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# Jewish Security & Jewish Interests

*Jack Wertheimer*

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SIX DECADES after the Holocaust, a new wave of anti-Semitism has swept the globe, spearheaded by radical Muslims in the Middle East and Europe but taken up with gusto in democratic Western society not only by right-wing nationalists and neo-Nazis but by liberal and left-wing “anti-Zionists.” With frightening regularity, Jews have been assaulted either physically or in venomous words, synagogues and community centers have been bombed or incinerated in places as far-flung as Turkey, Tunisia, Argentina, England, and France, anti-Zionist rallies on American college campuses have deteriorated into anti-Jewish harangues, and Jews and Israelis have been blamed for everything from using the blood of Palestinian children for baking matzah to masterminding the September 11 attacks on the United States.

Surveying this situation, Abraham Foxman of the Anti-Defamation League has concluded that Jews “currently face as great a threat to the[ir] safety and security . . . as the one . . . faced in the 1930’s—if not a greater one.”

Foxman’s words stand in need of qualification. For one thing, the nature of today’s challenge differs markedly from the Nazi menace; for another, levels of violence and overt prejudice in the United States are considerably lower than they were in the 1930’s,

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and much lower than they are in Western Europe or Canada, let alone in the Middle East. But it is certainly understandable that Jews today, including American Jews, have been left feeling more vulnerable than at any time since the end of World War II, or that this sense of insecurity should be reflected in the shifting priorities of Jewish institutions. So it is that the battle against anti-Semitism and the defense of Israel have once again come to dominate the work of many of the major communal agencies, overshadowing most of the other items—education, religious renewal, cultural creativity—that had been high on the agenda only a decade ago.

To some limited degree, today’s circumstances have also forced a general rethinking of where Jewish interests lie. To put it mildly, such a rethinking is long overdue. For even if anti-Semitism had not exploded on the international scene with such ferocity, unfolding trends within the United States should long ago have compelled the organized Jewish community to reassess its alliances and its political strategies, and to reconsider certain deep-seated habits of mind.

SIMPLY STATED, the approach to Jewish security still employed by most Jewish communal agencies was devised well over a half-century ago, when the composition of American society, and the relative influence of its various constituent elements, were vastly different from what they are today. At the mid-

point of the 20th century, the U.S. population was overwhelmingly white (87 percent) and Protestant (67 percent), and its Protestantism was primarily of the mainline stripe. Since immigration had slowed considerably, largely due to the quotas put in place in the 1920's, no major changes in the composition of American society appeared to be in the offing.

As for the Jews, they had experienced a half-century of population growth thanks to earlier waves of immigration, to their still significant levels of fertility, and to low rates of defection. The early postwar period was a time, moreover, when Jews and Judaism were gaining a status and respectability unprecedented in American history. Symptomatically, the most important study in religious sociology in those years, Will Herberg's *Protestant—Catholic—Jew*, acknowledged an equal role for Judaism along with Protestantism and Catholicism in the "triple melting pot" of the great American experiment.

Today's religious and ethnic landscape offers a startling contrast. Protestants now constitute barely half of all Americans (52 percent), and the likelihood is of still further decline, particularly among the mainline denominations; according to a Gallup survey, roughly 40 percent of Americans now identify as evangelicals or born-again Christians. As the overall numbers of Protestants have fallen, the numbers of Catholics have slightly risen (to a little over 25 percent), owing largely not to natural increase but to immigration. Indeed, the greatest impact of the post-1965 wave of immigrants to our shores is to be found among Christian groups. Spanish, Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese speakers are a major force today in both Protestant and Catholic churches. As the sociologist R. Stephen Warner has put it, these new immigrants "represent not the de-Christianization of American society but the de-Europeanization of American Christianity."

And the Jews? If their numbers at mid-century greatly exceeded the combined populations of Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists, that is far from the case today. While the total population of the United States has increased from 160 million to over 280 million in the past 50 years, the absolute number of Jews has, at best, remained static. Even with the arrival of several hundred thousand Holocaust survivors after World War II, and more recently of Jews from the former Soviet Union, Iran, and Israel, low Jewish birthrates and the upward spiraling of intermarriage have resulted in a failure to increase. In proportional terms, the Jewish share of the overall U.S. population has declined from a mid-century

high of 3.7 percent to somewhere between 2 and 2.5 percent.

**T**HOUGH POLITICAL and social strength is not dependent solely on population size or density, there is no blinking the significance of these waning figures, or of still other factors that could be cited—for example, the dispersal of the Jewish population from its previous concentration in the Boston-Washington corridor. As for the once eminent place of Judaism in the "triple melting pot," most works on American religion do still continue to include references to Jews—along with Sikhs, Hindus, and Zoroastrians—but at least one recent work on the "late-20th-century awakening," while offering chapters on Protestants, Catholics, and Buddhists, passes over the Jews in relative silence.

So far, there has been only limited discussion within the Jewish community as to how these altered patterns are affecting America's Jews, or as to how Jewish agencies should reposition themselves to forge links with groups that are growing in size and influence. For reasons that are readily apparent, the quandary in which the agencies find themselves is very deep. Take, for example, today's Hispanics, who make up the largest segment of Christian immigrants. Although politically liberal, Hispanics, in R. Stephen Warner's words, "tend to be morally conservative." How are Jews, who continue to be not only politically liberal but outspoken in their support of liberal social causes like abortion, gay rights, and ending the death penalty, to find common ground with their Hispanic neighbors? How, with their bias toward secularism or toward the more rationalistic forms of religious expression, will they forge links to the expanding numbers of Pentecostal Christians, or to adherents of African variants of Christianity, not to mention Santeria, voodoo, and other alien religious practices? How, especially in the light of Islamist anti-Semitism, are Jewish groups to respond to the growing political influence of Muslim populations in places like Michigan?

Although one or two community-relations agencies have consciously made overtures to leaders of Latino and Asian-American groups in order to explore matters of common interest, or to press the cause of Israel and other Jewish concerns, most remain in thrall to old allegiances and to the pull of inertia. The longer this state of affairs continues, as David A. Harris of the American Jewish Committee has correctly warned, the more Jews will run the risk of being "left in the dust one day, notwithstanding our remarkable success to date."

THE SUCCESS to which Harris refers was built upon a network of agencies established early in the last century to insure Jewish security and to fight for Jewish interests. Primary among these agencies were the so-called “big-three” defense organizations—the American Jewish Committee, the Anti-Defamation League, and the American Jewish Congress. Until World War II, these groups understood their task to be one of protecting Jews from discrimination and ameliorating the suffering caused by persecution. On the international scene, they confronted anti-Semitic threats to Jewish populations abroad and sought to ease the plight of Jewish victims. In time, they and other American Jewish organizations came to regard the Zionist movement and, after 1948, the newly created state of Israel as vital instruments of self-defense.

Not surprisingly, these agencies limited their purview to matters that strictly affected Jews: prejudice, stereotyping, discrimination, and physical violence. Individual Jewish activists interested in fighting for the rights and liberties of others generally did so by joining or in some cases founding non-sectarian organizations like the NAACP or the Urban League. One historian has referred to this as a “bifurcated program of social action.”

During the postwar era, all this changed. First, the range of agencies expanded. Denominational arms, local community-relations councils, Zionist organizations, Holocaust museums, and other institutions now participated in the task of winning friends for the Jewish community through coalition-building, interfaith and intergroup dialogue, lobbying, and political action. With the expansion of the field, strategy also shifted, as Jewish security was now understood to be bound up with an ever-increasing set of policy issues. Thus, organizations across the spectrum lobbied for legislation banning housing and employment discrimination against any American, on the reasoning that such discrimination would eventually be directed at Jews. Led by the American Jewish Congress, Jewish defense organizations also litigated vigorously against any infringement upon the principle of the separation of church and state.

In time, Jewish organizations formulated “positions” on every conceivable matter of public interest, from abortion rights to stem-cell research, from foreign policy to civil rights, the environment, and health care. Although a few observers questioned the competence of these organizations to render judgments on matters far removed from the defense of Jewish security, and others wondered how thoughtfully or how democratically the judgments were

arrived at, there was hardly any debate about whether it was good for Jewish groups to be taking vocal stances on so wide a spectrum of issues, still less about whether the positions taken might not create as many foes as they would win friends.

In the immediate postwar decades, such questions, if asked at all, were brushed aside. Just as Jewish voters overwhelmingly favored candidates fielded by the Democratic party, Jewish organizations instinctively made common cause with groups within the New Deal coalition—liberal Protestants and Catholics, labor unions, other minorities (especially black Americans), and secular liberal organizations. This was understandable enough. Evangelical Protestants were, at the time, quiescent; the Republican party was an alien entity, still tainted by isolationism; corporate America excluded Jews from major positions; rural populations were at a far remove; and insofar as anti-Semitism was noticeable, it emanated from conservative, nationalist quarters, the traditional locus of anti-Jewish animus in the modern era.

In short, American Jews had forged a consensus concerning the twin pillars of their public agenda—namely, as the historian Arthur Goren has described it, “assuring Israel’s security and striving for a liberal America.” Both aims were expressed in universal terms: democratic Israel deserved support because it embodied the best values of liberal-democratic America, and the values of liberal-democratic America were the best antidote to all forms of social prejudice, anti-Semitism among them.

IT WAS only in the late 1960’s that strains began to develop in the postwar consensus forged by Jewish groups. The first shock came during and right after the Six-Day war of 1967, when elements of the secular Left and liberal Christians who had been traditional partners-in-dialogue with the Jewish community openly castigated Israel for having defended itself against the Arab armies bent on its annihilation. In one characteristic statement, Henry P. Van Dusen, the president of the Union Theological Seminary, surrealistically described Israel’s actions as “the most violent, ruthless (and successful) aggression since Hitler’s blitzkrieg.” In a foreshadowing of things to come, many a Jewish participant in interfaith cooperation began to feel, in the words of Samuel Sandmel, a professor at Hebrew Union College, “completely abandoned by precisely those Christians with whom [American Jews] had so much affirmative cooperation.”

Almost simultaneously, the anti-white and, specifically, anti-Jewish fusillades of the Black Power movement heightened tensions between Jews and

their erstwhile allies in the civil-rights community, a relationship that would be further tested in the coming decades by disagreements over affirmative action. In the early 1970's, the newly skittish defense posture of the Democratic party evoked worry about the ability of a weakened and inward-looking United States to arm and protect Israel. Taking the measures of those and other seismic changes within American liberalism, some observers, in COMMENTARY and elsewhere, began to question the steadfastly liberal orientation of the organized Jewish community. So did Orthodox groups. For the most part, however, the major Jewish agencies stayed the course that had been set at mid-century. For the most part, they still do.

THE WORLD, however, has moved on. Especially during the last few years, shock after shock has been delivered to yesterday's assumptions about friends and foes. If, for example, American Jews have historically placed their faith in the civilizing influence of higher education, sending their children in disproportionate numbers to college and universities in the expectation of finding there a bastion of liberal tolerance, since 2000 these putative oases have erupted in anti-Israel demonstrations that in some cases have crossed the line into open anti-Semitism. To the further consternation of many Jews, the hue and cry against Israel and its supporters has been joined by the established liberal media, as well as by the more specialized journals of the educated classes. In this country, a new low in the campaign to delegitimize Israel was reached when the *New York Review of Books*, the house organ of the highbrow Left, published an article arguing for the dismantling of the world's only Jewish state.

If, on the issue of Israel, Jewish groups have had a hard time coping with their abandonment by allies (real or imagined) on the Left, they have had perhaps an even harder struggle making sense of the warm *support* for Israel shown by the Christian Right. Evangelicals raise money for Israel, lobby for congressional support of Israel, and at the height of the Palestinian *intifada* did not shy away from visiting the Jewish state even as American Jews kept away in droves. They have been no less forthright in their condemnation of the anti-Semitic and anti-Zionist rhetoric emanating from the Muslim world and from advanced sectors of Western society. Who would have imagined, as the Israeli writer Hillel Halkin has paraphrased the Jewish reaction, that "after 1,500 years of persecution by Christianity, our biggest allies are now

devout Christians—and not only devout Christians but often the most unlettered, unworldly, and unsophisticated of the devout, people with whom we seem to have absolutely nothing in common”?

SOME JEWISH groups have begun, belatedly, to adjust to these developments. Thus, at its most recent convention, the Jewish Council on Public Affairs, an umbrella for Jewish community-relations organizations and once an unabashedly liberal agency, voted to expand cooperation with evangelical Christians on a wide range of mutual concerns. But others, unable to take yes for an answer, have insisted on maintaining their distance from the Christian Right, supposedly out of distrust of its millenarian motives (some evangelicals view Israel as a divine instrument in the unfolding of the Second Coming).

The apprehensions of the liberal organizations were deepened last spring by the appearance of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, a hugely successful movie that, echoing passion plays of yore, revived the most pernicious of medieval canards: the charge that "the Jews," then and for all time, were Christ-killers. But whether the apprehensions of the agencies were justified is another question.

Long before it opened, the film drew an agitated response from a number of official Jewish spokesmen who predicted that it would assuredly trigger a wave of Christian anti-Semitism. (For Michael Lerner of the leftist magazine *Tikkun*, the film's very existence proved the scurrility of any Jewish organization thinking to forge ties with the Christian Right; instead, he averred heatedly, Jews needed to "get out of bed with the reactionaries" and end their "pact with the devil.") But no such apocalyptic scenario developed. So far, Christian feelings both toward Israel and toward contemporary American Jews appear unchanged.

In any event, lost in the uproar over the Gibson movie was a development of potentially great significance to Jews—namely, the emerging ideological alliance it exposed *within* American Christianity. Made by a self-proclaimed Catholic traditionalist, the movie was suffused with Catholic themes and imagery. Nevertheless, evangelical churches booked theaters and purchased blocks of tickets, and legions of the evangelical faithful made up an exceptionally large and ardent element in the film's audience. Their embrace of Gibson's vision gave public expression to a growing convergence between evangelical Protestants and conservative Catholics that is reconfiguring the American reli-

gious landscape. Although they do not see eye to eye on all political matters, these two huge communities are allies in the culture wars—i.e., on such issues as abortion, gay rights, pornography, education, and the rest. These, of course, are precisely the issues on which much of the organized Jewish community stands on the other side.

The flap over the Gibson movie also illuminated some of the ongoing pitfalls of Jewish-Christian “dialogue.” Notwithstanding the courageous efforts of four leading Roman Catholic (and two Jewish) scholars to criticize the movie in a constructive way before its release, and notwithstanding the reservations about it that were expressed by many Catholic and Protestant academics, the Catholic Bishops’ Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, a major body in interfaith work, failed to stand by its own guidelines for evaluating dramatizations of the passion; in the case of Gibson’s movie, much to the dismay of Jews professionally active in interfaith dialogue, the bishops acted as if those guidelines had never been drafted.

Nor was the controversy over Gibson’s movie the only sign of continuing trouble on the interfaith front. Blindsiding its longtime liberal allies in the Jewish community, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church USA recently instructed its investment managers to eschew the stocks and bonds of corporations doing business in Israel. In its press release, the church linked its divestment program to the successful campaign of the 1970’s and 80’s to end apartheid in South Africa—thus suggesting that Israel, too, is a racist state. Adding insult to injury, the Presbyterians also voted to continue funding a messianic church that targets Jews for conversion.

Presbyterians are not enemies of the Jews, or even of Israel. Since the vote, many clergy and lay people have expressed shame at the actions taken in their name. But, as in the controversy over Mel Gibson’s movie, the general lesson for Jewish groups is unmistakable: the partners and allies on whom they have long relied have their own agendas and their own interests, and Jewish concerns are neither necessarily paramount among them nor, in cases of conflict, of special weight.

**O**VER THE past half-century, no more fixed principle has taken root in the Jewish mind than the necessity for an impermeable wall of separation between church and state. In the words of one veteran insider, that wall is essential “not only to religious freedom but to the creative and distinctive survival of diverse religious groups, such as the Jewish community.”

As it happens, quite a few exceptions have been made to the principle of separation over the centuries, and neither the republic nor the Jewish community has been any the worse for them. But this has not stopped Jewish groups in the postwar era from litigating against even the slightest fissure in the wall, fearful that otherwise the entire structure would collapse. By the end of the 20th century, the separationist faith had so suffused the organized community that the head of the Washington office of the National Council of Jewish Women, declaring her opposition to any form of state aid to religious schools, could say without a hint of self-reflection that “We can’t put a chink in the wall just because [doing so] will benefit Jewish children.”

Perhaps ironically, what is now testing the separationist faith of Jewish groups is the terrorist war against America. Institutions around the country, including religious ones, are investing huge sums to improve security at their buildings by adding barriers, guards, surveillance cameras, and the like. The principal of an all-day Jewish religious school recently estimated that his annual security costs exceed \$1,000 per pupil. The question on the table is: ought religious institutions obtain a share of federal and state funds set aside for homeland security?

Most Jewish organizations have supported legislation, now before Congress, that would channel government money directly to contractors rather than to religious institutions themselves, thus preserving the spirit as well as the letter of the First Amendment. But not all the major groups are satisfied; among the vocal dissenters are the ADL and the Religious Action Center of the Reform movement, the largest of the Jewish denominations. The latter group in particular has opposed the bill on the grounds that it indirectly allows for “government-funded capital improvement of houses of worship, and we think that is a bad idea.”

This is an emblematic instance of the otherworldly quality that continues to affect the work of those Jewish community-relations organizations that remain committed to fighting yesterday’s wars whatever the consequences. Synagogues and other Jewish institutions around the globe have already been targeted by terrorists, at a terrible cost in human life. More attacks are hardly inconceivable. In what sense is the physical safety of real people—Jews and others who happen to be in the vicinity—less important to Jews than an intractable belief in the separationist faith? France separated church and state nearly a century ago. That did nothing to protect the Jews of France from the Vichy government, any more than it has shielded young French

Jewish children from Arab hooligans today. How long can American Jewish organizations continue to place their obsession with an impermeable wall of separation above the physical security of the Jews for whom they claim to speak?

**I**N A time of war, such questions are likely only to multiply. I have not even touched, for instance, on the issue of immigration. Jewish organizations have long been opposed to any restrictions on entry to this country, a position crying out for re-assessment in light of the terrorist threat and the growth of the Arab population. Nor have I addressed the delicate question of *how* the organized community should argue for and promote its agenda in today's changed circumstances. That is, aside from properly defining its mission, what should its tactics be?

A final word may be in order on that point. Much of the rhetoric and many of the approaches devised by community-relations agencies for dealing with matters of Jewish interest were formulated in the immediate post-Holocaust years. Indeed, when it comes to today's anti-Semitism, the Holocaust, and responses to the Holocaust, continue to serve as the template for understanding how to react. But some of the so-called "lessons" derived from the Holocaust have been distinctly unhelpful.

One such lesson concerns the allegedly quietistic posture adopted by American Jewish groups during the Holocaust years, a posture that in retrospect is said to have issued in even greater harm being done to European Jews. Whatever the historical accuracy of the charge, the lesson drawn from it is that today's Jewish leaders have a positive duty to go loud and public with their every concern.

The controversy over *The Passion* demonstrated how flawed such thinking can be. The spectacle of Jewish spokesmen vociferously inveighing against Mel Gibson—in the weeks surrounding the movie's release, Jewish critics filled the airwaves, especially on cable television, explaining how, in the light of modern biblical scholarship, Gibson and his sup-

porters completely misunderstood or misread the New Testament—accomplished little other than to provide free publicity for his movie. Not only would a modulated approach have proved more effective, it would have better tested the strength of the coalitions formed by Jewish organizations with their Christian counterparts. The critical question posed by *The Passion*, after all, was not what Jews thought of the movie, but what believing Christians would make of Gibson's heterodox rendering of a theme so central to their own religion. The attack on Gibson, by allowing him to portray himself as another martyr to Jewish persecution, effectively foreclosed the possibility of finding out the answer,

This same lecturing mode has extended into active meddling in the affairs of other religious groups. Thus, the *Forward*, the largest-circulation national Jewish newspaper, editorialized recently against Catholic bishops who had threatened to withhold communion from Catholic politicians favoring current abortion rights. Although the bishops did not *require* priests to withhold communion, that did not deter the *Forward* from hectoring Catholic leaders about what ought to be important to them and what fidelity to their own faith demanded of them. One can imagine the reaction were the Catholic press to undertake to instruct rabbis on the proper interpretation of Jewish law, and concerning a matter having little or no impact on Catholics.

Here again, in microcosm, is the confusion besetting the organized American Jewish community. Before the heady days when Jewish defense meant building a full-blown "domestic agenda," Jewish agencies focused, sharply, on the protection of Jewish lives, rights, and property. In the quieter decades of the late 20th century, mandates and ambitions began expanding as Jewish organizations embraced the causes of non-sectarian groups, often with greater fervor than those groups themselves and sometimes to the detriment of palpable Jewish interests. Now, as threats to Jewish security have multiplied, the time for business as usual has long passed, and the time to reconsider is urgently at hand.