentina where calamity has struck a formerly prosperous, self-sufficient, middle-class community of some 200,000 Jews.

The first blow came in the early 1990s, in bombings at the Israeli embassy and at the building of AMIA, the community’s umbrella organization. Yet, it was economics, not terror, that felled the community. After years of economic mismanagement, Argentina was driven to bankruptcy by the global recession. Businesses failures were widespread, unemployment soared, and individual savings were eroded by devaluation and were frozen out of reach in banks.

Tens of thousands of Jews were caught in this precipitous collapse, plunging them into the ranks of the country's "new poor." Now destitute, 35,000 Jews can no longer provide food, medicine, or even shelter for themselves or their families, and the number is still rising. Here, too, few social services are available to help them. Even AMIA—proud symbol of the community's ability to care for its own—collapsed into bankruptcy. The Jewish world, to which Argentina's Jews once contributed so much, is now their only hope.

### **Beyond Material Need**

Beyond the material threats, beyond terrorism and poverty, we face a less immediate, though no less serious challenge—the challenge to Jewish continuity. If a recent Jewish Agency for Israel (JAFI) study is correct, the world Jewish population is declining by 50,000 a year. The 2001 National Jewish Population Survey shows the U.S. Jewish population has dropped to 5.2 million. Western communities are employing a range of vitally needed strategies to halt the slide domestically, but appropriate strategies overseas are just as important, particularly where conditions are undermining Jewish community life.

In Argentina, the range of Jewish institutions supported by fees has crumbled along with the economy. Impoverished Jews cannot pay tuition or membership in community centers or synagogues, and even many of those who are still employed are so fearful of the future that they have cut back on all but the most essential expenditures.

In Argentina and in Turkey—where a similar, if less severe crisis, has struck—Jews unable to pay for community services are withdrawing from Jewish life. Given the shattered economic situation of these communities, outside assistance is the only way of keeping these Jews in the Jewish fold. If they depart, we may never reclaim them.

Yet, reclaiming Jews is the only option available in the FSU, where thousands are seeking out a heritage long denied them. It is

their right, and we need them to assert it. However, the window of opportunity that opened when the Soviet Union collapsed will not long remain so. If we do not act soon, untold numbers will be lost to the Jewish people forever.

### **THE WORST OF TIMES, THE BEST OF TIMES**

Terror in Israel, resurgent anti-Semitism, escalating Jewish hunger, and a Jewish population in decline—seldom have we confronted so many crises simultaneously. And yet, bleak as this picture may be, it is far from hopeless. To the contrary. While the challenges are great, the Jewish world has never been better prepared to meet them.

First, we are free to respond to challenges, no matter where they arise. With the vast majority of world Jewry finally free from official persecution, the political obstacles that once kept so many Jews beyond our reach have crumbled.

Second, we have unprecedented capacity to respond to crisis. Even though the recent recession has left the stock market far off its highs of a few years ago, Jews in the United States and throughout the West still enjoy great prosperity. The resources are there.

So are the mechanisms to bring those resources to bear in effective responses to our challenges. Communities in the West are strong and well organized: the North American federation system (with all its faults) is the envy of the world. And even as each community works to care for its own needs, agencies such as the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) enable them to give global expression to the shared responsibility that has been a source of our people's resilience throughout the ages.

As it brings that expression globally, JDC is easing today's hopelessness. It is also helping build, rebuild, and strengthen Jewish communities in the FSU, Argentina, and dozens of other countries, so that their Jews can join in meeting their own needs.

**THE COURAGE TO RECOGNIZE; THE  
WISDOM TO ACT**

For all that we possess the means to prevail, though, the challenges outstrip our response. We were spurred into action by Israel's emergency, prompted by the accurate assessment that the crisis was not a "local" issue for Israelis, but a threat to the entire Jewish world. We recognized our collective responsibility and fulfilled it magnificently.

Yet, the crisis in Israel is only one of many threats the Jewish world faces today. Each weakens the local community that endures it. Each also has its separate debilitating effect on us in the wider global community of the Jewish people, eroding our vitality and undermining our very future.

This is our greatest challenge. For the true test of crisis lies not only in our ability to respond to a single, threatening event, but in whether we are able to respond to that event without allowing other concurrent threats to escalate or fester.

Recognizing how great a threat these combined challenges pose is the precondition to overcoming them. Only by first understanding the cost of neglect can we muster the will to act, broadly and effectively, to ensure our future strength.

It was in this that Pharaoh succeeded where pre-war America failed. Both had the means to respond to looming threats, but only Pharaoh recognized the severe consequences that inaction would bring. Having done so, the austerity he imposed during the time of plenty seemed a small price to pay. America refused to recognize the unmistakable signs of approaching conflagration and would later pay dearly for its inaction. So would the Jewish people.

We too have the means to respond to our challenges. History will record whether we had the courage to recognize just how great the challenges are—and whether we acted in time.