

THE HARDEST ADAPTATION

Life without Apocalypse

STEPHEN JOEL TRACHTENBERG, J.D., M.P.A.

*President and Professor of Public Administration, The George Washington University,
Washington, D.C.*

For many Diaspora Jews, the millenarian vision, which gives political struggles apocalyptic overtones, colors their view of Israel and the peace process. It is time to wean ourselves from the millenarian vision and to adopt a political one, one that is still risky and still encompasses acts of occasional terrorism but can accommodate a movement toward peace.

HITLER'S GREATEST TRIUMPH

If we ask what the most eminent of human sages—figures like Confucius, Buddha, and Jesus—in fact achieved through their efforts, then the answer is surely: They converted others to their own way of thinking. That was the level of achievement to which Hitler always aspired. From Christianity he drew his messianic pretensions, which in turn depended on the assumption that our age is unique: that our own generation finds itself living in the “End of Days” prophesied in the Bible, that all of human history is converging on the point of time at which *we* stand, and that it is *our* generation’s responsibility—those of us who are fortunate enough to have been born Aryan—to fight the final battle of a truly cosmic war.

These millenarian visions Hitler incarnated in what we soon learned to call the Second World War. They accounted for his greatest diplomatic and military successes. They of course also accounted for his greatest military failures. For decades now, people have wondered why he attacked the Soviet Union, followed within a half-year by his declaration of war on the United States. How could Hitler have been so foolish?

But for the millenarian sensibility, bigger is always, by definition, better. If the is-

suces are cosmic rather than tactical, eternal rather than immediate, then the whole world must necessarily be in flames before God’s intended resolution can occur. As a self-proclaimed servant of divine intentions, Hitler had no choice but to attack everyone who was not professedly on his side and every place that represented an alternative to his Third and Final Reich.

In the bipolar world that followed the collapse of that Reich and the collapse of its European and Asian allies, the millenarian sensibility turned out to be a vision with considerable staying power. In the years following, Soviet Communism was engaged in an apocalyptic grapple with free-market capitalism and liberal democracy, a fight that sucked up into itself, on a world scale, every lesser conflict and every moral issue. The mood of the New Testament Book of Revelations could be heard in proclamations delivered from both Washington and Moscow. And President Ronald Reagan’s climactic words concerning “the Evil Empire” were a clear acknowledgment of what had always been latent within what we so inadequately called the Cold War. It was in fact the hottest war of all because it could only end, if it did not end peacefully, in the fall of our civilization and perhaps of our species—the kind of an ending envisioned, in previous years, by biblical prophets and their many subsequent imitators, including Adolf Hitler.

For the Jews of Israel and the Diaspora,

Prepared for the Diaspora Jewry Conference at the invitation of President Ezer Weizman, Jerusalem, June 22, 1994.

the millenarian international politics that dominated the twentieth century, from the wasteland battlefields of the First World War to the collapse of the Soviet Union only a few years ago, had some very special meanings. Within living memory, Passover *Haggadot* were printed in which an ancient Egyptian overseer flogging a Hebrew slave was depicted as only the first in a long line of anti-Semitic brutalizers, including Roman centurions, Christian crusaders, Russian Cossacks, and, of course, German Nazis. To suffer injustice and to die miserably seemed to many, including many Jews, like the inescapable Jewish fate. A historian as hard-working as Salo Baron felt compelled to devote his entire life and the many volumes of his "social and religious history" to showing that the life of Jews on our planet has been more than just a living hell.

But it was the grimmer and crueller vision, of Jewish life as an eternal curse, that turned out to have the greater hold on the human imagination—a vision that fitted so neatly into the complementary ones sponsored by pagan and Christian anti-Semites. The creation of the State of Israel took on such overpowering force for the Jews of the Diaspora because it was flung into the very teeth of that grim curse. The miracle of 1948 was like the moment, in the "Chad Gadya" poem of the Passover *Haggadah*, when even the Angel of Death is put down by the power of God. In a certain sense, it pointed toward the moment in 1995 when Yitzchak Rabin was cut down by an Orthodox Jewish assassin, an Israeli citizen who believed himself to be doing the work of God and—like the defenders of 1948—assuring the survival of Israel's Jews.

And when Gamal Abdel Nasser, in 1967, seemed to be assuming the mantle of Pharaoh and Titus and the Crusaders and the Cossacks and Hitler, Israel and Diaspora Jewry underwent a truly millenarian moment. On the stage of the Middle East, a dark and diabolical threat, incorporating the menace of so many centuries, was triumphantly laid low. All of the world's subse-

quent "disappointments" with Israel, including those felt by many Diaspora Jews, have stemmed from that theological moment—which turned out, after all, to settle nothing in a really permanent way and which left behind all of the problems, the petty messes of politics, that Israel is now struggling *finally* to resolve.

THE STRUGGLE OF DIASPORA JEWS TO WEAN THEMSELVES FROM THE MILLENARIAN ADDICTION

One of the more amusing features of life in a democratic society like the United States is the hunger for genealogy that creeps about among its many equal citizens. How desperately many of them seek—those whose families did not come over on the Mayflower—an aristocratic European ancestor or some other distinguishing mark that dates back at least a couple of centuries.

This American hunger helps us appreciate what a potent medicine is represented by the national and religious force called Judaism. To be told that you are biologically connected with a people whose persecution dates back to an age before Greece and Rome has, after all, a positive as well as a negative side. It confers upon Jews the curious distinction we so often glimpse in fictional or historical tragedy: the figure at the very bottom of the heap—be that Oedipus we see at Colonus, the Othello who has slain his truest love, or the Saul whose headless body is nailed to the wall of Bethshan—seems to rise to the top of the *moral* heap. Even Richard Nixon, after all—as some of the reactions that followed his death made clear—achieved a place in this pantheon of suffering and transcendence.

Given a powerful historical identity that was based on being threatened, Diaspora Jews, after 1948, found it increasingly feasible to feel themselves at one with a "threatened Israel"—an emotion that rose to floodtide in 1967. The money and other forms of support they contributed always had practical goals as well as emotional

roots, of course. But we neglect the latter at our own peril. In a bipolar world suffused with millenarian thinking, the occasional rhetoric from an Arab leader about "pushing the Zionists into the sea" chimed all too well with the Soviet vision articulated in the direction of America by Nikita Khrushchev: "We will bury you." American Jews, as they struggled to avert another Holocaust—this one scheduled to take place in the Middle East—could plausibly assure their fellow Americans that on the landscape of political apocalypse Israel and the United States stood side by side, while the Soviet Union and its Arab allies stood together on the *opposite* side.

And thus there arose the paradox more and more noted in recent years. In the State of Israel itself, among Jews speaking, writing, and thinking in Hebrew, the period from 1967 to 1990 was marked by a steady escalation in permissible tones and terms of debate. An Israeli citizen could get up in a public forum and declare: "What we are doing on the West Bank and in Gaza is to corrupt our nation, and is making a mockery of Zionist ideals." An American Jew who said anything of the sort in a public place—in 1975, say, or in 1980—would have turned himself into an outcast, never again to be tolerated in a respectable Jewish forum. Indeed, there were American Jews who argued that no Jew who did not undertake *aliyah* to Israel, and who did not personally share in the physical risks that Israeli Jews took for granted should allow him- or herself *any* criticism of Israeli foreign or domestic policy.

Embattled, threatened, and vulnerable: when that traditional Jewish position, so luridly confirmed by the Holocaust, came to be seen as the position of the State of Israel, the result was to reinforce—for American and other Diaspora Jews—their sense of Jewish identity, always leaking at the edges as young Jews married non-Jews and in other ways succumbed to the genial currents of Western secularism. Was there an American Jew, aged forty or fifty in 1980,

who could declare that the rhetoric of Rabbi Meir Kahane left him or her *totally* untouched? Or that a massive sale of American jets to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia would be, for him or her, a matter of *total* indifference? No wonder, therefore, that American Jews were so reluctant to go along when it became common to hear that Israel was not in danger of annihilation, but was in fact the single most powerful actor on the stage of the Middle East—a nation whose nuclear missiles could even reach Moscow!

And so we come to the present moment, when the State of Israel is actually, through its own democratic processes, seeking to achieve a long-term peace with its Arab neighbors, with the Palestinians of the West Bank and of Gaza, and with its own Arab citizens. The historical momentum behind that attempt is in many ways irresistible, given what is going on all over the world today. On a global scale, those of European descent are having to compensate, in one way or another, for the acts of injustice actually or allegedly committed by their ancestors. The debate, in Western nations, is increasingly over how far this process should go rather than over its validity. And the raw nerve quality of the process cannot be anesthetized on the grounds that one's ancestors, though European in every way, were persecuted by Hitler's Germany.

Having created a new nation in 1948, having repeatedly transformed it between 1948 and 1990, Israeli Jews are now consciously moving from a millenarian into a merely political context, complete with the drab political feature known as "occasional terrorism." Even the murder of Yitzchak Rabin has been assimilated into this very difficult perspective, which accepts a measured degree of risk in exchange for a very large degree of long-term gain. It is arguable that Israelis are carrying out this difficult feat *just in time* and are heading off the worst international scenario of all, one in which Israel stands alone as the last representative of a colonial state with two sepa-

rate tiers of citizenship—the less desirable being that accorded to the “natives.”

As the difficult, tedious, and often unsatisfying process of making peace with the Arabs drags its length slowly forward, the inevitable cries are heard from concerned Diaspora Jews, especially those of the United States. The Arab man in the street still dreams of the annihilation of Israel! Yasser Arafat is a hopeless administrator whose P.L.O. is in terrible political trouble! The rise of Islamic fundamentalism is restoring the anti-Zionist orthodoxy of 1948! Israel will end up with a missile threat only seconds, rather than minutes, from Tel Aviv!

In reply to these cries, once one is in the middle of a true political process—one that involves the struggle for reconciliation between those who have truly been enemies—the answers one can give are so much less than satisfying. Typically, they begin with “Yes, but...” “Yes, but what is the alternative?” “Yes, but the process itself is meant to help achieve its goals, until peace becomes a *habit*.” “Yes, but we are trying to build a whole repertoire of *vested interests* where peace is concerned—each one powerful enough to weigh in on behalf of keeping rather than violating a signed agreement.”

Compared to the language of apocalypse—of imminent annihilation, the holding off of which requires a perpetual mobilization of the human and particularly the Jewish spirit—what a come-down it is to have to resort to such ambivalent sentences, which allow for almost any possibility and which carry no 100% guarantees at all. Yes, but do we have any other choice?

FROM CRUCIBLE TO FARM: THE QUEST FOR A NEW NATIONAL METAPHOR

We live at a time when most industrial nations are having to adapt to their new multinational identities. The notion of a Swede or a German or a Dutchman or an American as automatically conforming to a specific physical or cultural identity is retained

today only by those seeking to hold back the tide of history. When we do encounter an exclusivist national model—as in the former Yugoslavia, say—we know that we are staring at an anachronism. Above all, we know we are staring at a willingness to trade political stability and economic progress for an unrealizable vision of national “purity.”

But when we experience the stresses of multiplicity, as is so much the case in the United States and in Western Europe right now, we can better understand the hankering after uniformity. All of us yearn for predictability, which in human affairs is so often identified with ethnic and religious homogeneity. And all of us would like “our” nation to represent a point of psychological rest rather than a locus of unresolved tension. Moreover, if we are the members of a Diaspora of any kind—if we are Greek-Americans or Irish-Americans or Jewish-Americans, for example—then we want our old homeland across the sea to incarnate our personal ethnic ideal in all of its clarity and purity. This yearning helps explain why Irish-Americans have so often served as financiers of the Irish Republican Army (IRA), why Greek-Americans are capable of more indignation over Macedonia than is generated even in Athens, and why Jewish-Americans are frequently more anxious about the developing peace in the Middle East than those—Israelis living in Israel—who have the most to lose if peace fails.

But difficult as this will prove for Diaspora Jews, the State of Israel can no longer be an idea or an ideal. And above all it cannot be, or become, a satisfying ideal. It is now well on the way to becoming a typically modern, typically complex set of national “arrangements.” If at one time it was common to speak of Israel as a nation forged in the crucible of history—forged in the way that a sword or a spear is forged, into one single solid piece—then we may now have to get used to the idea of Israel as a very large farm, where dozens of crops are

grown and dozens of processes take place. If the struggle for peace is successful, then Israel's future constituencies will surely include the following:

- Israeli Jews, ranging from those with Orthodox religious convictions to those who insist on marrying Jews or non-Jews in strictly civil ceremonies conducted within the borders of their nation
- Israeli Arabs, many of whom will vigorously debate exactly what it means to be a citizen of the State of Israel *and* a member of the Palestinian people *and* a Muslim or a Christian *and* an Arab
- Palestinians of the West Bank of Gaza, who will have to close the gap that now so often yawns between their practical adaptations to the State of Israel and their ideological rhetoric against it
- Diaspora Jews and West Bank Settlers who, when they look at today's Israel and today's West Bank, see no mosques and no churches but—in varying combinations, depending on the observer—all of Jewish history from Abraham to Bar Kochba, from the period of Byzantine to the period of Ottoman domination, and from Allenby's entry into Jerusalem to the rebirth of Jewish nationhood. The new and difficult political reality with which we are having to deal is that Jews of this particular kind can be dangerous, as was demonstrated by the killing of Yitzchak Rabin.
- Christians and Muslims from outside the Middle East for whom all past and

present and future developments in the "Holy Land" or in the City of Jerusalem ("al-Kuds") are focused around the figure of Jesus or Muhammad

- Archaeologists, scholars, journalists, and commentators from every conceivable background who, when they are not studying the most recent dig, are meticulously analyzing the most recent cultural and religious clash. (Imagine the political, cultural, theological, and, above all, vocal consequences, for example, if an illicit archaeological dig in the vicinity of the Temple Mount were to discover a potsherd, a gem, or a scarab bearing the name of Solomon the King!)
- And, as seems inevitable when we are talking about Israel alias Palestine alias The Holy Land, there are many more constituencies as well.

What a cacophony! What an overlapping bewilderment! And surely the moment will come when an American Jew, looking down from Mount Carmel or the Mount of Olives, will declare: "For *this* we knocked our kishkes out collecting money for the UJA? For *this* we supported every prime minister from Ben-Gurion to Golda Meir to Menachem Begin and even, at the very beginning of his presidency, to *the late* Yitzchak Rabin?"

And if all goes well, then the obvious answer to that question will be: "Yes. To accomplish *this* we did all of *that*. And thank God, we did it just in time!"