

S A P I R

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THE ISSUE ON

CONTINUITY

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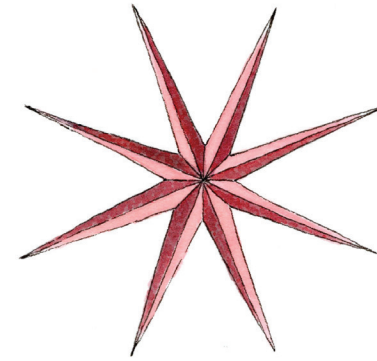
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*And they saw the God of Israel:
Under His feet there was the
likeness of a pavement of
sapphire, like the very sky
for purity.*

—Exodus 24:10



S A P I R

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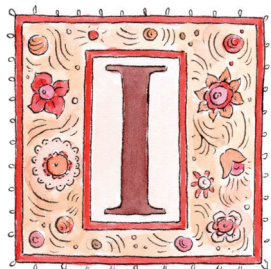
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Publisher's Note



PROBABLY OWE my career to “Jewish Continuity.” In 1990, I was a young professional in the Jewish community and was considering other career choices when the National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) stunned American Jewry with its finding of a 52 percent intermarriage rate (compared with 25 percent in the early ’70s). To say that this finding sent shock waves through the community would be an understatement, and a veritable industry of Jewish continuity was born.

While “continuity” became a communal rallying cry, the term never spoke to me as a Jewish educator. Why in the world would we want to continue the disastrous path that got us here? We needed disruption. Still, anything that could motivate Jewish Federations, Jewish Community Centers, camps, and funders to focus on Jewish education was a good outcome.

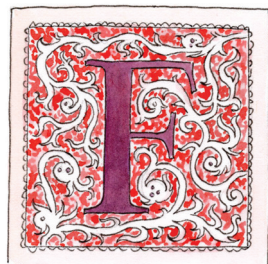
Over the years, the term “continuity” fell out of favor. Those uncomfortable with the content of continuity favored engagement: Let’s focus more on the magic of getting young Jews together and worry less about what happens when they gather. Let’s not be judgmental about what they ought to know, let alone what we want

them to do in order to live Jewish lives. Others objected to continuity’s implicit rejection of intermarriage, worried that a sense of disapproval would drive away interfaith families who might otherwise be attracted to Jewish life. Studies proclaimed that intermarriage was a net gain to the Jewish community, since the non-Jewish spouse was now a plus 1, and we chose to ignore the quality of Jewish identity and to focus instead on a quantity that would reassure us and lull us back to indifference. Finally, there was an attack on continuity as being fundamentally anti-feminist, relegating women to the role of mere vehicles for procreation.

Is “continuity” worth redeeming? The term seems unimportant, but the discussion it prompted in the 1990s is in desperate need of revisiting. What ought to be the nature of the Jewish community we are all working so hard to reinvigorate? What do we want Jews to know about their Judaism, their relationship to God, to Israel, to Zionism? How should they act Jewishly? How should Judaism inform their attitudes to their people, to citizenship, to the environment, to justice? Answering these questions is difficult because, for one, we don’t agree on the answers ourselves. Still, we can do better than satisfying ourselves with the numbers of young Jews we engage. Without compelling content, we are going to have a hard time making the case for continuity.

The essays in our third volume of *SAPIR* aim to fill this breach—to give us a sense of what we ought to care about, what we might do, and why it matters. *

Is There a Future for American Jews?



FOR DECADES, conversations about Jewish continuity in the United States have often revolved around numbers and definitions, all of them fuzzy.

How many Jewish Americans are there? That depends on who counts as a Jew. According to the 2020 Pew survey of American Jews, the headline number is 7.5 million, of whom 5.8 million are adults. That's a half-million more Jewish adults than there were in Pew's last survey, in 2013. Other estimates put the total Jewish population at somewhere between 7.15 million and 7.6 million. The percentage of Jewish adults as a total of the overall U.S. population actually rose somewhat, according to Pew, from 2.2 percent in 2013 to 2.4 percent last year.

This sounds like good news, particularly given the demographic doomsaying that prevailed only a few years ago. Dig a little deeper into the data, however, and the outlook dims. Of those 5.8 million adult Jews, 1.5 million, or just over a quarter, identify as "Jews of no religion." More than 40 percent of married Jews have

a non-Jewish spouse; that number rises to 61 percent of Jews who were married in the past decade. Outside of the Jewish population, there are 2.8 million American adults who had at least one Jewish parent, but who either identify with a different religion or with no religion at all.

Put another way, out of 8.6 million American adults of immediate Jewish descent, only about 4.3 million—half—remain firmly, faithfully, and unmistakably within the Jewish fold. A people that has produced such a disproportionate share of strikingly successful Americans has been strikingly unsuccessful in maintaining and reproducing itself.



There are, of course, more charitable ways of interpreting these figures. Jews first set foot in North America in 1654, just 34 years after the *Mayflower's* arrival in Massachusetts. Where, compared with the Jews, are the Puritans now—or, for that matter, the Congregationalists, their distant and much-diminished religious progeny? Alternatively, consider an ethnic comparison: How does Jewish communal cohesion compare with, say, that of the once-tight-knit, culturally confident, religiously cohesive Swedish-American community?

It is one thing to be a people that dwells apart. The challenge for Jewish Americans, as for most other ethnic and religious groups in the United States, has been to remain a people *slightly* apart: socially assimilated yet culturally and religiously distinct; modern yet tradition-minded; celebrating the supreme value of human freedom while seeking a baseline conformity in deeply personal matters of marriage, child-rearing, and sometimes politics. Given the tightrope the Jewish community has tried to walk, perhaps the real miracle is that more Jews haven't fallen off. At least not yet.

Yet the internal dilemmas faced by the Jewish community are only one side of the problem of continuity. The United States today

is undergoing a cultural transformation as radical as the one last seen in the 1960s. It's a transformation that threatens to alter the moral and philosophical character of America in ways that are profoundly inimical to the very possibility of vibrant, secure, desirable, and therefore sustainable Jewish life in America.

Four grave challenges stand out.

- 1) *Race is replacing ethnicity as a defining marker of group and personal identification in the United States.*

It wasn't long ago that most Jewish Americans—like Irish Americans, Italian Americans, or Chinese Americans—were just another ethnic group whose cultural, linguistic, and religious heritage separated them from the WASP mainstream. As such, we were subjected to various forms of discrimination, from neighborhood redlining to university quotas to the not-so-secret no-hire policies of prestigious law firms and commercial banks.

The boundaries separating ethnic America from the WASP mainstream faded (though by no means disappeared) in the postwar years, mainly for good reasons: assimilation, upward mobility, and a growing intolerance of bigotry. Yet the fading of ethnic differences has had the paradoxical effect of highlighting racial ones. America no longer conceives of itself as either a melting pot or a salad bowl, to use the old metaphors for assimilation and cultural diversity. Instead, we are becoming a country of unyielding binaries, in which people are grouped as being either “of color” or “white.”

The result is that the vast majority of Jewish Americans—those who do not identify as “Jews of color”—are being shunted into a racial category with which few have consciously identified; which is alien to Jewish cultural, religious, and political traditions; and which, within living memory, was used as an ideological tool to slaughter Jews by the millions precisely because we *weren't* “white.” If race is indeed a social construct, as the progressive Left insists, then surely the most obscene construct of all is one that lumps Jew-

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stoked antisemitism. In America, historically,
Jewish success usually extinguished it.
Now this is changing.

ish Americans with the sort of people who marched at Charlottesville chanting “Jews will not replace us.”

Nor does the problem end there. The same antisemitic libel that has always applied to Jews—that, through a combination of congenital malice and unfathomable power, we seek to oppress the downtrodden—has now become, thanks to bestselling books such as Robin DiAngelo's *White Fragility*, fashionable as an anti-white libel. As SAPIR writer Pamela Paresky has observed, “Jews have become ‘white’ and whites have become ‘Jews.’”

- 2) *Success is becoming “privilege,” and excellence is giving way to equity.*

Among the principal reasons that Jews have thrived in the United States is that American culture has more often tended to admire success than to envy or deprecate it—even seeing in success a mark of divine favor, not evidence of a past injustice. The archetypal American hero, from Alexander Hamilton to Abraham Lincoln to George Washington Carver, is the restless upstart who uses his wits and perseverance to make, and do, good.

These attitudes, born from the Calvinist convictions of the Puritans, did more to help Jews than any formal declarations of religious tolerance or personal liberty. For once in our long history of exile, Jews did not have to fear that our achievements would be

held against us, or that the fruits of our ingenuity would be taken from us. We could finally rise as far as our talents would reach.

Elsewhere in the world, Jewish success usually stoked antisemitism. In America, historically, Jewish success usually extinguished it.

Now this is changing. Success in America is coming to be seen as a function not of individual merit but of a deeply rigged system that calls itself a meritocracy but is actually a self-serving plutocracy. And just who, according to this view, has rigged this system? Precisely the people who have most benefited from it and now have the “privilege” of standing atop it. By any empirical metric, in nearly every major institution, a disproportionate percentage of the meritocracy is Jewish. And the goal of nearly every social justice movement in the United States today is to tear that system down.

The great battering ram in this effort is “equity”—the “E” in that now-ubiquitous initialism D.E.I. In ordinary English, equity means fair play. In modern practice, it means a continuous process of legal or managerial interventions to achieve equality of outcomes based on considerations such as color or gender. Excellence might still matter in our institutions, but only after demands for this kind of equity have first been met.

To say this is damaging to the interests of Jewish Americans, or any other minority whose achievements outstrip their demographic representation, ought to be obvious, but a thought experiment might help: If equity were achieved at an institution such as Yale, a maximum of 2.4 percent of its student body would be Jewish. The figure is roughly 16 percent today. Which of these students should be told that they earned their place inequitably—and required to go elsewhere?

3) *Independent thinkers are being treated as heretics.*

It is not a secret that Americans are becoming more secretive about their personal and political views: A 2018 study by the group More in Common found that a broad majority of Americans were

afraid to express themselves openly on subjects such as race, Islam, gay rights, and immigration. Some of this may be because their private views really are disreputable. Much more of it is because views considered mainstream a few years ago are now deemed hateful by the sort of people who might be in a position to bestow—or deny—a job, a promotion, or a good review.

The consequences of the new censoriousness, often verging into a kind of Jacobinism, are being felt throughout the country. Yet here again, there’s reason to fear the effects will be felt most heavily by Jews.

Why? Because of an ancient Jewish tradition of argument for the sake of heaven. Because of long Jewish experience, dating from the days of Joseph, of having one foot in, and one foot outside of, the dominant political and ethical culture. Because Jewish culture in America has a rich history of impishness, irreverence, skepticism, activism, and dissent. Because we are theologically and culturally predisposed to doubt sweeping promises of redemption. Because we have found that consensus-seeking is a poor road to truth, and that intelligent contrarians usually deserve a close hearing.

In a 1919 essay, “The Intellectual Pre-eminence of Jews in Modern Europe,” the American economist Thorstein Veblen suggested that it was the hybrid, hyphenated nature of Jewish identity that made Jewish thinkers so original and important. For “the intellectually gifted Jew,” Veblen wrote,

the skepticism that goes to make him an effectual factor in the increase and diffusion of knowledge among men involves a loss of that peace of mind that is the birthright of the safe and sane quietist. He becomes a disturber of the intellectual peace, but only at the cost of becoming an intellectual wayfaring man, a wanderer in the intellectual no-man’s-land, seeking another place of rest, farther along the road, somewhere over the horizon.

Today, the intellectual “no-man’s-land” that was once the place for expanding the frontiers of knowledge has become a kill zone

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to anyone who rashly ventures into it. The list of subjects now deemed strictly off-limits to skeptical, iconoclastic, or merely curious thinking has grown disturbingly long: climate, intelligence, the role of cultural patterns in influencing social outcomes, biological determinism in matters of gender differences, gender differences in matters of intellectual aptitudes. And so on. Merely to list these all-but-unmentionable topics risks inviting accusations of climate denialism, racism, transphobia, and sexism — any one of which could trash a reputation or end a career.

From this it doesn't necessarily follow that Jews will be forced out of universities, publishing houses, media outlets, and other organs of mainstream American culture. But as Thane Rosenbaum noted in the previous issue of *SAPIR*, "the ground rules of liberalism have disappeared, and with them, the qualities that made Jews so vital to American culture are vanishing as well." An arid intellectual climate may not be deadly to Jews, but neither is it one in which they are likely to flourish.

4) *Conspiracy thinking has gone mainstream.*

From 9/11 trutherism to the myth of the stolen 2020 presidential election, we have become a country frighteningly disposed to believe conspiracy theories simply because they suit our ideological predilections, and to keep believing them even after they've been comprehensively disproven.

Then there is anti-Zionism, another political program married to a conspiracy theory claiming that Israeli Jews are imposters and swindlers — European imposters who feigned ancestral ties to the Holy Land in order to swindle Palestinians out of their land. In this, anti-Zionism is a mirror image of the political program-cum-conspiracy theory known as antisemitism, which held that Jews were Middle Eastern imposters who feigned a European identity in order to cheat authentic Europeans out of their financial wealth and cultural inheritance.

What makes today's fast-spreading anti-Zionism so dangerous, however, isn't merely that it is wrong on its merits, malicious in its intent, and antisemitic in its foundation. It is that it is a symptom of a much larger disease of the American mind, a willful irrationalism, an inability to accept inconvenient facts and to process reasoned arguments. As Liel Leibovitz notes in these pages, it is bringing the long era of American Enlightenment to an abrupt and frightening end.

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The antisemitic outbursts during the Gaza War in May 2021 were not, in themselves, murderously violent. Yet the fact that they were expressed in the open, by people who plainly felt no fear in showing their faces, and who were met with weak and equivocating condemnations from so many quarters of the American establishment, gave them the quality of an omen, like the shattering of a single pane of glass. A few months later, House Democrats were briefly forced to capitulate to their most radical members by voting to remove \$1 billion in funding for Iron Dome, a system whose sole purpose is to protect Israelis from lethal terrorist rockets.

Any sentient American Jew with an instinct for danger has to know that things won't simply right themselves on their own. To adapt Isaac Newton, social trends in motion tend to stay in motion unless acted upon by an external force.

What will that force be?

Many of the essays in the current volume of *SAPIR* make the case for Jewish fortification from the inside. Richer and deeper content in Jewish education. More effective management of Jewish organizations. Smarter outreach to potential converts. And so on.

These are necessary and important conditions for Jewish survival and renewal in America. But they aren't quite sufficient. Jewish Americans live most of their lives outside the gates of their Jewish homes, synagogues, and communities. That is where the battle for the future of Jewish America will have to be waged. A few thoughts on how to fight it.

- The intellectual battle against critical social justice theory (often called “woke” ideology) is one no true Jewish leader can shirk. That isn't merely because a spirit of liberal-mindedness matters to Jewish well-being. It's because woke ideology invariably combines three features that ought to terrify Jews: a belief that racial characteristics define individual moral worth, a habit of descending into antisemitism, and a quasi-totalitarian mindset that insists not only on regulating behavior but also on monitoring people's thoughts and punishing those who think the wrong ones.

There are a few nonprofit groups that are rising to tackle this challenge, including the newly formed Jewish Institute for Liberal Values (on whose board I sit). But woke ideology needs to be seen as an acute threat and become a key item in the Jewish organizational agenda.

- Prominent Jewish Americans need to use all the political influence, social capital, and institutional muscle they have to defend baseline Jewish interests in ostensibly liberal institutions. That hasn't happened. Instead, in one institution

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after another, Jewish leaders—trustees and major donors, university presidents and academic deans, senators and representatives, CEOs and board directors—have, to paraphrase Lenin, sold the rope from which their enemies will hang them.

Nobody today would imagine, say, a female university president sitting still while a culture of misogyny and sexual harassment prevailed in faculty lounges or student dorms. Yet Jewish leaders and donors will often bite their tongues when the institutions they oversee or support become saturated with anti-Jewish animus. They would do better to stop writing checks; start speaking up boldly at board and faculty meetings; and, if they conclude they cannot rescue an institution, publicly and vocally resign to take their talent and money elsewhere.

- For too long, Jewish Americans have sought the friendship of those who didn't want us as friends and looked askance at the friendship of those who did. Jewish “allyship” in multiple civil-rights movements usually began early and often proved itself in the darkest hours. Has that allyship been reciprocated at a time of skyrocketing antisemitism?

Jews will not come out well from this series of unrequited love affairs, just as we didn't come out well from our unrequited love affairs with German, Austrian, or French culture. There is broad support in the United States for Jewish Americans, demonstrated by the fact that Jews remain the most admired religious group in America and by the widespread support that Israel enjoys outside the progressive bubble (within which so many Jews live). But our non-Jewish friends need to be far more deeply engaged by Jewish communities, not held at arm's length out of religious differences, political disdain, or simple ignorance.



In a sparkling recent essay in *Commentary*, the German-Jewish writer Josef Joffe observes that, where Jews are concerned, America's better angels have been getting the better of its baser impulses from the very beginning—ever since Peter Stuyvesant's colonial masters overruled his desire to expel his Jewish immigrants. Predictions that American Jewry would gradually disappear thanks to intermarriage, conversion, and the march of progress date back to the 19th century, but never came true. Similar predictions that a decline in religious beliefs—the “death of God”—portended the demise of Judaism ran afoul of the extraordinary cultural resilience and fecundity of Orthodox Jewry.

Jews have always had a capacity to find unexpected sources of renewal and to surprise themselves on the upside. My Kishinev-born paternal grandfather changed his name from Ehrlich to Stephens out of a desire to submerge his Jewishness in the broad American mainstream. Yet it was thanks to that same bland surname that, decades later, I learned what certain people in my social circles were willing to say about Jews when they didn't realize a Jew was listening. The name that my grandfather thought was his ticket out of his roots became my ticket back into them.

Jewish history is filled with such serendipitous twists of fate, and some of them have good outcomes. But in the current fight for a Jewish-American future, we'd do better, as the old adage has it, to hope for the best and plan for the worst. *

September 22, 2021

PART ONE

CONTINUITY AND
THE GLOBAL CHALLENGE



Advice to a Jewish Freshman



EAR FRESHER,

It's customary to begin an Induction Address by congratulating you on the hard work that has got you here and expressing the hope that the next however many years will exceed your expectations. I would like to add the wish that you not be distracted from your studies or made to feel unwelcome or uneasy in this place of disinterested learning by depictions of Jewishness, which you, as a Jew, will find hard to recognize, let alone share. To that end, I offer some words of practical advice that I hope will prove useful in answering awkward questions, correcting misconceptions, and otherwise setting the record straight. Who knows? It's possible they will even make you feel a bit better about yourself.

As a general rule, do not assume ill will. "All the great evils which men cause to each other...originate in ignorance," wrote Moses Maimonides. This is especially the case when it comes to what the world has made, and continues to make, of Jews. Remember, you

could be the first Jew some of your contemporaries have ever met. And even when they have spent time in your company, they may prefer to believe what is rumored about you or trust what is written about you in books by authors no less ignorant than themselves.

Q: How should I respond when, in the course of larking about in showers or changing rooms, fellow students ask to feel the residuum of my tail?

A: Smile and be patient. Explain that they are confusing you with the devil, a being in whom, in all other contexts, you would expect them to be too rational to believe.

Further instances of medieval fantasizing you are likely to encounter include the belief that you once murdered non-Jewish children in the streets of Lodz and Lincoln in order to mix their blood with matzoh, and that you now murder them in the streets of Gaza for fun. Be prepared for the modern variant of this ancient superstition, which contends that Jews in the uniform of the Israeli Defense Forces harvest the organs of victims of earthquakes and other natural disasters to whom they pretend to give assistance, the motive in this instance being profit.

Q: How, short of going to the International Court of Justice, flanked by the best lawyers, do I refute this infamous libel?

A: Employ the Shylock Defense. "If you prick us, do we not bleed?" And when we bleed, do we not shrink from the sight of blood?

Explain that you are squeamish as a matter of culture and of faith, that the Jews are a hemophobic people, fastidious to the point of madness even about their own blood, and so are unlikely to dabble willingly in the blood of others. Read to them from Leviticus ("Therefore I said

unto the children of Israel, no soul of you shall eat blood”) and then take them through as many of the Jewish dietary laws as you can remember. As for killing just for the fun of it—rest assured that as your fellows spend more time in your company, they will see how little Jews do just for fun.

You could, if you are so minded, remind your fellows that, though the Church of England has subsequently apologized for defaming Jews as child-killers, those making the same charge against the Israeli Defense Forces have not.

Thus, for the antisemite, do all roads lead to Israel. Ready yourself for the Holy Land cropping up frequently in campus conversation, demonstrations, social-science seminars, and even lectures, and take it as read that you will be suspected, should you take issue with anything you hear, of being in the pay of the Israeli state. Accusing Jews of being fifth columnists is, after all, no more controversial than accusing them of being rich. As someone I imagine to be Talmudic by culture and inclination, accustomed to intellectual disputatiousness, loving the arts of discrimination and fine distinction, and knowing that no argument is ever settled, you are going to find it strange that a university of all places should foster the idea that there is only one truth; but take heart from the fact that it isn’t everybody who is not allowed to express an alternative view, only you.

Q: Are there then to be only two kinds of Jew? An apologetic Jew, or an enemy Jew? A Jew who says what his adversary says about Israel, or a Jew who lies to protect it?

A: Good question. Be prepared for the answer to shock you.

It might well be that you have never read a great deal about modern Israel, never been there or studied its recent history, and

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never felt more than a sentimental attachment to the place. “One day, should the world again prove inhospitable to Jews, we might need it” is a precautionary sentiment that a good number of Jews own up to while not really believing it will ever come to that again. So the idea that you are working covertly for the State of Israel simply because you don’t agree with one of your lecturers will strike you first as funny, then as sinister.

Faced with the alternatives of putting up with this obloquy or protesting your innocence, whereupon you can expect to face more obloquy still, I recommend that you follow the example of women’s groups who demand the right to be believed when they complain of being importuned or harassed—it being up to them, and not their persecutors, what constitutes misogyny or abuse. Should a fellow student or lecturer accuse you of crying antisemitism for the sole purpose of silencing criticism of Israel, you must insist on your primary right to be believed.

Q: And say what?

A: Tell them that to accuse Jews of cynically and promiscuously attributing antisemitism for their own gain is itself antisemitic—indeed doubly so. For it at once minimizes the crime of antisemitism and paints you as bearing false witness on no other evidence than that you are a Jew.

No man is an island, entire of himself, and no Jew can escape from Jewish history untouched.

To make this point forcibly does not require that you defend or attack Israel. This is about you—the Jew who lies because that’s what Jews do. Be warned: You will find it hard to keep attention focused precisely on that offense. Few can remain subtle in the face of persistent insult and mistrust. Willy-nilly you will be drawn into the politics and find yourself justifying actions that in other circumstances you would view with more circumspection. Or you will be tempted to do the opposite and wash your hands of the whole damned business. It is natural to vacillate between the two. But if there is one position, above all, that I entreat you not to adopt, it is that of a supine, conciliatory Jew who believes he can remain outside the fray. Here is what *not* to say:

Why are you picking on me when your actual argument is with Israel? I am just a Jew standing on the other side of the street. I have no part of this.

This implicitly concedes the case against Israel and, more than that, demeans you.

“We are not Israel,” declared the Jewish comedian Sarah Silverman. Well, funnily enough, Sarah, we are. If you feel you are unfairly taking the flak for Israel, don’t forget that Israel unfairly takes the flak for you. Whatever the truth of the charges made against it—that it is a racist, apartheid state, that it practices ethnic cleansing, that its true and only aim is genocide, etc., etc.—Israel would not be judged anything like so immoderately were it not a Jewish state with every past vilification of Jews burnt into its flesh.

View this the other way round and, no, you are not responsible for the actions of an administration you have not voted for and might not support. But the very fact that Jewishness is impugned the moment fighting between Israelis and Palestinians breaks out—that Jews are attacked around the world, that demonstrators will carry banners or march alongside others carrying banners that deny the Holocaust while wishing it had gone further—proves that Israel is not separable from Jews no matter how much you might want Jews to be separable from Israel. No man is an island, entire of himself, and no Jew can escape from Jewish history untouched. There is a word for what binds and has long bound Jews to Israel, whether any of us care for it or not. I see you looking quizzically at me. Could I possibly mean “Zionism”? Don’t be alarmed. Zionism, yes.

“Zionism.” In our time, few words are more misunderstood or maligned. So successfully has the campaign to discredit Zionism been that even you, a perplexed, inquiring, open-minded Jew, will on occasion feel uncomfortable in its presence. This discrediting has been the work of generations and many hands. Because it enables racism while appearing to root out racism, anti-Zionism has many adherents, some die-hard, some casual. It is an ideology that pretends to liberal modernity, its targets being imperialism, colonialism, exclusivism, and, because of its associations with America, capitalism. Its other target is the very longevity of the Jewish story. All practical applications apart, the word “Zionism” conjures the age-long fear of Jews, their secret conspiracies, their ambitions to undermine and control, the sinister pact they long ago made with the forces of darkness. *Zionism*. The very letters hiss with mouldering and virulent intent.

Q: *So what do I say to an anti-Zionist who insists he is not an antisemite and asserts that I am playing the “Jew card” only to silence legitimate criticism?*

A: This:

1) My friend — and I will assume you are a friend of Jews because you go on saying you are, just not a friend of what happens to be a Jewish country — Israel is already the most criticized place in the world. If there are people trying to stop your criticisms, they are signally failing. So synonymous have the words “Israel” and “criticism” become that you rarely hear the former without the latter tagging along. “Criticismofisrael” is now one word. But much depends on what you mean by “criticism.” “Israel is not a very nice place” is criticism. “Israel is the very pit of hell,” is also criticism. You cannot expect whatever you say to go unquestioned simply because you call it criticism. And if I cannot criticize your criticism, it is you who are doing the silencing and I who am the silenced.

2) You have the right, nevertheless, to talk whatever irresponsible nonsense you choose about the country Israel without being labeled an antisemite. Zionism, however, is not a country or a system of government. Zionism is the expression of a people’s soul: It is a longing and a necessity, a Utopian fantasy, an understanding of history, a solution, an act of reasoning, an act of despair, a prayer, a poem, and a song. Hate the poetry of my soul and you hate me.

Take time to talk to tyro anti-Zionists among your fellows and you will be astonished how little many of them know of the Zionist ideal that they confidently pronounce to be murderous and that they will, at a moment’s notice, march and chant against. Taking it to be a species of military adventurism, some think it began in 1948. The ones with a marginally longer historical memory will go back to 1917. In the imaginations of both, the Zionist entity dropped out of a clear blue sky with the single colonialist intention

So synonymous have the words “Israel” and “criticism” become that you rarely hear the former without the latter tagging along. “Criticismofisrael” is now one word.

of seizing Palestinian territory and taking the life of any Palestinian who resisted it. In his last months as leader of the English Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn (of whom you are likely to encounter campus acolytes) went on refusing to employ the widely accepted Working Definition of Antisemitism, from the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, because he believed it compromised his freedom to claim that Zionism was an “essentially racist endeavour.” For the right to insist on Israel’s criminality, not just in its present but from the very moment of its creation — and here he, too, was uneducated about origins and dates — he was willing to sink not only his leadership but also his party.

Q: How would you suggest I answer those loyal Corbynites — supposing I fall into amicable conversation with them — when they ask wherein, exactly, lies the wrongness of labeling Zionism “an essentially racist endeavour”?

A: It is unlikely, if you do fall into a discussion with them, that it will be amicable. Though I don’t want to dissuade you from trying to make it so. As for answering their question, throw it right back at them. Ask, “Wherein lies the rightness?”

For there was no *essential* anything about Zionism. It had no essence. It comprised, over a long period

By this reasoning, the Holocaust was a sort of University of Compassion into which Jews were, for their own benefit, enrolled, but where, as witness their subsequent hard-heartedness to the Arabs of the West Bank and Gaza, they paid scant attention and flunked their exams.

(for Zionism has no starting date), a myriad of hopes, dreads, and conflicting expectations. In no sense can it be defined as a single, determined “endeavor.” There was no plan, only a constellation of aspirations, some of them irreconcilable with one another. For Zionists of one sort, it was to be a new start for Jews altogether; for others, it was the culmination of Jewish hopes to return to the home they’d been expelled from centuries before. Not a sudden invasion, indeed not a sudden anything: Jews had been returning in small numbers and large since the Exile. A Jewish civilization persisted there. It wasn’t in order to steal but to continue that Zionism went on renewing itself: to live and work and worship with the freedom and self-respect others enjoyed, alongside an indigenous population with whom the earliest Zionist pioneers hoped to share the land and coexist peacefully. For others again—the poorest and most oppressed—it was a liberation movement, an escape from the massacres of Eastern Europe, from the anti-Jewish sentiment building in Western Europe, from the demeaning sta-

tus of second-class citizenship that was the best they could expect in Arab countries, and from the confined life of servitude and superstition to which centuries of contempt and cruelty had reduced them. What Corbyn could not bear not to call racism was in fact flight *from* racism.

And now? Well, it is clear that of those disparate Zionist ambitions, several have been realized—Jews are not being killed in Eastern Europe, they are returned to their ancestral homeland, they are no longer reduced to lives of narrow superstition, they are free to follow whatever occupations they choose—whereas other hopes, especially those that envisaged peaceable relations with Arab neighbors, have not. And make no mistake, its failure to deliver peace and equity, however complex the causes, represents no small defeat for Zionism. However we describe Zionism, it can be no surprise that Palestinians see it as a calamity. But here is something you might say to those whose imaginations are not large enough to grasp the all-round magnitude of Zionism’s failure to be everything it hoped to be:

Your demonization of Zionism has been a public-relations triumph right enough, but that is all. The sum total of your success is to have deluded Palestinians with the dream that one day all the country—“from the river to the sea”—will be theirs again, and to have hardened Israelis against any version of that outcome, which would of course be a calamity for them.

Things don’t always turn out as intended. Bad outcomes are not necessarily proof of bad intentions. Had you seen the fading of Zionism’s idealism as a tragedy for all parties, had you found a more pacific language and sought to reignite some of those ideals that fired the minds and souls of early Zionists, you might have carried all parties with you.

As it is, your ancient suspicion of the Jew, your ignorance of history, and the one-sidedness of your sympathies have only helped to keep the conflict simmering.

If all this seems more than enough to be going on while you are endeavoring to concentrate on your studies, there is, I am afraid, one more stratagem those who don't want you to enjoy a quiet life have up their sleeve. This is Holocaust Denial, not the original Alpha or Beta Strains but the more recent Omega Variant.

In its early, primitive forms, Holocaust Denial was mainly a matter of macabre geometry. That many bodies could never have been processed in so few rooms, etc. The spectacle of the deniers scampering over what was left of the camps with their rulers and drafting triangles rendered them ultimately absurd. Their conclusion, that 6 million Jews could not possibly have been gassed in that space and in that time, still makes an appearance on pro-Palestinian marches, but it looks increasingly cranky.

What came next was less actual Holocaust Denial, more Holocaust Relativization. Yes, it happened, but who hasn't it happened to? Your best bet when confronted with this is to concede that Jews are not the only people who have faced extermination; but you could try adding that few have faced quite so determined and thoroughgoing a version of it, or the ambition to have all trace and memory of them removed from the face of the earth for all time, and this as a consequence and fulfillment of centuries of Christian loathing, to say nothing of a fair amount of dislike from elsewhere. But, but, but, suffering the Holocaust was not a competition, and, if it had been — hand on heart — Jews would be more than content not to have been proclaimed the winners.

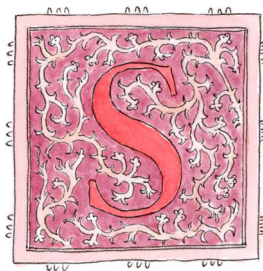
Uglier by far, and more sinister by virtue of what it concedes and why, is the new Omega Variant, which allows the horrors of the Holocaust but shakes its head over the failure of Jews to have learnt its lessons. By this reasoning, the Holocaust was a sort of University of Compassion into which Jews were, for their own benefit, enrolled,

but where, as witness their subsequent hard-heartedness to the Arabs of the West Bank and Gaza, they paid scant attention and flunked their exams. The next time you see the Holocaust figured as a University at which, uncharacteristically, Jews were the worst students, inquire politely,

What exactly is it, then, that you would have us do? Retake the course?

Permit me to seize this opportunity to wish you every success in your current studies. *

Seven Pillars of Wisdom for 21st-Century Jews



TOP ME IF you've heard this one before: Once upon a time, and not so long ago, things at our suburban shul/Jewish community center/local Federation were going great. Sure, we had disagreements—we're Jews!—but ours was the sort of community that felt truly diverse and inclusive and

warm. And then, something happened. What exactly isn't clear, but suddenly there were discussions we felt we just couldn't have, particularly about Donald Trump/Black Lives Matter/Israel and Palestine. Members started leaving, the rabbi/executive director/vice president for communal affairs did her best to patch things up, but it just doesn't feel the same.

Help us!

This, with very slight variations, is the grim note I get too often these days. You can spend an eternity pondering how we got here and a few foundations' endowments dreaming up complicated schemes to dig us out of what seems like a dishearteningly dark moment in American Jewish history. Or you can simply accept a set of

sober, unappealing, and irrefutable observations and move on with your life. They are, in ascending order of magnitude, as follows:

First, our turbulent moment in time isn't going away anytime soon. This isn't a pendulum that's swinging, or a crisis awaiting some soothing, responsible adult to lull it back to sleep. The answer isn't seeking moderates to elect or tepid policies to endorse. What we have here is nothing short of an epochal upheaval, the end of one period of history and the beginning of another.

Second, if you're wondering which era, precisely, is at an end, I regret to inform you that it's the Age of Enlightenment, that cheerful chapter in our collective story that gave us everything from representative democracy and life-saving science to Double Stuf Oreos. The mad howls drowning out rational discourse these days—the insistence, say, that gender, which is literally coded into every cell in our bodies, is fluid and malleable while race, a dubious notion watered down further by millennia of intermarriage, is harshly fixed—aren't the shouts of barbarians storming the gates. The call is coming from inside the house. The callers aren't Marxists or radical leftists or loony woke Millennials. They're professors and pundits and politicians who have come to believe that liberalism, now that it's no longer fettered by faith and family, and now that it has powerful digital technologies at its service, should take it upon itself to achieve its true essence and create a society of solipsistic individuals whose liberties and ethics are managed exclusively by a class of self-selected and infallible experts.

Third, if the former paragraph strikes you as harsh, it's because it is. You may reject the analysis at its core, but not the fervor with which the New Inquisitors approach anyone and anything they deem worthy of cancelation. That's because the movement upon us now, whatever you believe its reasons or origins to be, is very much a religious one, a fifth Great Awakening that won't stop until all either join it or are vanquished. The taking of the knee, the toppling of statues—all the markings of a crusade.

Fourth, this being the case, conversation is futile. Engaging

with the Twitter Torquemadas won't get you anywhere. Open the door — of your home, your school, your shul — to these ideas and possibilities, and pretty soon, like the arsonists in Max Frisch's delightfully depressing play of the same title, they'll burn everything down. That's because the cats urging you to examine your privilege, repent for sins real and imagined, and rewrite history to benefit the newly elect are religious zealots, a sort not particularly known for having a taste for compromise or compassion.

Fifth, and final, it all comes down to this: It's us versus them. If you're looking for labels to help you understand who belongs in what group, here are two imperfect but helpful ones: anti-Zionists and Zionists. Team A, to put it very bluntly, gravitates to the belief that America and Israel are essentially evil; it dislikes traditional religion, which it sees as nothing more than an excuse men came up with to oppress women, whites to lord it over blacks, the rich to take more from the poor, etc.; and it distrusts the nuclear family for many of the same reasons, which is why we're looking at historically low marriage and birth rates. Team B, on the other end, understands itself in terms of its fealty to family, faith, and nation, three organizing principles that stress community over self, which is why its members feel innately proud of Israel, the best earthly manifestation of these principles cohering into a real-life polity. Lament our Manichean moment, wish for a better time and an age more accommodating of nuance and complexity, but understand that to survive, you must stand with your people.

Who, exactly, might these people be? And what does standing with them entail? These are complicated questions, no less so because our contemporary wreckers of civilization, like some of their predecessors, swear that it's a uniquely Jewish redemption they have in mind. Taking a page out of the playbook of the Yevsektsiya — the Jewish section of the Soviet Communist Party, which was tasked with “the destruction of traditional Jewish life, the Zionist movement, and Hebrew culture” until it was itself destroyed in the Stalinist purges — these people are subverting many of our core principles in the

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service of foreign, malicious agendas and ideologies. In a powerful essay for *Tablet* magazine, Natan Sharansky and Gil Troy called these folks, somewhat harshly but not unfairly, the “un-Jews.” How, then, are Jews, communally and individually, to proceed?

Culture wars call for bullet points, so here are the seven pillars of a strong Jewish foundation for the future.

Think Small. You may be a dentist in Cleveland or the richest Jew in America. You may be the guy who goes to shul twice a year at best or the head honcho at a Major Jewish Organization. Whoever you are, here's an important reminder: It's not your job to save the Jews. That's because ours is not a top-down religion, nor does it have much of an appetite for sweeping, dogmatic solutions. Concepts such as going viral or growing too big to fail are innately alien to our faith. We pray in groups of 10 because we know one's too few but 100 is far too many. For community to be sustainable, it must consist of smallish clusters of people who occupy the same physical space and pursue the same attainable and sustainable goals.

And because community — not more government, or better tech, or muscular policies — is the antidote to the devastations of the current moment, the way out of the current crisis must begin by recognizing that there isn't one way out. There are a hundred, a thousand,

A century or more ago, Zionism brought us Jewish liberation; it's time we finally started acting the part.

3 million, or as many as there are groups of Jews interested in being Jewish together and charting a shared course for the future. Some things may still look the same from community to community—we are, after all, united by our *mesorah*, the written and oral Torah transmitted, as *Pirkei Avot* teach us, from Moses on downward through the generations. But the tradition contains multitudes, and the choices and ideas that inspire six couples in a suburb of Baltimore may not be the ones that excite the members of a small synagogue in Fresno.

So rather than design audacious and costly blueprints for solving grand and abstract problems, we should focus our energies on giving passionate people the resources they need to cultivate their own small corner of the Jewish world. This, after all, is how Judaism survived for nearly 2,000 years, with little nodes across the globe, connected by a neural network of belief, but otherwise free to cultivate customs, styles, and sensibilities. It made Judaism not only feasible—ask the Jebusites or the Hittites what happened to groups who clung to massive, unyielding tribal structures—but also unimaginably rich and diverse, with the best insights and practices eventually spreading across space and time.

These days, sadly, we're more likely than not to ignore this hard-earned bit of wisdom: The well-meaning men and women who run and fund much of Jewish life too often behave like the schlemiel in the old Jewish joke who looked for his lost penny but only under the streetlight, focusing on the large concentrations of Jewish people, money, and influence in New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, and a handful of other major urban centers. That's a shame. For American

Judaism to thrive, it must urgently decentralize, investing not in banner projects but in little local initiatives that make Jewish life exciting for small groups of people all over the place, the only sort of groups that ever really mattered.

Don't Be Stupid. I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by blandness, dragging themselves through social-media platforms, looking for an angry fix while ranting about ice cream or reality TV or what some model's brother posted on Instagram. For too many otherwise sane and sensible people, this is what being proudly Jewish has become: a constant stream of petty conflagrations, an exhortation to get upset every time some boob says or does something remotely offensive, and an invitation to a never-ending torrent of pointless arguments with random strangers. This attitude, which passes as activism for many who should know better, owes its life force to *hasbara*, the untranslatable Hebrew word that loosely means "explanation." It's the idea—most recently expressed by Israel's newly elected foreign minister, Yair Lapid—that if we only presented our point of view better, our haters would eventually come to see things our way.

This singularly stupid conviction rests on three fallacies: first, that we have an obligation to explain ourselves at all. Second, that people who hate Jews can be convinced if only they were presented with the right facts in the right order. And third, that even if we don't win any converts, there's intellectual and moral merit in a well-crafted argument. None of these assertions are true, and not a single minute more should be wasted on meaningless quibbles. Free and proud people owe no one any explanations, particularly on the matter of their inconvenient survival. Want to boycott Israel? Groovy! Thankfully, we've come up with an antidote, a system of thought that encourages Jews to wean themselves from caring what their haters think or do. It's called Zionism, and it means that if someone doesn't wish to grace us with their ice cream/bad TV shows/academic conferences, we can simply shrug our shoulders, move on, and acquire the thing elsewhere, most likely by making it ourselves and making it better. That's what people do when they're in command of their

destiny. A century or more ago, Zionism brought us Jewish liberation; it's time we finally started acting the part.

Be the Party. As most of us learn sometime around sophomore year of high school, attitude is everything. Which is why it's painful to watch so many Jews act as if the great good is always elsewhere, in the newsrooms of legacy publications or the boardrooms of multinational corporations or the classrooms of ivy-covered universities. You hardly need to have been the most popular kid in your class to know that no one wants to sit with the wannabes. People, bless them, tend to gravitate to those who seem confident, relaxed, happy, and proud of whatever it is they are and are doing. Which, for example, helps explain the enormous surge of popularity of Chabad on campus. Rather than engage in endless debates about politics or fret about what other groups are doing or saying or strive to attract the mediocrities other people consider cool, the rebbe's emissaries simply host Shabbat dinners that are genuinely welcoming and fun, inviting kids to take refuge from the thinky tedium of life on the quad, with a bite of chicken and a taste of Torah. It works because it feels lived-in and genuinely joyous, not like an attempt to solve a problem or seem smart or impress the dean. There's no easier way to win friends and influence people than simply behaving as if the best party ever is right here, right now, and everyone's invited.

Know Who Your Friends Are. Speaking of winning friends and influencing people, it turns out that the art of picking your crew — another high school survival skill — is largely lost these days in too many corners of Jewish officialdom. Here, then, is a necessary refresher: Our friends aren't necessarily those we'd *like* to see by our side. They aren't the ones whose mothers or grandmothers marched with our own, no matter how noble the cause. They aren't merely alumni of the same schools or subscribers to the same symphony orchestras. Our friends are the people who believe what we believe, and who stand up for us when it matters most, not meekly and mildly but with flailing arms and a full heart. American Jews are fortunate to

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have at their side a stunningly diverse coalition of supporters, from the Church of God in Christ — the country's largest Pentecostal denomination, a largely African-American group that has recently dispatched one of its senior leaders to be the bishop of Jerusalem — to Indian Americans, who came out en masse to demonstrate in support of Israel during its recent conflagration with Hamas. Instead of finding reasons to fear and loathe those fellow Americans who actually want to stand with us, we should learn to hug them back and stop pining for the attention of the Hollywood darlings or the sophisticates who would never embrace us anyway. As a wise rabbi once put it, if you can't be with the one you love, love the one you're with — or at least those who are with you.

Just Do It. For too long, American Jewish life was one big escrow account. Pay your local Jewish organizations, went the logic, and they in turn will make sure that communal life proceeds apace. This model worked well in the second half of the 20th century, which was all about helping Jews learn how to become fully American; it's not the best fit for the first half of the 21st century, which is all about helping Americans learn how to be fully Jewish again. That's why the organizations and platforms that do best are not the ones that offer effortless engagement but the ones that ask members to do something, anything, from studying a page of Talmud

a day to learning a *bissel* Yiddish while they walk the dog. More than most other faith traditions, Judaism must be practiced, not just pondered or discussed. Its insights become available through deeds, its benefits revealed only once sincere commitments are made and kept. And knowing that its adherents are Jews, the most stiff-necked of all people, it offers enough paths to redemption to satisfy anyone's spiritual wanderlust. That old Nike commercial had it just right: If you want something to happen, even something as elusive as spiritual fulfillment, just do it.

Pay Up. Conviction and confidence alone, however, can take you only so far. If you want to soar to great heights, you better have great health insurance, and too many of our most dedicated and inspired leaders don't. Amble into any Jewish organization anywhere in the country, and two things are likely to be true. First, the person most responsible for the organization's success isn't necessarily its storied and adequately paid leader, but some young person who gave up a more remunerative career option to work full-time for the Jews. And second, that person most likely does not benefit from access to a generous family-leave policy, say, or subsidized day care, or a living wage that makes raising a Jewishly engaged family feasible. Any organization that says it cares about nurturing Jewish life—which is to say, really, every Jewish organization—should do its utmost to make Jewish life affordable and sustainable, beginning with those dedicated few who have made our communal well-being their life's work. When the Jewish professional world is known for offering unparalleled benefits to those caring and committed enough to enter it—particularly when it comes to having, raising, housing, feeding, and educating children—we'll know we're closer to redemption.

Have a Theory of Change. Finally, as we rethink our American Jewish lives, individually and communally alike, let us remember one key insight: We are a covenantal people. As my friend Rabbi Ari Lamm likes to teach: A covenant, unlike a contract (social or otherwise), isn't interested in tightly controlling every possible outcome. A covenant wants you to sign the dotted line first and learn to keep

your promises later, as that first covenanter, Abraham, learned the hard way. A covenant, in fact, is possible only because it assumes that people change, and it wishes to inspire them to change wisely. That's why covenantal people waste no time adjudicating the shortcomings of the past and a lot of energy imagining a better tomorrow. It's also why they're more likely to forgive failings, forge alliances with past enemies, and adapt more readily to change. Rather than live out the dramas of their ancestors, they focus on the part they are meant to play. And rather than expect today's moral crisis to require the same solution as yesterday's, they are free to dream up unorthodox approaches and take measured risks in pursuit of their goals.



Risk, perhaps, is at the heart of the matter. In large part, the technology industry grew into a colossus because it understood that money was plentiful but good ideas forever in short supply, which meant that prudent investors acted dutifully by taking risks and investing in a slew of start-ups, realizing that the handful that succeed would more than pay for the bulk that didn't.

Jewish communal life is too often organized around the exact reverse principle, believing that good ideas and passionate people are readily available everywhere while money comes only from a few deep pockets. When our best and brightest have to invest much of their time and energy in getting and keeping grants, writing quarterly reports, and managing the expectations of funders, they naturally grow risk-averse, mirroring the same emotional valence of the foundations and organizations that support them. We can do better than that. We've got enough bright people on our team, and the hour is getting late. If change is to begin somewhere, even before the aforementioned attitudes take hold, it will begin by radically reducing the time and effort it takes the sort of folks who can save us to get the money and the help they need to get going.

We have the dreams; all we need now are the dollars and the love. *

Two Weddings and a Sorrowful Wife



I'M TELLING YOU, one day we will talk about this time as the good old days, as bad as it is."

My friend Michael is sitting across the table from me. We've both flown to London to attend the wedding of a mutual friend who, like us, belongs to the Stockholm Jewish community. The bride and groom are from two European countries and met in a third—a common story among religiously observant European Jews. In order to reach the ultimate goal of having Jewish grandchildren, we have to live each day with our Jewishness on top of mind, fighting to keep up our observance, to find a Jewish partner who shares our same goals, while also staying safe from the underlying threat of harassment and violence.

Michael and I are chatting about the recent attacks on rabbis and other visibly Jewish individuals, swapping stories about what the last few months have been like following the latest Gaza war. We've been through similar dramatic upticks in violence and harassment whenever Israel is involved in a military operation before, but we agree that this time feels worse, leaving us increasingly

angry and isolated. It's not just our anecdotal opinions: Jews across Europe have been experiencing a dramatic surge in antisemitism, usually recast as anti-Zionism, that continues to use the same methods, conspiracy theories, and tropes as previous iterations. Michael tells me things will get worse, that we've reached the point where hating Jews carries no social or political cost and that, for all our complaining, we have lived through the glory days of European Jewry. Now is the time to prepare to leave.



The most recent study of perceptions of antisemitism among European Jews, released in 2018 by the EU's Fundamental Rights Agency, reports startling numbers, concluding that antisemitism in Europe "pervades everyday life" and is "so common that it becomes normalized." Among more than 16,000 survey respondents, 89 percent felt that antisemitism had increased in their country over the past five years, and 85 percent considered it to be a "very big" or "fairly big" problem in their country, tending to see it as "the biggest social or political problem" where they live. They experienced antisemitism online (89 percent), in public spaces (73 percent), in media (71 percent), and in political life (70 percent). Twenty-eight percent had experienced some form of antisemitic harassment over the past year, and 2 percent had been physically attacked; more than one-third had avoided Jewish events out of safety concerns. Fully 38 percent had considered emigrating at some point during the past five years.

European Jews live in fear and, to some extent, in hiding. They do not trust their governments to protect them. In the 76 years since the Holocaust, hating Jews has again become politically expedient and socially acceptable in Europe. A clear line has been drawn: The dead Jews of the past are good, while those who insist on staying alive and staying Jewish—especially those who support the State of Israel—are evil.

In Europe, therefore, Jewish observance is an act of rebellion.

We Jews bond together like refuseniks, fighting for survival in a place that has never stopped trying to get rid of us. Governments across Europe are attempting—and sometimes succeeding—to ban foundational Jewish practices such as kosher slaughter and male circumcision, making traditional Jewish life extremely difficult. Jews attending prayers, Jewish schools, or community centers do so behind bulletproof glass with armed guards at the door. When they are victims of antisemitic attacks, they are often assumed to have provoked the attackers simply by being Jews.

Although modern-day Jew-hatred is more refined than in the past, current conditions are eerily similar to those in Europe hundreds of years ago, when Jews were given the choice between death and hiding, whether in the form of forced conversion or the self-erasure of our ancestry, practices, and beliefs. If we are too Jewish, we can expect to be attacked; but if we tone down our identity and assimilate, we will be left alone.

While antisemitism used to come primarily from the far Right, it now attacks from all angles. Respondents to the EU study reported a “wide range of perpetrators, which spans the entire social and political spectrum.” The most serious incidents of antisemitic harassment they encountered came from extremist Muslims (30 percent), from people on the Left (21 percent), and from those on the Right (13 percent).

Given these pressures, European Jews have increasingly abandoned their old homes for the old/new country: Israel is the one place on earth where it is safe to be breathing while Jewish. The pandemic has only pushed the issue of aliyah to the front of our collective mind. The closing of borders gave us the first taste of what it’s like to live in a world where Israel is not an option.

With the Jewish population of Europe feeling as if it’s on its way to an eventual extinction, we have to wonder whether our absence will be felt—and whether it matters. The answer, simply and clearly, is that we were never wanted in the first place and that our contribution to and success within European society is at the very heart of Europe’s

Today I am forced to make a choice between
the country of my birth and the land of my
ancestors, because Europe does not allow me to
have both — not if I want to stand up straight as
a Jew of faith, a Zionist, a daughter of Abraham.

disdain for us. The Jews of Europe have been hated and persecuted for over 2,000 years, because of our unique ability to survive and thrive in forced exile and our tradition of neither proselytizing nor intermarrying. The ironic duality of antisemitism is never more evident than in Europe; they do not want us to be one of them, but they resent us for refusing to assimilate. Our unwillingness to substitute our millennia of identity, faith, and tradition for modern-day dogma is, to European society, proof of nefariousness, all too often punishable by death.

We will be missed—not as citizens, but as enemies. Were Europe to become *Judenrein*, the continent would be without a handy scapegoat for its ever-growing problems, and that could trigger a crisis. The relationship between Europe and its Jews is not unlike that of an abusive marriage: The abused wife is only ever loved and cherished in weakness, and she is beaten—even killed—when asserting her freedom and identity. As conditions worsen, it is becoming more and more difficult for Jews to justify remaining Europe’s sorrowful wife.

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I find myself at another wedding, just a few weeks later, this time in Accra, Ghana. The bride and groom met in Africa, their families are

The lesson of Europe will be written over
and over in years and decades to come,
but in essence it is simple: You cannot build
a nation without faith, and you cannot keep
it alive without tradition.

from Europe, their passports are Israeli, and now they are about to start a new life and family in West Africa.

They are like all of us, a wild mix of backgrounds. When we introduce ourselves, we do so by telling one another all the places our ancestors were chased out of: Latvia, Russia, Germany, Spain, Uzbekistan, Poland, Hungary, Romania. Few of us at the ceremony are refugees ourselves, but we are all born with the readiness to leave, carrying our passports the way others might bring umbrellas, as a hedge in case of rain. This is the darkness ever present to us, just as a groom breaks the glass under the chuppah in remembrance of the destruction of the Temple. It is the plague of our existence, but it is also the key to our survival. It is the reason why, as a people, we outlive our persecutors, despite repeated predictions of our demise.

Constantly fighting for your identity means constantly affirming your identity — something Europe hasn't done in a very long time. Jews inhabit all the things that Europe lacks: faith, identity, tradition, nationalism, and survival. In a different world, Europe might have taken a page from our ancient book to ensure its own survival.

I've written about the Jews of Europe many times, and all of my articles have been calls to action, cries for help, expressions of fury. This time is different. Now I also feel sadness, not for myself, but for the Europe I grew up in, the place I used to love.

I have deep roots in Sweden, my country of birth, going back three generations. I have grown up dipping my toes in cold and placid fjords and in the warm and choppy Mediterranean. I had great pride in being this mix of things and places, languages and traditions, and as a child I assumed I could belong to all these entities at once, passport from one place and heart in another. Today, I know differently. Today I am forced to make a choice between the country of my birth and the land of my ancestors, because Europe does not allow me to have both — not if I want to stand up straight as a Jew of faith, a Zionist, a daughter of Abraham.

In America, people carry the duality I seek: They call themselves Jewish-American, Muslim-American, Sikh-American. The very names express a built-in acceptance. But in Europe, we must make a choice, or the choice will be made for us.

So I choose to be a Jew. A Jew born in Sweden, but a Jew first. I truly believe it is Europe's loss that it forces us to make these choices, pushing us into this binary place. The rampant antisemitism in Europe encourages some Jews to assimilate, but it also makes many of us more observant, less susceptible to pressure, prouder of who we are. It pushes us closer to the safety of one another, further away from the non-Jewish world and its constant threats. Had there been some public goodwill, Europe could have seen a strong and faithful Jewish population as essential to Europe's own moral and political health. But Europe could never fully get past its age-old hatred of Jews, much less resolve its modern-day ambivalence toward them, to see the point clearly.

The lesson of Europe will be written over and over in years and decades to come, but in essence it is simple: You cannot build a nation without faith, and you cannot keep it alive without tradition. Somewhere along the line, in the aftermath of World War II, Europe decided that religion, nation-states, and particularist identities were the enemy of peace. As Jews, we are remnants of the old, the almost forgotten parts of Europe, so it makes sense that we would be treated as enemies of the state. Yet as Europe's social, economic, and

political crises become more acute, it will need the kind of social cohesion that only a concept of peoplehood can provide. Too bad for Europe that the people who best embody and model that concept will by then have mostly left.



In one week, I've attended two Jewish weddings, lit Shabbat candles, heard the ritual kiddush prayer, and attended synagogue services. In just one week, I have filled my life with ancient practices that affirm my faith, my traditions, and my sense of peoplehood. I have seen new unions formed, young men and women vowing to build faithful Jewish homes. We Jews have been called an ever-dying people—ever dying, ever living, generation after generation. If I weep, I do not weep for the Jews of Europe, I weep for Europe itself, for the paradise of my childhood, which now for all intents and purposes is lost.

I am no longer advocating that Europe accept or protect us. After the events of the past few years, I know there is no point, but for once it is Europe I pity, not us. The Jews will be okay—for all the reasons Europe hates us, we will be okay. For all those same reasons, Europe most likely will not. *

PART TWO

CONTINUITY IN
COMMUNITY



Continuity Requires Content



AMERICAN Jewish leaders never made the claim publicly, nor in all likelihood did they ever articulate it to themselves. Yet in retrospect, the wager they made has become clear: American Jewish leadership believed that it could fashion a variety of Judaism that would be both meaningful and sustainable with virtually no content at its core.

How many American Jews today know, when they visit the Metropolitan Museum or the New York Public Library and encounter the grandeur of the Western tradition, that they are the heirs to not one, but two grand civilizations, each with its canon of great, world-changing books, its array of pathbreaking thinkers, its cluster of ideas and questions that have shaped the way many people experience the universe? Do they have any sense, when they encounter the profundity of Western thought in universities or elsewhere — Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli, Locke, Hobbes, Rawls — that Jewish civilization is just as rich? Do they know anything about the

biblical mindset, the rabbinic revolution, Ibn Gabirol, Maimonides, Mendelssohn, Kaplan, Soloveitchik?

We see the result of Jewish “education” sans content most painfully when it comes to Israel. Many of us are distraught at the antipathy a younger generation feels toward what *we* see as a national liberation movement, but to no small degree, it’s our fault. What have we done to show them that Zionism is not a simple and uniform ideology, but a profound and ongoing conversation? What have we done to usher them into the *chavruta* that was once (and in certain circles, still is) Zionist discourse? What have we taught them about the differing worldviews of the great Zionist thinkers — the anti-statehood Ahad Ha’am; Pinsker, the diagnostician of the illness of European Jewry; Gordon and his belief that redemption would come from having the earth of the Land of Israel under their fingernails; Jabotinsky, the classic liberal who opposed mainstream Zionism’s naïveté about Arabs; or Rav Kook and his unique theological stance that allowed his Orthodoxy to embrace the revolution?

Can we imagine how different — less strident, more connected — our discourse would be about Jewish life, Jewish peoplehood, and Israel if it could be rooted in familiarity with some of these people and some of these ideas? Can we imagine a Jewish world in which subtlety, sophistication, nuance — all summoned through engagement with content — were what characterized us? Would people still be fleeing? Or might they, instead, be clamoring to find their way back in?

The most basic truths about Judaism are utterly unfamiliar to the Jews we claim to have educated. By the time we send them off to freshman orientation, have we ever taken their intelligence seriously? Have we ever explained, for example, how in the aftermath of the destruction of the Second Temple and the loss of Jewish sovereignty, the framers of rabbinic Judaism (which first emerged in the Mishnah and then developed in the two Talmuds) fashioned a way of Jewish living that they intuited would be best equipped to

sustain a people that would no longer be bound together by residing in an ancestral land? Instead of sanctifying space, they chose to sanctify time. With the pomp of the Temple gone, they moved pageantry into the home. In a world in which the categories of pure and impure had been largely destroyed, they substituted rituals that would distinguish between sacred and profane. With the priestly class rendered irrelevant, they established a new form of leadership, based not in heredity but on learning, whose job would be not to offer sacrifice but, instead, to transmit the substance of the new Jewish civilization just beginning to emerge.

For almost 1,500 years, it worked. But then, as a result of the Enlightenment—which bolstered the individual freedoms of the West (particularly in America) and hastened the decline of intimate ethnic community—the “plausibility structures” of American religion (to borrow Peter Berger’s term) began to decay. American Jews were hardly the only community buffeted by these sociological and intellectual storms; the moderate Protestantism of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich in America has also been pummeled. Today, Protestantism, too, is but a mere shard of its former glory.

How did this play out in American Jewish life? American non-Orthodox religious leaders, increasingly shaped by academic scholarship, found themselves unable to embrace theological principles that had long been a bedrock of Jewish life. If God’s authorship of the Torah was suddenly called into question because of various formulations of the documentary hypothesis, how could one speak of the authority of the laws that emerged from the Bible, or the Talmud, or the Shulchan Arukh? And the flocks, in turn, felt welcomed in the United States in a way that no other Diaspora had ever embraced them. They did not want to miss out on the opportunity called America.

Very quickly, in a matter of just a few decades, the default setting in American Jewish life went from traditionalism to one in which tradition was first on the defensive and then largely jettisoned. The rituals that had once sanctified time were gone—the rigors

Jewish illiteracy has also vitiated
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of Shabbat; the practices that gave meaning, not simply a nod of recognition, to the holidays; a daily rhythm with morning rituals and liturgy, afternoon worship, practices for nighttime. As those practices evaporated, so, too, did the sense that Judaism could do much to sanctify life. To entice Jews into Jewish life, we demanded less of them. Three days of Hebrew school became two, then one—and the students learned very little. Services were diluted and shortened—and we robbed the liturgy of its power to move us, to say anything. To hold on to an increasingly disconnected laity, American Jewish non-Orthodox leaders lowered the bar, demanding less, teaching less, even cajoling less, so that now, the best and brightest of young American Jews had no sense of the grandeur that had been abandoned in order to retain their waning loyalty.

If they only knew what had been discarded, they would be shocked by the absurdity of the proposition.

As a result of this Faustian bargain, we also lost the ability to fashion what one might call a sane center—a sense of shared vocabulary, concepts, narratives, and practices that might afford Jews of radically different religious, political, and moral worldviews an opportunity to see themselves as partners in the same enterprise. To put the matter bluntly, Jewish illiteracy has also vitiated Jewish pluralism; absent Jewish literacy, who could possibly ground their views on any issue in Jewish terms? A lack of familiarity with Jewish

When we failed to teach the texts and rituals
that had been its foundation, we weakened
our connection to a great civilization —
and also to one another.

texts has made it inevitable that Jews must resort to an exclusively Western frame of reference. Once that happens, though, in what way are they *Jewishly* linked to Jews who see the world very differently from them?

If we instinctively disagree about whether one should first support Jewish causes or, alternatively, the neediest wherever they might be, how do we ground our positions? Can mere instinct suffice? What, if not the numerous canonical texts on the subject, might bind those two differing camps as parts of a shared conversation? If we have entirely different sentiments about Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel, what kind of unifying discourse can we have if we have never engaged with the Jewish texts that address the role of landedness in Jewish life, or the narratives that cannot imagine telling the story of the Jewish people without the Land of Israel as an anchor? (Consider the fact that the Land of Israel is much more central to the Bible than God, Abraham, or Moses is.)

With no familiarity with the Bible or liturgy, how are we to feel the power of the heartbroken yearning of Chaim Nachman Bialik's poem "To the Bird," which weeps for the healing that landedness might provide, or the angry impatience of Shaul Tchernichovsky? What about Natan Alterman's "Silver Platter," which described the declaration of the state as a replacement for Sinai? Or Avraham Shlonsky's "Toil," which suggests that the black strips of newly paved roads in the Galilee are a substitute for the black leather

straps of phylacteries? How can we debate as one unified people the ways in which land softens — or callouses — the soul if we have not read Amos Oz, David Grossman, A.B. Yehoshua? Is there any chance that we will feel bound to one another if the worldviews we bring to our conversation are derived solely from the *Wall Street Journal* or the *New Yorker*?

Yes, there is an intermarriage crisis. A birth-rate crisis. The future of many midsize Jewish institutions in a post-COVID world is far from certain. There are angry, vitriolic divides over Israel. And much more. But more foundational than any of these crises is the fact that a thick sense of Jewish peoplehood is dissolving. It is our fault, because we have robbed the Jewish tradition of the power to enrich its people. When we failed to teach the texts and rituals that had been its foundation, we weakened our connection to a great civilization — and also to one another.

Not everyone is moved by intellectual pursuit. Others might be touched by the simple but still deeply felt satisfaction of singing at the Shabbat table songs we call *zemirot* that are hundreds of years old. We may live very different lives than did our great-great-grandparents. They might or might not have been proud of us, might or might not have recognized or approved of our way of Jewish life. But would it not have reassured them — or much more important, inspire *us* — to know that we and they sang the same songs, welcomed and celebrated Shabbat in surprisingly similar ways?

We gave up that anchor. We relinquished our bond to them and, as a result, to one another.

For a while, there were indications that American Judaism had fostered communities in which tradition and modernity might meet in dialogue, where there might unfold a thoughtful discourse about what a unique but sustainable American Judaism looks like. But Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik's brand of modern Orthodoxy has not survived; its intellectual openness is, in most of the communities that still speak of him as "the Rav," a faint memory.

In its heyday, Conservative Judaism also claimed that role. But those cavernous sanctuaries that made worship passive, the hope that the synagogue would substitute for homes where ritual was increasingly absent, couldn't hold the line. As the latest Pew study of American Jewry notes, in recent decades, "for every person who has joined Conservative Judaism, nearly three people who were raised in the Conservative movement have left it." Among American Jews 65 and older, only 3 percent self-identify as Orthodox, while among 18–29-year-olds, 17 percent do. What is shrinking is the center, the segment of the Jewish community that is not Orthodox but that is still denominationally affiliated. Among those 65 and older, 69 percent self-identify as Reform or Conservative. In the 18–29-year-old cohort, that number is 37 percent. Are there nondenominational, noninstitutional, or new varieties of Judaism that might carry us forward? That is certainly possible, but so far, at least, passionate though the adherents of these new communities are, their numbers do not come close to assuring us a future.

It is late, very late. For decades, we have allowed what was once the world's largest postwar Jewish community and is still its second-largest to sink into an anemic brand of universalist vapidness. It will take at least as long to climb out of the rut we have dug. But is it too late to try, to save at least some of what still survives?

We should derive great encouragement from the growth of emerging, often grassroots, communities that are fired by the power of tradition without theological gymnastics; of communities that still demonstrate the profundity of surrendering autonomy without judgment of those not yet ready for that. There are communities animated by the sense of God's closeness, which do not disparage those who are animated more by doubt than by certainty. Think Kehilat Hadar in New York, the Mission Minyan in the Bay Area, the Cambridge Minyan; think Chabad. Think many Hillels and the transformative educational work of SVARA, M², and many others. There is, in Jerusalem, Zion, a congregation that attracts

We need new leaders. We need radically reconceived rabbinical schools. We need reconsidered notions of what leaders of rabbinical schools and education programs ought to be trying to produce.

Orthodox women with traditional head coverings as well as men without kippot, men in black pants and white shirts, and men in shorts, all of whom want to welcome Shabbat together.

Since it *can* be done, we need a strategy. Very briefly, a few key elements I think are critical:

First, let's jettison the prevailing assumption that an embrace of tradition has to be theologically driven. Here the Mizrahi Israeli world offers us a new model for emulation. Meir Buzaglo of the Hebrew University describes a world that he has said focuses more on "reverence" than on "obedience." He describes a "traditional" Jew as one, for example, who does not allow questions about whether the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai was true to determine her commitment: "To be a believing Jew does not necessarily require certainty that the event took place. His loyalty to the Judaism of his parents is key to Jewish life."

This is no embrace of Orthodoxy as most Americans understand it. Buzaglo argues that change can still happen within such a traditional system, but that when it unfolds in a life *anchored by commitment*, it can engage others in conversation and build bridges even with those who disagree with that particular shift in practice. Change on the back of no commitment is in dialogue with nothing—it can provide neither meaning nor connection. It is time for

what Jaroslav Pelikan, that great scholar of Christianity, described as “the vindication of tradition.”

Second, we need a curriculum. In a digital world, nothing could be simpler than sharing materials and ideas across America (or the globe). Imagine a Jewish world that adopted the 929 Project (named for the number of chapters in the Hebrew Bible), marching day by day, week by week, on a shared schedule, through the entire Bible, engaging its grand ideas. Imagine a Jewish world re-embracing Jewish and Hebrew literature, in which first hundreds and then thousands of American Jews were reading at least snippets of important works, and then conversing about them across communal, congregational, and denominational lines.

Imagine an embrace of *daf yomi*, not necessarily to do the entire Talmudic page every day, but to hear, each day, or even every week, some insight, some idea, some concept that roots our conversations in our canon. Take the seemingly arcane idea of the *eruv*. Studying it in depth helps one to see that the rabbis were not simply focused on logistics—they used it as a proxy for larger questions about connection, (physical) closeness, community. What were they telling us about Shabbat, home, our emotional needs, our communal needs—and how might those conversations inform the ways we think about those same issues today?

What if we knew that the congregation down the block—different denomination, dissimilar politics, a wholly other worldview—was studying the same concepts, the same texts? Would there not be power in that shared experience, not only in continuity but in unity as well?

Third, we need new leaders. We need radically reconceived rabbinical schools. We need reconsidered notions of what leaders of rabbinical schools and education programs ought to be trying to produce. Can today’s rabbis read an Israeli novel? What about the deans of their rabbinical schools? Do Jewish communal leaders know Hebrew? Or modern Jewish history? In what way can we aspire to be part of a people when half of us live in a language and are building a culture that much of the other half cannot parse?

Fourth, we need the courage to say to ourselves, to each other, to our flocks: We were wrong, we erred. It will require genuine grit to acknowledge that the educational system we have built has not succeeded, that the visions of Jewish community we fashioned cannot sustain our people. The following is not politically correct to say, but it’s undeniably true: American Jewish communities unengaged in Jewish textual learning, divorced from ongoing, regular Jewish ritual, and unschooled in the richness of Jewish civilization are on their way to oblivion—and that oblivion will come much sooner than most people imagine.

Will we summon that honesty? Can we work with a younger generation, helping it to shed its anger, or indifference, or outright rejection, working together to relearn how to embrace tradition for its own sake? Can we reimagine people-wide, lifelong learning that will bind us together, since nothing else can or will?

There is no way to know. What we do know is that if we answer in the negative, future generations of Jews will think of us as we do the Sadducees, Essenes, and Karaites. They were well-intentioned, perhaps, but they never had a chance at survival. We face a similar choice, and the future of our people rests on what we decide. *

Continuity Requires Religion



FOR A PEOPLE as numerically modest as the Jews, we have more than our fair share of civic, cultural, and advocacy organizations in service of Jewish continuity. From historical societies to Holocaust memorials, Maccabi Games to Jewish museums, the American Jewish establishment is filled with passionate individuals working tirelessly to preserve, defend, and forward the mission of our people. We attend rallies and conferences, sit on boards, give *tzedakah*, and sign our names to statements of support or outrage. These are the rites and rituals of what sociologist Jonathan Woohar famously described as the “civil religion” of American Jews.

But what of *actual* religion? Our robust communal infrastructure raises the question of whether it is possible for Jews to continue without being part of the *religious* system of Judaism. Significant as the contributions of the alphabet soup of organizations may be—ADL, AJC, AJWS, HIAS, JFNA, and I could go on—none of these institutions are religious in nature. Are they sufficient to

carry Jewish communities from one generation to the next? In the absence of Judaism itself—prayer, devotional text study, and observance of mitzvot—will our people endure?

The question goes to the very heart of the modern Jewish condition. In the pre-modern era, anxieties regarding Jewish continuity were focused on the fear of the next pogrom, not on concerns about intermarriage. Internal and external forces ensured that a Jew lived, married, and died within the fold. To be a Jew was neither a religion nor a nationality; it was an all-encompassing and inescapable identity that, antisemitism permitting, was generationally assured. There simply were no alternatives.

The first sign of change came in 1656, when the famous Jewish heretic Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677) was excommunicated from the Amsterdam Jewish community for his “evil opinions and acts.” Rather than convert to Christianity, Spinoza chose to live the remainder of his days independent of any religious affiliation. Spinoza’s transformation “from Baruch to Benedict” prefigured contemporary Jewry: He was the first to opt out of his Jewish identity and community, becoming a pioneer of what today we might term a “Jew of no religion.”

The idea that Judaism was a religion arrived by way of the German-Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786). As Leora Batnitzky explains in her introduction to modern Jewish thought, Mendelssohn responded to the challenges of his contemporaries to leave the faith of his fathers through his book *Jerusalem, or on Religious Power and Judaism*, in which he asserted that his faith-based commitments as a Jew were no different than those of his Protestant neighbors. He could exist comfortably as a German citizen, as they did; being Jewish, he asserted, no longer needed to set Jews apart as a people. Many post-Emancipation Jews would follow his lead, coming to define themselves through the “revealed legislation,” or religious mitzvot of Judaism.

From here, the story of modern Jewry really takes shape—in Europe and eventually in America. Reform Jews refashioned themselves

as “German Jews of the Mosaic faith,” a sentiment that would reach its apotheosis in America with the 1885 Pittsburgh Platform, which proudly declared that “we no longer consider ourselves a nation, but a religious community.” Orthodox Jews transformed Judaism into a religion in a different way, zealously clinging to the punctilious observance of Jewish religious law and rejecting any innovation in practice. Only through this path, they believed, could Jews withstand the assimilating allure of modernity. Transforming Judaism into a religion both opened doors and closed them, built walls and tore them down.

The redefinition of Judaism as a religion was not, to be sure, the only Jewish response to the challenges and opportunities of modernity. Many Jews assimilated out of Judaism and Jewish communities entirely; others poured their energies into secular Jewish socialist movements; still others directed their efforts intellectually, to the scientific study (*Wissenschaft*) of Judaism and Jewish history. The most famous and successful Jewish response to modernity is, of course, Zionism. Whether it was the anti-Jewish Russian pogroms of the 1880s, the Dreyfus trial of the 1890s, or the horrors of the Shoah, the emergence and endurance of modern Zionism is a rejection of not only the false promise of the Emancipation but also the notion that Judaism is only a religion. The Zionists argued that it is our attachment to our land, our people, our Hebrew language, and nationhood that defines us—not our faith.

The freedoms of America, religious and otherwise, have granted American Jews the ability to opt in to or out of Judaism in ways that neither Spinoza nor Mendelssohn could ever have imagined. We can largely live freely as Jews—though not entirely, as Pittsburgh and Poway remind us. The countless philanthropic bodies of self-help and self-defense established over the past 100-plus years all signal the strength of American Jewry. The existence of so many and such politically diverse organizations advocating on behalf of Israel further signals our arrival as American Jews. By a certain telling, American Jewry lives in the best of all worlds, free

As important as nonreligious expressions of Judaism may be, they are entirely insufficient to transmit the riches of Judaism from one generation to the next.

to practice our faith, all the while retaining the telltale signs of peoplehood and nationhood.

But the blessings of America come with their concomitant challenges. More than any Jewish denomination, it is the rise of “Jews of no religion” that should cause consternation in anyone invested in Jewish continuity. Per the 2020 Pew study, 40 percent of American Jews under 30 eschew any faith commitments or discernible patterns of observance, considering themselves “ethnically” or “culturally” Jewish.

What does this mean and where will it take us? We are living in an unprecedented chapter of our people’s history, when Jews can and do live proudly as Jews but may not be either interested in or educated about what Judaism as a lived religion means. It is a state of affairs best described by the late Reform rabbi and theologian Eugene Borowitz, who dubbed American Jews “Marranos in reverse.” Unlike the Marrano Jews of 14th- and 15th-century Spain, who adopted a Christian exterior but remained steadfast as Jews in private, we American Jews publicly affirm our identities as Jews but are removed from our religion, the wellspring of our inner identity.

Uncomfortable as it is to discuss, the impoverished condition of the religion of American Jews sits in plain view. We are more at home debating the Iran deal and the grades of uranium that can be weaponized than we are opening a prayer book. We make every effort to understand the opportunity and challenge of critical race theory,

Mitzvot are the sacred shibboleths by which Jews build conscious community.

but we are flat-footed when asked to consider what it means to stand in a covenantal relationship with God. We are willing to drive for hours to freeze on the sidelines of our children's club sports, but we find ourselves unable (or unwilling) to sit next to them in synagogue on a Friday night or Shabbat morning. We will try any fad diet other than the one prescribed by our Torah. We would rather label another Jew a "self-hating Zionist" or "settler-colonialist" than acknowledge that our children or grandchildren have no ostensible connection to Judaism, never mind the State of Israel.

To be clear, I am not critiquing the civil religion of American Jews. I myself sit on organizational boards and contribute what I can in time, treasure, and talent to their continued well-being. My concern is simply this: As important as nonreligious expressions of Judaism may be, they are entirely insufficient to transmit the riches of Judaism from one generation to the next. In many cases, the secular commitments of American Jews serve as compensatory guilt offerings hiding paper-thin religious identities. In all cases, they presuppose a commitment to Judaism that, for much of American Jewry, is not as present as we would care to admit. My concern is that ramified effects of a Judaism without the foundation of religion will prove to be our undoing, a giant sinkhole into which the hard-earned superstructure of American Jewry will collapse.

It is only by way of mitzvot, the positive acts of Jewish identification, the language and behaviors of the Jewish religion, that Judaism will survive. Mitzvot are the mystic chords, the commitments and commandments by which one Jew connects to another—and, belief permitting, to God. When I put on tefillin, when I

study Torah, when I refrain from eating from one side of the menu in favor of the other, I am, to use Heschel's language, taking a leap of action, giving expression to a vertical relationship to God.

Even for those to whom appeals to the divine are a leap too far, a life of mitzvot remains the most assured means to inspire individual and collective Jewish identity and continuity—a connection to the Jewish people by way of religious expression. We light the same Shabbat candles, we sing the same (or similar) prayers, we read the same books, and we observe the same festivals as the Jews who have come before us, those who are alive today, and those who will come after us. Mitzvot are the sacred shibboleths by which Jews build conscious community. They are the vessels of transmission by which Jewish identity is passed on—the Proustian madeleines, the triggers to memory that have kept our people together across continents and through the generations.

Now is an opportune time to operationalize a cross-communal effort to recover and reclaim the language and practice of mitzvot. In an era of podcasts, Pelotons, and "Couch to 5K" training programs, there is no reason that the Jewish community can't figure out a way to bolster the individual and communal performance of Judaism as a religion. Preliminarily, such an effort would be framed by way of four rubrics: "head," "heart," "how-to," and "community."

Head. For the vast majority of American Jews, the language of mitzvot is a closed book. What are the rhythms of the Jewish year? How has Jewish practice developed over the ages? What are the great books of our tradition? This is not creation ex nihilo—generations of Jewish educators have devoted careers to creating accessible curricula. The task of our time is to update and recast the efforts of our predecessors in a manner consistent with the best practices and platforms by which educational content is accessed today.

Heart. Given a lifespan whose duration is of limited and indeterminate length, what defines a life of meaning and purpose? How am I connected to those who came before me, and what is the legacy I leave to those who will follow? How shall I balance

the particularism of my Jewish identity with my universal commitments to a shared humanity? What is it that the Lord requires of me? It is the obligation and opportunity of clergy and Jewish educators (and the institutions that train them) to inspire contemporary Jewry to adopt mitzvot as the historic and ever-evolving toolbox with which to explore the existential questions sitting within all our hearts.

How-To. The greatest impediment to Jewish practice is neither theological nor ideological, but practical. How do I recite kiddush? When exactly do I bow during the silent devotion? Where can I learn Hebrew? How do I host a discussion on the Torah reading at my Shabbat table—or host a Shabbat dinner at all? The gap between American Jewry’s vaunted secular educational achievements and its anemic Jewish literacy is daunting, but not insurmountable. In a world filled with instructional TikToks and YouTube videos for everything from cooking to yoga, why not populate the internet with “how-to” content on the greatest spiritual practice of all—Judaism? Such curricula must be judgment-free, affirming the varied paths by which individuals today seek entry into the tradition.

Community. Critical as the aforementioned three rubrics are to motivating Jewish observance, only communal reinforcement will make it all stick. A combination of one-on-one mentorship, interconnected *havurot* (small communities), online engagement, and intensive, retreat-based education can provide the ecosystem to nurture and sustain the desired outcomes in Jewish practice. Similar intentional communities (modeled after the successes of programs such as One Table and Honeymoon Israel) should be conceived and implemented in partnership with the existing structures of American communal life. Synagogues, Hillels, and other legacy institutions are already poised to serve the needs of American Jewry, and they stand to be the primary beneficiaries of a reinvigorated religious practice of American Jews.

Head, heart, how-to, and community: a preliminary vocabulary for a program to restore the religion of Judaism to the Jewish

people, an effort that could be shared by Israel and the Diaspora, across denominations and political divides. Indeed, in an era as hyperpolarized as our own, the shared rallying cry of world Jewry to return to a religion of mitzvot is a dividend worthwhile in itself.

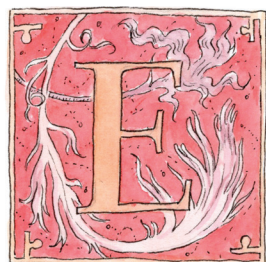
“A community cannot survive on what it remembers,” wrote the late Conservative rabbi and scholar Arthur Hertzberg. “It will persist only because of what it affirms and believes.” It is our religion that has kept us as Jews, defined us a people, and that is the key to Jewish continuity. It will be an undertaking of no small significance to reverse the trends and empower American Jews to reclaim their religious heritage in all its manifold varieties. I am hard-pressed to think of a project more urgent or more exciting.



I recall walking to synagogue with my daughter, then five years old, now in college. As we walked hand in hand, I turned to her and said, “You know what, Lucy, here we are walking hand in hand to shul together. When I was a little boy, I walked to shul holding my daddy’s, your grandpa’s, hand. And you know what is even more interesting? When grandpa was a little boy, he walked to shul holding his daddy’s hand.” On and on I went—confident that she had lost interest in what I found to be so interesting—until she tugged at my hand and responded with a question as pure as it was unexpected. She looked up at me and asked: “Daddy, did Moses walk to shul with his children?” I answered her the only way I knew how: “Yes, Lucy, Moses walked to shul with his children.”

For lack of a magic elixir assuring Jewish continuity, the minimum we can do is to take agency for our personal role in our people’s future. To reach out our hand to our children with the hope that they extend theirs in return. Practicing our faith, spending more time showing and less time telling. Step by step, hand in hand, mitzvah to mitzvah, and generation to generation. *

Deep Diversity, the Common Good, and the Israeli Future



VEN TO ITS most accomplished observers, Israeli politics is dizzying.

Case in point: In May, after a series of confrontations in Jerusalem between Israeli security forces and Palestinians in East Jerusalem, violence erupted between Israel and Gaza and simultaneously between Arabs and Jews within Israel. Arab riots broke out with an intensity that hadn't been seen since the second intifada in September 2000; Jews responded in kind. Yet weeks later, the conservative Islamist Ra'am Party became the first Arab political party to join an Israeli government coalition. Moments after we were ripping apart at the seams, a historical precedent emerged that showed Jews and Arabs moving closer together.

This is but one of many conflicting examples. Depending on the evidence you choose to emphasize, the Haredim are either more isolated than ever or are entering the workforce at unprecedented numbers. Religious Zionists are either asserting ownership of Greater Israel and

Judaism or are pioneering a new relationship between religious and liberal values. Mizrahim (Jews from Arab lands) are either mired in the social periphery of the country or are pouring into an Israeli middle class and redefining what it means to be Israeli. A largely Ashkenazic liberal elite either increasingly sees Israel as a political pariah or is recommitting itself to Israeli society. Which stories hold sway?

Israel stands at a crossroads. Do we double down on the differences between us—between Jews and Arabs, between Israel and the Diaspora, between religious and secular, conservatives and liberals—or do we find new ways of reaching out across the abyss?

DEEP DIVERSITY

In a now famous 2015 speech, Israel's former president, Reuven Rivlin, described Israel as having four tribes: religious, secular, Haredi, and Arab. The tribes have different school systems and different dreams for their children's lives, reflecting varied and often irreconcilable values. The differences are not primarily political. They are foundational. We pull apart because we are *fundamentally* different from one another.

This is deep diversity. Not the diversity of American university campuses today—the striving toward a surface diversity perhaps of skin color, but not of worldviews or goals. It is, instead, a diversity that spills outside of liberal boundaries.

How deep? Progressive advocates of Arab inclusion in Israeli politics are now confronted with the fact that the head of Ra'am, Mansour Abbas, has declared his opposition to homosexuality. This confounds the static political categories in Israel (and beyond) that misconstrued Arabs as part of a progressive Left. Does diversity make room for all Arabs, or any traditional religious groups, or only those who fit neatly into the liberal mindset? What to do about the fact that, for example, Religious Zionists often see the Arab-Israeli conflict through a religious prism—a promise made to the Jewish

people and definitely *not* to the Palestinians, with religious Muslims often sharing an equal and opposite position? How to cope with the idea that the Haredim continue to place Torah study as the core priority of their lives, more important than work or public health, not out of benighted immorality or ignorance, but as a thoughtful and intentional choice? These stated values are decidedly not liberal.

Rivlin's point is first and foremost factual: Our tribes see the world through very different eyes. But his second point is existential and political: Can we build a common life out of such deep diversity? Can we build a politics of the common good that works, well enough, for all of us?

Liberalism believes that it solves the dilemmas of deep diversity by offering the Enlightenment compromise of being “a man in the streets and a Jew at home.” Our particular identities are a private matter — perhaps sentimental, perhaps primitive, perhaps a matter of taste — this approach argues. But we build our public lives as autonomous, rational, choosing individuals, “freed” of the particularist loyalties that divide us. Policy is led by objective experts; states are collections of individuals in a transactional social contract; peace is what happens when we step beyond our parochial differences and embrace our common humanity.

From such a confident stance, forcible conversion of those who resist is really the only option — not necessarily by sword, but by policy, persuasion, coercion, and often condescension. The goal is clear: pushing a worldview onto the rest of society, one that is often in a head-on collision with others.

Such a liberal strategy, what I will call “fundamentalist liberalism,” is flawed in two key ways. The first is descriptive: Israel is not the United States, a country where liberal values, at least until recently, have been perceived to rule. Israel is Turkey, Algeria, India. It is a society with strong religious, ethnic, and national commitments. And while Israel was founded on secular liberal ideas that purposely broke with a traditional past, not all of Israel's citizenry signed on to the new liberal faith. We know from the Turkish example, where the secular-liberal

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project was pursued with the full power of the state, that such force can produce a significant backlash: the rise of a figure such as Erdogan. As Michael Walzer shows in *The Paradox of Liberation*, this is a pattern that repeats itself. Conversion as a strategy has a price.

Second, this form of fundamentalist liberalism has a flawed normative stance. Liberalism is rooted in the assumption that human beings are autonomous and rational. Its outsized focus on the individual and the protection of individual rights is an extension of that assumption. But focusing so single-mindedly on the individual ignores the larger background of social and communal solidarity, which is the fertile soil from which a shared ethos can grow. Social cohesion is a necessary condition for individual flourishing. Traditional communities, for example, are willing to sacrifice more of the autonomy of the individual in order to strengthen the ties of community. Democracy, first and foremost, is about coming together with people who are different from you and constructing a society that is “good enough” for all.

I'm a big fan of John Dewey, considered by his biographer Alan Ryan as the foremost American philosopher of the “high tide of American liberalism,” at the turn of the 20th century. Dewey's liberalism, however, was substantially different from the way we understand the concept today. His was not primarily about protecting individual rights; it was instead about “the great conversation,” the idea that we can build bridges between different people with different viewpoints and still nurture solidarity, finding pragmatic, shared solutions to

societal challenges. Not to convert, but to search for common ground. Not independence—interdependence.

Democratic solidarity is easier when societies are perceived as being homogeneous, made up of people who seem to look and think alike: the Athenian assembly, the New England town-hall meeting, the early Yishuv in Israel. It is no wonder that the strong welfare states of Scandinavian countries emerged in overwhelmingly homogeneous societies. But Israel's democracy is a profoundly heterogeneous one, far more than its secular-liberal founders were willing to admit or make space for. In Israel, democracy cannot be about bringing together people under one liberal umbrella; it must be about engaging and working with diversity in all its configurations, liberal or otherwise.

THE POLITICS OF PARADOX

To its detractors and boosters alike, the Israeli government that brought down Benjamin Netanyahu, which is sitting in power as I write this essay, is perceived as a marriage of convenience.

In the eyes of its critics, the coalition is united by only one thing: its disdain for the deposed prime minister. That the new government includes many of his former allies seems to prove the point. To many of the government's boosters, on the other hand, it emerged primarily by a shared commitment to avoid a fifth election in less than three years. Something had to be done, the argument goes: Political parties had to abandon their ideological axioms. The lowest common denominator was the best to be hoped for.

But these explanations miss the mark. This government is a manifestation of a new phenomenon that has been gaining traction in Israel over the past decade, promising a credible path forward for a deeply heterogeneous society, and indeed for all societies that wrestle authentically with diversity. It could of course unravel in the coming weeks, and the next election could be around the corner, as

happens here in Israel. But we should nevertheless recognize that something of import is taking place with this fledgling coalition.

Under the radar, beyond social-media echo chambers, and outside the toxic culture wars where all leftists are traitors and rightists are fascists, people in Israel have been searching for a way to live together. Through my work at Shaharit, a “think-and-do tank,” I have watched this phenomenon emerge, nurtured it, and seen it take hold. Its growing leadership is made up of people that Tehila Friedman, a former member of Knesset, calls people of the borders: people anchored both in their own worldview and communal commitments, and in a commitment to building together with others, with all the compromises and contradictions that this entails. People who see cultural and moral complexity as a societal asset and not a zero-sum game. People who come from different and often conflicting worlds of meaning, the dizzying kaleidoscope of Israel's body politic: Haredim, Arab Muslims, Mizrahi traditionalists, Jewish liberals in Israel (and abroad), Ethiopian and Russian immigrants and their Israeli-born children, Religious Zionists, and Bedouin and more. They are people who recognize that our futures are embedded in our ability to hold on to our own identity while creating bonds through our differences, rather than somehow trying to ignore or transcend them.

Just a few examples to color this in: Moshe Morgenstern, a Haredi city-council member from Bnei Brak, holds the health portfolio while the coronavirus is rampant and Haredi compliance is sketchy—and must navigate his commitments to community and to public-health imperatives at the same time. My friend and Shaharit co-founder, Nazier Magally, who brought a delegation of fellow Israeli Arabs to Auschwitz in 2003 in order to do an act of “radical empathy.” Idit Silman, a member of Bennett's Yemina Party and the majority whip for the current government, a religious Mizrahi woman who brings together members from all of the political parties on initiatives such as food security, preventing violence against women, early childhood education, and cultural sensitivity in the schools.

Through hundreds of people like Moshe, Nazier, and Idit, we are learning how to navigate through deep diversity to build the bridges necessary for a healthy, thriving democracy. The lessons we're learning are relevant not only to the culture and political wars here in Israel, but to any place struggling to find productive, constructive paths through difference.

First, culture matters. Deep diversity starts by embracing our cultural differences, not ignoring or flattening them—and definitely not disdaining them. Theological commitments to the Land of Israel, for example, are not an obstacle; they are a necessary part of the conversation.

Second, Rivlin's tribes are primary to most of our identities (and claiming not to have an allegiance to a tribe is one of the central characteristics of the liberal tribe). When sucked into the culture wars, we all hunker down, retreating into battle mode behind our walls, believing that it is only *our group* that is being threatened. When a conflict with our group's identity is ignited, we return to that first and most basic allegiance.

Third, feeling acknowledged and accepted is a necessary condition for replacing walls with porous borders that can allow connections and commonality to emerge. It takes courage to truly open oneself to the world as seen through other people's eyes, but everyone has the power to do this. When the educational leadership of the Haredi-Mizrahi Shas Party met the secular-liberal leadership of the Association for Civil Rights in Israel (ACRI) in strategic meetings to find ways to relate to each other, it was ACRI's humility and generosity of spirit that allowed the Shas leadership to respond in kind. When, during the heart of the riots in May, Mansour Abbas (considered by most progressives to be primarily the "victim" in the Jewish-Arab dynamic) visited a torched synagogue in Lod and committed himself to its rebuilding, he opened up the gate for the "ultra-nationalist" Naf-tali Bennett to invite him to be a coalition partner. Recognition and acknowledgement in all directions change the dynamic.

Fourth, relationships need not be conditional on ideological

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commitments; they can be the core of our commitments, as with family. When the new prime minister, Bennett, calls the heads of rival political parties in his coalition by their first names—Mansour and Gidon, Benny and Yair, Merav, Yvette, and Nitzan—he is modeling the importance of personal relationships. First names matter. All good community-organizing work nurtures relationships as its core principle. Unlikely alliances are built on human relationships that create a foundation for working together, breaking out of viewing social change as one group pitted against another.

And last, loosening ideological straitjackets leads to new possibilities. When those who see the world from different vantage points are considered partners and not adversaries, what Lord Maurice Glasman calls "a politics of paradox" emerges. The dissonance between different perspectives gives birth to different options. Peace looks different when we integrate the full range of perspectives, not only liberal-based ones. Economics looks different when we listen to the populist revolt as well as the globalist discourse of start-up nation. Policy takes on new meanings when we consider a broad range of cultural commitments and sociological perspectives.

The new Israeli government's crossing of divides is not happenstance. On the night that Yair Lapid received the mandate for forming a new government, he wrote on his Facebook page: "This has been my mission: finding the common good; pulling Israel from conflict to consensus." Bennett and Lapid have been political friends on and off for almost a decade, and their addressing each other with the term *Achi* ("bro"), a term of affection and fraternity, hints at a

relationship that allows both of them to cross their ideological divides.

The coalition's attempt to bridge divides is far from perfect. Most significant is the populist critique that this is a government of elites, especially Ashkenazi elites, what some call "First Israel." Bennett and Gidon Saar, head of the right-wing coalition partner Hope for Israel, and their partners from the center-Left, all share a familiarity of status and social codes. In contrast, the Likud has been a party supported by "Second Israel," the Mizrahi lower and middle class, ever since Israel's populist revolt and Begin's ascent to power in 1977. So a rage brews against this government: that the elites and "the deep state" continue to control the civil service, the media, the courts, and business interests, pushing a globalizing, liberal agenda in economics and in cultural values. There is a good case to be made that the elitist-populist divide is in fact the central fault line of Israeli society. Without addressing it in fundamental ways, it will continue to threaten the future of democracy, here and throughout the world.

TOWARD THE COMMON GOOD

A politics of the common good puts its focus on sociology, not ideology; on a less confident, more curious posture toward what needs to be done. It embraces the deep diversity of Israel's tribes, while nurturing the interplay among them, and it builds solidarity from which new possibilities can emerge. This common good, a set of shared values and a shared ethos, cannot be dictated from above; instead, it emerges through a growing network of connections among people willing to have porous boundaries, rooted in and nurtured by a true acceptance of our differences.

Liberalism has brought many positives to our shared lives in the public square in Israel as elsewhere: freedoms of expression, property, religion, movement, representation, and equal status before the law are all commonplaces, even as, on the edges, we argue about their boundaries. But for these ideals to succeed in becoming part of

the fabric of a heterogeneous society, they must be in dialogue with other worlds. Religious feminism (which liberal fundamentalists would describe as an oxymoron) is not the capitulation of conservative values to liberal standards; it is something else, a new hybrid that is coming into being. The growing acceptance of homosexuality is similar: More overt commitment to marriage and traditional family structures by the homosexual community dovetails with conservative communities' growing acceptance of less-traditional families to create something new. The movement of one side makes it possible for the other side to move as well. When hybridization works, it works in both directions. We meet at the center, which as Maimonides—and Aristotle before him—pointed out, is not the compromised middle between two ideals, but the golden mean.

Jewish tradition gives us a language for exploring divides. The two great legal traditions of Shammai and Hillel were often at odds, but Judaism accepts them both as arguments "for the sake of Heaven." Hillel's position became the halakha (law) because his students were "kind and gracious," teaching both their ideas and those of the students of Shammai, and even teaching Shammai's opinions first (Babylonian Talmud 13b). This is a model not of ideological warriors, but of intellectual modesty that understands that none of us has direct access to Truth. Each of our sociologies, each of our worldviews, holds a piece of truth; only together can we transcend our limitations and come closer to the Kingdom of God.

The future of Israel's democracy, the continuity of the State of Israel, can assume two different forms. One, self-righteous and ideological, will pull us inexorably apart. The other, more modest in its claims and more generous in its sensibility, will reach out to find partners who can pull us together. The jury is out as to which direction will win, both in Israel and around the world.

I'm betting on our better angels—on Moshe, Nazier, Idit, and countless others emerging from under the radar in city councils, NGOs, and now in national leadership—to lead us to a future that is good enough for everyone, together. *

More Unites Us Than Divides Us: A Haredi Perspective



O JEWISH COMMUNITY to my knowledge has ever long flourished without widespread Jewish literacy and a vibrant culture of Torah learning. What can be done to prevent that fate from befalling the non-Orthodox segment of American Jewry?

1 | WHERE WE ARE

Based on the 2013 Pew Research Center survey of American Jewry, Professor Edieal J. Pinker of the Yale School of Management projects an American Jewish community in 2063 that will be one-third Orthodox, one-third Reform or Conservative, and one-third that's of "no religion or partly Jewish." Over that period, the overall Jewish population will decline because of the "substantial shrinkage in the number of Reform and Conservative Jews, as well as of the departure from the Jewish people of many children of the intermarried,"

before gaining again in numbers because of rapid Orthodox growth. According to Pew, by 2030, half the American Jewish children under nine will be raised by Orthodox parents.

Demographic trends, including declining rates of marriage and lower fertility, are hard to reverse, especially when they parallel broader trends in society. None will be harder to reverse than the present intermarriage rate of 71 percent among non-Orthodox Jews. The stigma that once attached to intermarriage has long disappeared, and indeed it is those who express opposition to it who now risk communal calumny. As intermarriage rates climb, the pool of potential Jewish spouses shrinks.

But numbers alone capture only part of the story—the Torah itself predicts that we will always be the smallest of the nations (Deuteronomy 7:7). No less concerning is the "thinning" of the quality of American Jewish life. As Rabbi John Moscovitz, rabbi emeritus of one of North America's most prestigious Reform congregations, argued recently: "Above all, Jewish ideas do not grip liberal congregations, or galvanize them to action, which can only happen when a critical mass of the community has committed to the regular study of sacred texts."

Liberal communities, he continues, do not set a "religious worldview" as a goal. Heterodox clergy are expected to focus on programming, pastoral work, and, increasingly, on the politics of the moment, rather than learning and teaching Jewish sacred texts. The latter, like support for Israel, is deemed too parochial.

Of those things that, Pew tells us, American Jews list as defining Jewish identity—including remembering the Holocaust (73 percent), leading an ethical life (69 percent), working for justice (56 percent), a good sense of humor (42 percent)—none are exclusively Jewish or provide a reason for marrying another Jew.

As historical memories of ghettos and murderous pogroms fade, and ethnic Jewish enclaves disappear in America, the once deeply ingrained sense of Jewish peoplehood and mutual responsibility has declined sharply. A 2007 study by sociologists Steven M. Cohen and

Ari Kelman reported that over half of non-Orthodox Jewish adults under 35 responded that the destruction of the State of Israel would not be a “personal tragedy” for them. And only 47 percent of the same age cohort responded affirmatively to the question of whether Jews worldwide have some special responsibility for one another (as opposed to 75 percent of Jews over 65).

Another threat to Jewish identity comes from the changing face of American antisemitism. The stereotypical antisemite is no longer an Aryan Nation member in Idaho, but an Israel Apartheid Week crusader on campus. Jewish students are increasingly challenged to disavow their Jewish identity or be ostracized from the progressive circles to which they often gravitate.

2 | ATTACHING TO THE JEWISH STORY

The survival of the Jewish people in exile as a solitary sheep among 70 wolves, in the language of the Talmud, is history’s longest-running miracle. Arguably even more miraculous has been the Jews’ ability to preserve a national identity even while uprooted from their historical homeland, and to return to that tiny sliver of land after almost 2,000 years. Louis XIV of France once asked the great mathematician Blaise Pascal for proof of the existence of miracles. “The Jews, your majesty, the Jews,” Pascal replied.

Appreciation of the Jewish story fills one with a sense of privilege to have been born into such a remarkable people. Whether one adopts a naturalistic or a supernatural approach, no student of Jewish history can deny that Jewish survival is inseparable from the Torah. At the very least, that history makes plausible an idea upon which the Torah insists repeatedly: that Jews are G–d’s Chosen People, charged with a mission to bring knowledge of G–d to the entire world.

I can testify personally to the power of being caught up in the Jewish story. The decisive turning point in my life occurred on the

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morning of July 4, 1976. I was then studying Hebrew in Jerusalem, taking a year off between Yale Law School and the start of legal practice. As I got on the bus that morning, there was total pandemonium. My Hebrew was not yet good enough to comprehend immediately the news blaring from the bus radio that Israel had successfully rescued more than 100 captives held in Entebbe. Eventually, however, I determined the reason for the joyous hugging of strangers all around me.

I began to ponder why I felt so much closer to all those on the bus than I ever did to my fellow passengers on a New York City subway. On the subway, I tended to be aware of the things that divided me from others — my “privilege,” if you will. On that Israeli bus, however, I felt connected to everyone else, no matter how different we were in family history, skin color, or education.

But what was my actual connection with the Yemenite Jew, several rows in front of me, whose ancestors were already on the Arabian Peninsula hundreds of years before the destruction of the Second Temple?

I concluded that the connection derived from the fact that every Jew on that bus was the product of an unbroken chain of ancestors, going back thousands of years — descendants of great scholars and

simple peasants, in almost every part of the globe, for whom the connection to G-d was so powerful that they resisted the most brutal of sticks, as well as every blandishment that could be offered, rather than go over to the other side. That conclusion led me to another question: Was the power that our ancestors found in their relationship to G-d something that could still be tapped into by a secular Jew like me in the last quarter of the 20th century? Though I did not act immediately upon that question, it continued to niggle over the next three years, until I first entered a yeshiva.

The truth is that I had been primed to ask at least the first question by my upbringing. I am the oldest of five sons, four of whom became Torah-observant Jews. As a consequence, my mother, now 91, has lived to see more than 115 Jewish descendants and counting.

If my parents ever wondered whom to blame for the fact that four of their Ivy League-trained sons ended up spending years studying Talmud, we had a ready answer, and one they never contradicted: “You have no one to blame but yourselves. You told us that being Jewish was the most important thing about us. We took you seriously, and decided to find out what Judaism actually is.”

Ours was not a particularly observant family, even by the standards of the Conservative movement, in which my brothers and I were raised and of which my maternal grandfather was a prominent lay leader in the 1950s. But we did grow up knowing that there were certain obligations that went along with being Jewish, such as attendance at the Shabbos dinner table, in semiformal attire.

And our Jewish identity was strong. We visited Israel frequently, and each of my brothers and I spent a year there before, during, or after college or graduate school. The only time a television was allowed near the sanctum of our family dinner table was during the UN debates preceding the Six-Day War of 1967 and for updates during the war itself.

Like most of the tens of thousands of Jewish young people between the early 1970s and the mid-1990s who entered yeshivas and seminaries designed for people with little background in Jewish

texts—many of us backpacking around the world—my brothers and I had two Jewish parents. If we had felt (and we did) that we had an identity we needed to explore, there was no question that it would be our Jewish identity. That is ever less the case for young Jews today.

8 | THE BOTTOM LINE

The study of Jewish history, Israel trips, and various forms of Jewish activism are valuable in part because they stimulate further questions—e.g., “What is my relationship to other Jews in distress or under threat?” A visit to Israel might trigger the question “Are Jews a nation or just a faith community?”

But ultimately, as Jack Wertheimer, the former provost of the Jewish Theological Seminary, has written, a revitalization of American Jewry depends on a reengagement with the “commandments, beliefs, and values for the sake of which Jews over the millennia...have willingly, and gratefully, set themselves apart.” One path that will not work, and can only prove counterproductive, is to attempt to “save” American Jewry by accounting tricks—like redefining who is a Jew—or by presenting Judaism as fully congruent with the modern zeitgeist. That path can end only in Judaism seeming infinitely malleable, extraneous, and ultimately trivial.

In a recent perceptive essay, “The Case for Wooden Pews,” Yuval Levin contemplates the plummeting attachment to religious institutions in America, even as the percentage of Americans who describe themselves as “highly religious” remains constant. The instinctive response to the loss of membership, writes Levin, is “to emphasize commitments to justice and to deemphasize specific strictures on personal behavior.” But that misses what people seek in religion: “Religious institutions need to show not that they are continuous with the larger culture but that they are capable of addressing its deficiencies—that they can...be counted on to do the work of molding souls and shaping character.” As Alexis de

Tocqueville long ago noted, in free societies it is precisely the moral and religious institutions that hold firm to orthodoxy — and not those that seek modernization and accommodation — that have proven most attractive.

4 | HOW TO MAKE IT HAPPEN

What would it take to get American Jews to engage seriously with Jewish texts and the basics of Jewish practice? My answer: a personal relationship with a fellow Jew who takes the Torah seriously and attempts to guide his or her life in accord with the Torah's dictates, a Jew for whom being Jewish informs every aspect of his self-identity. The relationships should be ongoing and one-on-one. It is also crucial that the criterion of success for the religious partners is building a relationship, not whether their secular partner takes on religious observance.

Why do I think programs facilitating such relationships might have a significant impact? Because I have seen how powerful they can be in Israel. Let me give you a few examples.

For well over a decade, I have been writing about an Israeli organization named Keshet Yehudi. Initially, the organization arranged study partnerships between secular and Haredi Jews. It has about 4,000 such partnerships ongoing at any given time, many of which have lasted for years. I have been to many gatherings where study partners met one another in person for the first time (after a long period of learning by phone), and I've observed how they sit there for the rest of the evening with their arms around each other.

Over and over again, I've heard study partners describe each other as "my closest friend, an inseparable part of me" — and that comment is as frequently heard from the Haredi study partner as the secular one. That is in keeping with the message that Tzila Schneider, the Meah Shearim-raised mother of 11 who founded the organization, gives to each Haredi volunteer: "If you only seek

to do an act of *chesed* for an unlearned Jew, this is not the organization for you. Only if you believe that every time two Jews draw closer, that each can gain from the other, is Keshet Yehudi for you."

Nine years ago, Major (res.) Gilad Olshtein asked Schneider to develop a similar program for the participants in the three pre-army academies (*mechinot*) he runs, to introduce his charges to the basics of Jewish practice and some of the major Torah concepts. He did not want a lecture series, but something deeper and more intimate that would help his charges authentically understand the Haredi worldview.

Olshtein had grown up on a virulently anti-religious Hashomer Hatzair kibbutz. After retiring from the army, he and his wife were sent by the Jewish Agency as emissaries to the Salonika Jewish community, a task for which he quickly realized he was supremely unqualified. How could he strengthen the Jewish identity of Salonika's Jews when he himself knew nothing about what it means to be Jewish? Over the next two years, he was a weekly Shabbos guest of the local rav and began to learn with him.

He returned from Salonika a changed person. He earned a Ph.D. in Jewish history and began leading five to eight trips annually of Israeli Jews to Poland. On those trips, he pounds home the questions: Is there a difference between you and a Gentile? If yes, what is that difference?

After the 1995 Rabin assassination, Olshtein and a few friends had the idea of creating one-year *mechinot* for specially selected students, with a focus on leadership, Jewish history, the history of Zionism, and understanding the various subpopulations of Israeli society. It bothered Olshtein that in most cases, the high-performing young people in his program had never heard of Havdalah and could not make Kiddush on Friday night and, above all, that they had so little sense of themselves as inheritors of something precious. If these young people were about to give two or three years of their lives, and perhaps their very lives, to the defense of Israel, they should have some understanding of why protecting the

Jewish people justifies such a sacrifice. And he suspected Haredim could help them find an answer.

For her part, Schneider was thrilled to develop a program for some of the most idealistic Israeli youth, many of whom go on to be officers in the IDF and to hold other leadership positions in Israel. It has long been her goal to heal the fissures in Israeli society, in particular that between Haredim and secular Jews. And she felt that the way to do that was to focus on their shared inheritance of Torah. “Torah was not given in Boro Park or Meah Shearim; it was given to the entire Jewish people at Sinai”—that’s her watchword.

Once a month, the Haredi volunteers meet for several hours with participants in the *mechinot* to study texts related to essential Torah topics—Shabbat, the transmission of Torah, Creation, etc. Each *mechina* participant spends at least one Shabbos in the home of his or her Haredi study partner. And the Haredi volunteers commit to maintaining a connection during the period of their partner’s army service.

Despite some initial skepticism from parents of the *mechina* members, the program has been an overwhelming success. Twenty-four *mechinot*, with approximately 1,200 members, will be participating this year. And that rapid expansion has been entirely at the initiative of *mechinot* seeking to join the program.

But no matter how many new *mechinot* join, the places for Haredi volunteers have always been oversubscribed. The Haredi community long ago shed the isolationism it adopted in the early days of the state, when it was a tiny and beleaguered minority. (It is growing every day: 30 percent of incoming Israeli first-graders are in Haredi educational systems.)

The secular participants in the program are exposed to Jews for whom being Jewish is the greatest imaginable privilege, who are fully imbued with the belief that the Jewish people have a world-historical mission. When a Haredi volunteer shows up to a session bringing her nursing newborn with her, her study partner

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feels clearly how important the commitment, and how precious each Jewish soul, is to her.

In addition, the secular participants experience lives that derive their meaning in ways often diametrically opposed to what they are used to. Psychologists speak of two types of pleasure: hedonic (a good dinner) and eudaimonic (a generalized sense of well-being and purpose). The latter is associated with longer lives and reduced chances of dementia. In *The Power of Meaning: Finding Fulfillment in a World Obsessed with Happiness*, Emily Esfahani Smith explicates four elements among those who rank high on the eudaimonic scale: a sense of transcendence; a feeling of belonging to a community; an ability to tell a story that fashions a coherent narrative of one’s life; and finally, a feeling that one’s life has purpose.

All four are endemic to Haredi life. G-d awareness (transcendence) is instilled from an early age. The communal dimension of life, particularly prayer, and common rhythms centered on the Jewish calendar provide a sense of belonging. The belief that G-d is directing the show makes it easier to connect the events of one’s life as more than random happenstance. And finally, the recognition that G-d does not create any doubles, but has a unique mission for each of us, fills life with meaning. As a granddaughter remarked recently on the occasion of my 70th birthday: “The day you were

born is the day that G-d decided the world can no longer get along without you.”

I have focused on one organization, Keshet Yehudi, but there are many others creating the same types of deep interpersonal relationships between religious and nonobservant Jews. Just based on the organizations with which I’m familiar — Lev L’Achim, Ayelet HaShachar, Keshet Yehudi, Partners in Torah Learning — I can say that at least 10,000 secular Israeli Jews are learning weekly with a Haredi study partner or in small groups.

Or consider Be a Mensch, which began with the social demonstrations against high food prices a number of years ago, when Yehuda Shine unfurled a banner proclaiming, “Haredim and *chilonim* (secular Jews) refuse to hate one another.” He became an instant social-media star, and he and a few others began meeting weekly with senior leaders in the Israeli Scouts movement. The impact was such that the Scouts have given Be a Mensch carte blanche to set up as many meetings with teenage scout troops as they want.

The laws of family purity revolving around the laws of separation during a woman’s menstrual cycle would seem an unlikely vehicle for drawing Jews closer to Torah. Yet the rules of Israel’s Chief Rabbinate dictate that brides in Israel receive instruction in these laws before their weddings. In 2004, an organization named Lahav was created to provide precisely this kind of private, one-on-one instruction, and prior to COVID it was serving approximately 4,000 brides (and their future husbands) annually. Though initially skeptical, the nonreligious brides-to-be invariably finish their study sessions filled with effusive praise for their teachers (average rating 4.9 out of 5) and with a newfound sense that there is great wisdom in the Torah of immediate relevance to their lives. Many even express eagerness to practice the laws about which they have been learning and to continue their Torah learning.

Believing Jews are an optimistic lot. They are confident that G-d will one day bring the world to its ultimate destination (described repeatedly in the High Holy Day machzor) and that the Jewish people will be the central players in that process, no matter how bleak our prospects at any given moment.

But that confidence does not lead to passivity. For our part, we must do everything possible to ensure that no Jewish soul is left behind. There are no magic solutions — all the money and glitzy campaigns in the world cannot do it. Only touching as many Jewish souls as possible, at their root. *

PART THREE

CONTINUITY AND
JEWISH INSTITUTIONS



Russian Lessons for American Jews



IFIRST LEARNED that being Jewish had something to do with religion when I was 20 years old and a new immigrant in America. A visitor to our apartment in Golden, Colorado, explained that the U.S. government classified us as refugees because of the religious persecution we had experienced in the USSR. That sounded odd to me. *Religious* persecution? We weren't religious. We were just Jews. The persecution we experienced was antisemitic. What did religion have to do with it?

It took me nearly two decades to fully understand that conversation and to find my own path to Judaism. It was a hard journey. The first obstacle was my "religion is the opium of the people" conditioning. I squirmed at services, wondering whether the intelligent-looking people in the sanctuary took all that God-talk seriously. Lack of basic Jewish literacy, which left me feeling dumb and lost at Jewish events, was another. And then there was the failure to connect with my American-born Jewish peers. Their Jewish experiences were

about Jewish summer camps and bar mitzvahs. Mine were about getting nearly run over by a Jew-hating truck driver and figuring out which university might accept me as a Jew.

At some point I quit trying. I exchanged alienating synagogue experiences for meditation halls and yoga retreats. Instead of Hebrew psalms, I chanted Sanskrit mantras. Instead of the Torah, I studied the Buddha's path to enlightenment. I was a member of no Jewish community. And yet not once in those years did I doubt my Jewishness. Judaism might have felt foreign, but I knew exactly who I was: a Jew. If someone had asked me in those years what made me feel so certain, I might not have understood the question. My entire life had been defined by my Jewishness. What else could I possibly be?

My frustrating attempts to reconcile my Jewishness with that of my American peers will sound familiar to many in my generation of Soviet Jewish immigrants. We weren't the only ones feeling frustrated. American Jews did, too — by our apparent apathy and failure to engage. As the years wore on, many assumed that we had simply assimilated. And yet, 30 years after this immigration wave first began in America, Russian-speaking Jews, or RSJs, are still here, still identifying themselves as Jews, suggesting that some form of continuity is in place. What is it? What has sustained it? And can it benefit the broader American Jewish community?

If any Jewish group has a right to apply the "my existence is resistance" motto to itself today, it is RSJs. Soviet Jews outlasted Lenin's, Hitler's, and Stalin's "solutions" to "the Jewish problem." They survived mass slaughter (over 100,000 in the postrevolutionary violence; 2.7 million in the Holocaust), a decimation of their religious and cultural institutions, the murder of their intelligentsia, and an erasure of their collective memory. They came out of those experiences with a Jewish identity that was deeply paradoxical: secular, devoid of any ethnic content — and yet, unshakable.

Some of the “credit” for the construction of this identity goes to the Soviet state, which separated Jewishness from Judaism and defined it as nationality or ethnicity. In theory, this meant that Jews were ethnically Jewish in the same way that, say, Ukrainians were Ukrainian: an ethnic group defining itself by language, history, dress, customs and cuisine. This worked in the first decade of Soviet power, but, as historian Zvi Gitelman describes in detail, by the time the anti-cosmopolitan campaign concluded in the 1950s, Soviet Jews had lost their Jewish particularity. Growing up in the 1970s Soviet Union, I learned songs, dances, national costumes, and traditions of Moldovans, Georgians, Armenians, Uzbeks, Tajiks, Roma, and, of course, Russians. But the idea that Jews might have equivalent ethnic attributes likely never even occurred to me. By then, nothing remained of Jewish culture in public consciousness but ugly stereotypes.

Soviet Jews themselves struggled with the many paradoxes of their identity. A highly-regarded samizdat journal had a rubric titled “Who Am I?” in which Jews mulled the question. Fully acculturated, raised on Pushkin and Tolstoy, they felt as Russian as their ethnically Russian friends and colleagues. And yet, the scarlet letter of the Jewish “nationality” line in their identity papers, as well as their recognizably “Jewish faces,” permanently marked them for hate and discrimination, preventing them from assimilating. Many Soviet Jews’ experience suggested that Jewishness was akin to race: a vague yet inescapable reality whose primary marker was one’s external physical characteristics.

Even so, Soviet Jews did develop a distinct culture. For one thing, they came to view themselves as part of the intelligentsia. They understood themselves as people who collected books, read voraciously, and strove for educational and professional excellence. They were people whose children played musical instruments and spent Sundays in theater matinees. They might not have had much knowledge of Jewish culture or tradition, as historian Yaakov Ro’i has noted, but they *felt* themselves to be Jewish. They had “an existential feeling of Jewish solidarity” and “common fate,” and Jewish

For the first time in decades — possibly ever — the American Jewish community includes RSJs who explicitly say that they want to lead on the basis of their particular identity, and not only within their own communities.

pride emanating from their own and other Jews’ professional and cultural achievements. Being Jewish to them was more of a mentality and a shared interpretation of reality than a set of specific Jewish expressions.

The Jewish identity that this complicated mix of circumstances, policies, and adaptations created did not require any specifically Jewish actions to reinforce itself. It is no wonder, then, that it remained invisible to the American Jewish eye. Writing in 2016, sociologist Steven J. Gold observed that it had been only recently that Jewish scholars and community activists recognized that “while Russian-speaking Jews frequently express their Jewishness in ways at variance from the local Jewish population, they often have a stronger Jewish identity and more extensive Jewish social ties than do American Jews.”

The system that produced this identity is long gone, but some of its aspects linger, including among “generation 1.5”—today’s 30- and 40-somethings who came to America as young children. This group has imbibed both the “thin” Jewish culture of their Soviet parents and the “thicker” Jewish culture of their American-born

RSJs have no intention of letting themselves and their children fall victim to the same form of antisemitism that turned their parents into refugees.

peers. Identities that resulted from that mix have varied widely. Assimilation, undoubtedly, has had a heavy toll on many. Others, however, wanted to transmit their Jewishness to their children. They recognized that for that to happen, “feeling” Jewish was not going to be enough.

This self-selected group of RJSs wanted their children to be generally Jewishly educated. But they also wanted to transmit to them their specific Jewish stories. They wanted them to know the stories of their family members who were murdered in the Holocaust or who disappeared in Stalin’s labor camps; of their grandparents who fought as partisans in Belarus and as tank commanders in the Red Army during World War II; of their relatives who struggled for Aliyah as refuseniks. They wanted them to learn about the importance of Israel and the horrors of Communism. They wanted them to learn Russian.

When they found that no American Jewish institutions could meet these complex needs, they established their own. The language that these organizations use to describe themselves says much about the aspirations of the community they serve. For example, iMishpacha seeks “to strengthen Jewish identity, create a sense of community, and nurture future leaders through service-based learning experiences infused with Jewish values,” and it lists Jewish pride and pro-Israel advocacy among its top values and activities. The Jewish Parents Academy defines its mission as helping RSJs “take

ownership of their multilayered Russian-Jewish-American identity and become active contributors to their communities through leadership, volunteerism and philanthropy.” And Club Z is “cultivating the next generation of proud and proactive Jewish Zionist leaders” and envisions creating “a network of leaders who embrace their Jewish identity, are proud of their Jewish heritage, and address issues of bigotry and antisemitism head-on.”

The language of identity, community, volunteerism, and philanthropy may not strike third- and fourth-generation American Jews as notable, but it marks a radical departure from the RSJs’ parents’ conception of Jewishness. Even more striking is the language of leadership. For the first time in decades—possibly ever—the American Jewish community includes RSJs who explicitly say that they want to lead on the basis of their particular identity, and not only within their own communities. Irina Rakhlis, who co-founded the Jewish Parents Academy, told me that the founders’ vision was “to understand who we are,” with the ultimate goal of enabling RSJs “to sit at the bigger American Jewish communal table as educated citizens and educated community members,” rather than as people who feel that they are “not good enough or don’t know enough to contribute to the conversation about the future of the Jewish people.”

The latter point is crucial. Reconstituting and reframing their specific Jewish history has helped RSJs recognize that they have unique strengths and insights that could benefit the broader American Jewish community, including an unapologetic Zionism and a strong sense of peoplehood. Developing religious consciousness may have been hard for this group, but developing a Zionist identity has not been. These Jews know from their families’ experience how crucial it is for Jews to have a state of their own, and a million of their closest family and friends live in Israel. Wherever there is pro-Israel action today, one is likely to find RSJs among the organizers and participants.

For historical reasons, too, RSJs are motivated to fight anti-

semitism in all its forms. “In Russia there was no difference between antisemitism and anti-Zionism,” Natan Sharansky told me in a recent interview. Soviet Jews knew that Stalin’s anti-cosmopolitan campaign, the Brezhnev era’s anti-Zionist propaganda, and the neo-fascist, *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*–type antisemitism that emerged during perestroika all targeted Jews. In contrast to their American-born peers, RSJs today easily recognize Soviet propagandistic tropes in the contemporary Left’s anti-Zionist rhetoric, and they identify the danger these present to the Jews. The equation of Zionism with racism, fascism, Nazism, neo-Nazism, colonialism, and racism dates back to Soviet Cold War propaganda, whose goals had nothing to do with justice for Palestinians and everything to do with Soviet political objectives at home and abroad. RSJs are immune to progressives’ claims that anti-Zionism and antisemitism are not the same, because the state-sponsored antisemitism their families experienced was intimately intertwined with the anti-Zionism and anti-Israelism that dominated Soviet public discourse. They have no intention of letting themselves and their children fall victim to the same form of antisemitism that turned their parents into refugees.

For now, the number of RSJs who are exhibiting this level of engagement is relatively small. But they have accomplished something remarkable. Going against the general American trend over the past decade, they have “thickened” their Jewish identity, reimagined their narrative, and become committed stakeholders in their own future and the future of American Jewry as a whole.

Whether their American-born children will continue what they started is as yet unknown. But the very existence of active RSJs in the current American Jewish moment is important. They remember what it is like to be oppressed as Jews. Their experiences endow them with authentic voices and arguments with which to address some of the most crucial issues facing American Jewry today. They bring new immigrants’ wisdom and courage to the community. Significantly, they are no longer on the outside looking in.

Can they make a difference? To a considerable degree, that will depend on the willingness of Jewish communal leaders to integrate their perspectives and to bring them into positions of broader influence. Filling in the gaps in American Jewish education is also important. Here are some of the things that can and should be done:

- Get to know the rising RSJ leaders and their organizations, and start involving them in the broader American Jewish establishment.
- Develop special speaker programs to enable RSJs to communicate their families’ experiences and their lessons to broader American Jewish audiences, particularly on university campuses.
- Incorporate the history of the refuseniks’ fight for their Jewish identity and freedom, and American Jews’ support for it, into standard Jewish education curricula. Focus on collecting, preserving, and sharing this history in Jewish archives and museums. That American Jews have failed to transmit this crucial part of their history has deprived their children of crucial knowledge, experience, and role models that could serve them in the current moment. It is time to change this.
- Incorporate the teaching of the history of Soviet anti-Zionist propaganda in standard Jewish education programs on antisemitism to help erase the false dichotomy between right-wing and left-wing antisemitism. This knowledge will be crucial for preparing the next generation of American Jews to fight antisemitism in all its forms.

Those who feel skeptical about the American Jewish future would do well to remember that not so long ago, a few hundred refuseniks reimagined their Jewish identities and changed the future of millions of Soviet Jews. Could today’s RSJs—their heirs—do the same for American Jewry today? *

A Wider Door: Reimagining Conversion



THE JEWS are few in number: About 15.2 million souls. Slightly fewer than half of them live in the United States, where their population is barely growing. The reasons are complex; the Holocaust, the declining birth rate in Western countries, intermarriage, and assimilation have all played a role. The data suggest that it is becoming more common for intermarried Jews to raise their children as Jewish; still, the American Jewish population is, at most, replacing itself from one generation to the next. Jewish continuity depends on sustaining vibrant Jewish communities. To do that, we must make or find more Jews.

The whole Jewish people stands to benefit from overcoming skitishness around the topic of conversion, better understanding what draws people to Judaism, and improving the conversion process. What inspires people to embrace Judaism? What do prospective converts need as entry points and encouragement? How can Jewish communities support the social integration of converts and deepen

their engagement? And what can the experience of converts teach us about Jewish communities more broadly, about other people we are failing to notice, embrace, and engage—people sitting on the sidelines who want to be part of our communities but don't know where to start?

Increasing the number of Jews should be easy. Judaism is so vital and compelling that it can pretty much market itself, both to a growing number of converts and to unaffiliated Jews in search of community and meaning.

Why do people choose a Jewish life? As a young adult from East Lansing, Michigan, Judaism's appeal to me was clear: It offered a blueprint for a structured, intentional, ethical life that balances work and leisure, indulgence and restraint, individuality and community, *teshuvah* (repentance) and joy. It's a path that requires human, not superhuman, commitment; a path that accepts people as physical beings with natural urges for eating, sex, and rest; that welcomes independent thought; that expects people to err and try again and renew their intentions every year. These points may sound simple, but they can be revelatory for people who grew up without a good balance between aiming for goodness and accepting physicality and imperfection. Judaism offers an affirmative middle path between a culture of rigidity, self-denial, and impossibly high standards on the one hand, and aimless, chaotic license on the other.

The narrative arcs of the Torah can be enormously resonant for people who feel adrift in the 21st century. Abraham and Sarah's path from isolation to connectedness. Rebecca's leap into the unknown. The Exodus generation's move from slavery to freedom to revelation to the project of building a good society from scratch. These stories culminate not only in freedom, but also in commitment: to a new relationship with God, a new body of law, a new sense of purpose in the world. They speak profoundly to people who are struggling, overcoming hardship, seeking meaning and connection.

Who is drawn to Jewish life? Broadening our view beyond the prevailing image of the "young woman seeking to please her

prospective Jewish in-laws” reveals many other people who are seeking models of how to live thoughtfully and ethically in the context of a strong community.

These are often people who stand on life’s thresholds: twenty-somethings designing their adult lives for the first time; new parents thinking deeply about how to do well by their children; single parents who find in Judaism a means of creating a loving, orderly, fulfilling life for their families; older adults stepping back from earlier structures and renewing their search for meaning; people whose lives have been upended by personal tragedy, migration, or divorce. Judaism’s home-based, do-it-yourself elements appeal to those trying to create warm homes and rich family traditions. Judaism’s practice of partnered or small-group text study is enticing to people who are wrestling with life’s big questions.

Designing programs around what people are seeking and that demonstrate Judaism’s humane, comforting, and thought-provoking pathways through universal experiences can be our starting point, both for converts and for unaffiliated Jews, bringing many more people through our doors. We could be offering classes and study groups on relationships, parenting, grief, and healing; hosting programs drawing on secular books that embody Jewish ideas, such as Harold Kushner’s *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* or Wendy Mogel’s *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee*; or drawing attention to popular practices like the “tech Shabbat,” taking a weekly break from technology. In 2010, about 200,000 people strolled through Sukkah City—an assembly of creatively envisioned sukkot scattered throughout Manhattan’s Union Square—exploring ideas of shelter, environment, and impermanence through a Jewish lens. Given that camp and nursery school are necessities for many families, what would it look like to open more Jewish camps and nursery schools to non-Jewish children? Don’t reduce the Jewish content—just open the doors and see who wants to enter. What treasures from Jewish tradition can we offer the wider public, knowing that for some, this may spur a deeper exploration of Judaism or set them on a path to conversion?

What treasures from Jewish tradition can we offer the wider public, knowing that for some, this may spur a deeper exploration of Judaism or set them on a path to conversion?

Prospective converts’ initial encounters with rabbis and synagogues tend to feel very high-stakes. The motivations for conversion are often momentous, raw, and deeply private, and it is hard to go public about one’s intention to change a foundational piece of one’s identity. Social anxiety is also high: Who will my people be? Will this new group accept me? How do I avoid embarrassment? At the same time, the exclusive, inward-looking character of Jewish communities can make it hard to enter a synagogue for the first time. Sincere seekers can get scared off easily.

We need a broad variety of accessible, low-key entry points into Jewish communities. I admire the numerous “Introduction to Judaism” classes that synagogues, Jewish learning institutes, Chabad, and other organizations run. But I feel some unease about relying on them as the primary path to conversion—not everyone has the time, transportation, child care, or financial resources to take advantage of yearlong conversion courses. Moreover, Judaism is a religion of *doing*, with practices that pervade daily life and require a lot of individual initiative. Highly structured, all-encompassing, rabbi-led “Introduction to Judaism” courses seem like an awkward fit for Judaism as it is lived day by day. Many people are riveted by the complexity of Judaism, its lay-led communities, and its relative lack of doctrine. How can outreach and the conversion process be made to capture this bottom-up spirit?

I feel lucky that my own conversion process mimicked what Jews

actually *do*: I attended services regularly (switching between a regular minyan and a learners' minyan), took a Hebrew class, went to Shabbat dinners and evening lectures, read a lot, and used the rabbi mainly as a resource and a sounding board. I appreciated the dignity of designing my own syllabus; it pushed me to develop my own Shabbat, kashrut, and davening practices, instead of treating Judaism as an academic subject that I studied once a week. It also helped me meet more people who were actively practicing Judaism than I would have met if I had focused only on an "Introduction to Judaism" course and a learners' minyan.

Some of the biggest challenges facing converts (and many people on the margins of Jewish life) are not educational or spiritual, but social. Those who embrace Jewish life are told, "Don't try to be Jewish alone," but not everyone has this choice. Adult converts often struggle with a limited Jewish social network, especially compared with peers who grew up in synagogues, day schools, Jewish camps, and Hillel. Even those who grew up Jewish but outside these networks can find social integration rough.

All who embark on Jewish living as adults, whether or not they're converts, have similar social needs. Synagogues can adopt creative initiatives such as "Shabbat clusters," which bring together small groups of four to six households that commit to celebrating Shabbat together several times over the course of a year. Shabbat clusters foster authentic relationships that strengthen over time. They can be engineered for similar ages, interests, and levels of observance, or be intentionally heterogeneous. Another practice that helps converts, new community members, and those who live alone is to turn the post-Saturday, morning service kiddush into a full, leisurely lunch to give people a chance to break bread together every week. The consistency of social engagement with roughly the same group of people fosters deep, real relationships.

There is an elephant in the room, which I've saved for the end. The ways in which Jewish communal organizations have traditionally promoted continuity — prizing marriage and especially endogamy

and creating dense Jewish social networks — can feel exclusionary to converts and prospective converts, as well as to Jews from diverse or less traditional backgrounds. Where do converts fit in a vision of Jewish peoplehood that emphasizes hereditary Jewish identity, generational continuity, and ethnic pride? As converts settle into Jewish communities, they often encounter some boorish behavior, ranging from the trivial (no one says hello) to the tenaciously prejudicial (such as the idea that conversion is unnatural and people who want to become Jewish are emotionally insecure, flighty, or weird). It may be time to reevaluate our messaging. Where might our focus on building strong in-groups be making it more difficult for those outside to find a way in?

Rethinking how we reach out to prospective converts is a multifaceted challenge. We need to paint a richer picture of who is drawn to Judaism, connect with them in more creative ways, and articulate a vision of Jewish peoplehood that embraces *all* who wish to be part of Jewish life, wherever and whoever they are. The programs that appeal to non-Jews who are curious about Judaism will also appeal to Jews who are unengaged but curious. Talking more openly about the logistical and financial challenges that many people face in trying to get involved in synagogue or communal life will make Jewish institutions more accessible to all. Prioritizing the social integration of those who are new or otherwise on the margins will enrich all our institutions, making them places that are more vibrant, innovative, and welcoming.

Many souls will be touched by the beauty of Judaism and Jewish community. The more we can find ways to bring new people into lives of Jewish meaning, purpose, and connection, the stronger the future of the Jewish people will be. *

Saving Jewish Organizations from Themselves



COMPARED with the railway systems of most advanced nations, Amtrak, America's intercity railway system reflects a pathetic reality. Sitting somewhere between private business and government service, and taking the worst aspects of each, Amtrak simply hasn't kept up—neither technologically nor in meeting evolving human needs nor with smart economics. What business is Amtrak in? Its masters are in government, the marketplace, the capital markets—everyone, that is, except the passengers it is designed to serve.

How analogous this is to the performance of American Jewish institutions, so many of which stalled out on the local tracks long ago, while the Jewish population simply left the station. Without fundamental changes, the institutions that shape American Jewish life will not only fail to thrive—they may close their doors entirely. The future of Jewish life in America depends on our

ability to confront the weaknesses of our system honestly and to invest in and incentivize organizational change in whatever ways we can.

We need to understand why, for example, so many shrinking congregations choose to slowly go out of business before considering merging with adjacent congregations. Why are supply and demand in Jewish education so misaligned, with local bureaus of Jewish education closing even as Jewish leaders call for more and better educational opportunities? Why do we have essentially zero infrastructure for supporting extraordinary Jewish talent in arts, culture, and the humanities? And why is it that not one of the top 50 places to work in the nonprofit sector is a Jewish organization?

This is especially disappointing given that we have a large body of knowledge about what differentiates dynamic and successful organizations that can successfully adapt to contemporary needs from those that cannot. World-class organizations operate with a functioning double helix: There is crystal clarity and alignment between mission, vision, and annual operating plans. They boast deep alignment between governance, management, and staff. They are user-centered and adapt frequently to meet a rapidly changing environment. The (rare) successful examples in the Jewish communal landscape follow the models of entrepreneurs who know how to refocus a mission, realign a program, create new governance structures, collaborate or merge when necessary, and otherwise meet emerging needs with creativity and adaptability.

Why aren't more Jewish organizations like this—robust, resilient, and relevant?



Jewish organizations began coalescing into the current system around the turn of the 20th century. The tremendous needs presented by the 2 million Jewish immigrants who arrived on American shores between 1881 and 1921 led to an unprecedented

proliferation of Jewish organizations. Federations soon emerged to rationalize communal life, consolidating fundraising, conducting centralized planning, and using data to inform allocations. As American social work became more professionalized, Jewish community leaders, too, sought more strategic and scientific approaches to philanthropy and service delivery.

Yet many factors militated against nurturing organizational behaviors that would have assured the long-term success of these or any of the legacy organizations now celebrating their centennials, such as the Anti-Defamation League (to fight antisemitism), Hadassah (to build up the Jewish settlements of the Yishuv, especially when it came to health care for women and children), HIAS (managing the flow of Jewish refugees to the United States), or the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (a response to the humanitarian fallout of World War I).

These organizations (and many others) were designed as mobilizations with a specific set of objectives that, once met, would lead to their closing. They were enormously successful for a period, but their success relied on a set of conditions that largely no longer prevail, which puts their future in jeopardy: They were nurtured by a generation of Jews who were strongly identified both as Jews and with Israel; they were gravely concerned with local antisemitism and global Jewish insecurity; they abided by an ethic of collective responsibility; and there was little competition for their donors' generosity or volunteer time. All this at a time when the great American museums, hospitals, and universities didn't want Jews at their board tables and were not interested in Jewish money.

All aspects of this landscape have changed. In a world of complex identities, Jewishness is, at best, only a part of the way that most Jews identify themselves. While antisemitism mutates and persists, Jews generally continue to enjoy incredible access and success in America. Young adults' connection to Israel is more tenuous and under great strain. Collective responsibility seems a quaint notion in a time of individualism and universalism. And Jews have been

Far too many Jewish organizations lack the core elements that support organizational flexibility and success: strong board governance, healthy staff cultures, and data-informed decision-making.

discovered: Every major arts, health-care, and higher education institution benefits greatly from engaging Jewish donors.

Jewish organizations have not adapted to these changed circumstances. The very success they enjoyed in the past has blinded them to the ways in which adaptation is necessary for future thriving. Far too many Jewish organizations lack the core elements that support organizational flexibility and success: strong board governance, healthy staff cultures, and data-informed decision-making. The communities these institutions are supposed to serve are the stakeholders who come last on the priority list.

Those of us on the funding side have to be honest about our role in fostering dysfunction—and our responsibility for, instead, promoting excellence.

Foundations and key donors bring their own agendas to organizations, forcing organizations to contend with conflicting and often contradictory demands that limit their effectiveness in an increasingly competitive environment.

Boards also need to step up. Too many board members identify their appointment to a Jewish board as a reward for their social and economic status, rather than as stewardship of a sacred communal asset. They treat membership casually, with attendance, punctuality, and preparation optional. What makes their behavior

The assumption that leaders can simply ‘know’ their constituents seems far-fetched.

They would be better positioned to fulfill their purposes if they observed and listened to the diverse communities they serve.

on Jewish organizational boards suboptimal, when they are, no doubt, behaving quite differently on the boards of major hospitals, public companies, and museums? Simply put, they see the Jewish community as an extension of their family life, not their corporate life. Dysfunction and misbehavior are more acceptable in a personal context than in a corporate one.

The “family” spirit might work for fundraising, but it has many downsides. Boards need to be serious and professional: They need governance and nominating chairs who are constantly seeking to upgrade their bylaws and operating rules; they need term limits and the fresh thinking that new members can bring; they need to hold directors accountable; and they need limits on the size of the board. Newer, smaller organizations need to strive for best practices as well. Social entrepreneurs often rely too closely on a founding “friends and family” board, which often offers little pushback to the entrepreneur’s vision and little actual governance. CEOs and board allies need to be in true partnership to build cultures that take board service seriously.

The sense of family also leads many leaders to pride themselves on “knowing” an organization’s market on a gut level, believing that every Jew is somehow just like them, rather than using actual research and data to drive decision-making. In truth, many boards

(and even C-suite leaders) look very little like the communities they are designed to serve: They are older, wealthier, more male, more conservative, and more embedded in traditional Jewish life and institutions. Thus, the assumption that leaders can simply “know” their constituents seems far-fetched. They would be better positioned to fulfill their purposes if they observed and listened to the diverse communities they serve.

Organizations also need to develop best-in-class staff cultures if they are going to thrive. A recent study of the highest-performing American nonprofit organizations delineated the elements that staff reported as being necessary to their resilience and success, including feeling valued by their employer, supported by their supervisors, having confidence in institutional leadership, believing that the organization values quality, and understanding the organization’s long-term strategy.

Do these conditions exist for staff in Jewish organizations? We barely know. The fact that we’ve only recently started asking is itself part of the problem. In 2014, recognizing that Jewish nonprofits needed to focus attention on the issue of “talent,” several major Jewish foundations and Federations created Leading Edge, the first national Jewish initiative dedicated to acquiring and retaining professional and volunteer talent for Jewish organizations. One of Leading Edge’s first priorities has been to understand Jewish organizational culture through annual Employee Experience Surveys, whose results it then aggregates and publishes. The last report, from 2019, was based on data from 11,400 employees (of approximately 73,000 in the field) from 182 organizations. Learning about employee satisfaction (or lack thereof) has real results: Organizations that take the survey repeatedly score better over time, and the more times an organization takes the survey, the better its scores. Data matter.

The mantra of organizational excellence is *focus, alignment, and intensity*. What does this look like in practice? See, for example, the organization in sixth place on the Nonprofit Top 50 Places to Work list, Musicians on Call (MoC), which delivers

in-person and virtual performances at the bedsides of patients in hospitals and health-care facilities. MoC embraces the connection between mission and performance. Quarterly board meetings utilize a dashboard that, while starting with financials, goes far beyond them to understand the quarter's performance. Every board member is accountable for committee work throughout the quarter, and board members who do not fulfill their range of responsibilities to the organization (including a \$50,000 give-or-get financial commitment) know that they won't be renominated. They understand that accountability and responsibility go hand in hand. Staff are energized by a demanding environment that boasts clarity of purpose and a near-daily set of metrics to chart their progress.



The pandemic has offered every organization a moment of opportunity to recalibrate. In so many ways, “the way we always do things” had to be changed overnight. The breathtaking emergency response—the rapid collaboration of Jewish foundations and of so many organizations, the conversion of Federation parking lots into food-distribution centers, the near-immediate development of online capabilities for program delivery—must now be followed by a period of organizational reimagination.

We now know that many organizations can change if they need to, and that others cannot. The opportunity in front of us is to follow up on what we've learned and to take the challenge of communal continuity seriously. We must avoid the pitfalls of Amtrak: We need to align our missions and visions, and hold our governance bodies, management, and staff accountable for measurable progress. Where serious change needs to happen—whether through restructuring, mergers, changes in leadership, or in programming—we need to have the courage and the creativity to embrace it.

Jewish history is full of stories of amazing resilience. New challenges and opportunities have led, over and over again, to radical

changes in Jewish communal life, driven by life-affirming Jewish values. This past should reassure us that change is possible yet again. The challenges of the current moment require us to embrace the double helix of vision, mission, and our human resources. Our memories will never exceed our dreams. We can—and we must—adapt. *

Summing Up



ASSIMILATION, antisemitism, intermarriage, apathy, and ignorance: These, historically, have been the threats to the Jewish people. Once you ignore the déclassé connotations of the term “continuity,” acquired due to communal overuse in the 1990s, and once you widen the lens beyond, say, current debates about whether wanting more Jewish children to be born is inherently sexist, it becomes clear that continuity is the underlying purpose of all Jewish communal efforts. We educate, inspire, and engage; we embrace, include, and welcome; we criticize, condemn, and exclude; we advocate, defend, and argue: all in the service of ensuring that the Jewish people live on.

Let’s not forget that as with all crises, *continuity crises* beget opportunities. Take intermarriage. The hue and cry following the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey’s finding that 52 percent of Jews who had married in the prior five years had married non-Jews (a percentage that’s only growing) gave rise to unprecedented efforts to embrace and include non-Jews in Jewish communal life, and to encourage interfaith families to raise their children Jewishly. This has had results: Pew 2020 reports increases in the percentage

of children of intermarriages being raised Jewishly. Forty-seven percent of 18- to 49-year-olds with one Jewish parent identify as Jewish, while only 21 percent of those raised in earlier generations do.

The Jewish people have survived because of our ability to adapt to new circumstances while retaining a connection, in some form, to the past. The trick is to balance “tradition and change,” as Mordecai Waxman’s classic book about Conservative Judaism put it.

Most American Jews grasp the change part of the equation. The creative response to intermarriage is just one of many examples. But as many of the authors in this volume argue, the balance has tipped too far from tradition, toward the abandonment of both Jewish practice and Jewish knowledge. Without content—Jewish text, history, wisdom, and behaviors of whatever sort—what keeps us Jewish? What binds us to other Jews, if we have no shared language, shared mentality, shared sense of connection to one another?

The articles in this issue are freighted with concern, but I see them as ultimately optimistic. The authors know that Jews have survived much worse, and they sketch out prescriptions and policies to create confident, knowledgeable Jews, varied in background and practice, who can, with resilience and adaptability, still chart a path into the future.



BRET STEPHENS warns that the principal challenge to Jewish continuity in the United States is no longer internal. A cultural upheaval, no less fundamental than the one that swept America in the 1960s, risks shaking the pillars on which Jewish security and success in America have long rested. Race has replaced ethnicity as the primary marker of identity, shunting a majority of American Jews into a racial category that erases our particularity. Individual merit based on excellence is being stigmatized as “privilege” based on systemic injustice, putting Jewish prosperity in the ideological crosshairs. Independent thinking is increasingly being treated as a

form of heresy. And conspiracy thinking is going mainstream, on both sides of the political spectrum. “A nation that can bring itself to believe anything about anything,” Stephens writes, “will, sooner or later, have little trouble believing the worst about Jews.”

DANIEL GORDIS argues that content—“a sense of shared vocabulary, concepts, narratives, and practices”—fuels appreciation for the richness of Jewish civilization, creates a “thick sense of Jewish peoplehood,” and provides the necessary context for understanding contemporary Jewish and Israeli life. Gordis offers several prescriptions for revitalizing American Jewish life through content: adopting the Mizrahi Israeli model of embracing a life anchored by commitment, with reverence for tradition rather than obedience to it; the creation of a shared curriculum that Jews across the world, and of all backgrounds, can engage with regularly; a radical reconception of Jewish leadership, rabbinic and otherwise, with much more rigorous educational standards; and, as he says, the “genuine grit” to acknowledge that our current educational system has failed. Without reinvention, he warns, American Jewish communities are headed for oblivion.

ELLIOT J. COSGROVE asks whether it is possible, in a country of vanishing religiosity, to have Jewish continuity without Judaism. Emancipation, enlightenment, and freedom have allowed Jews to opt in or out of Jewish identity, and an increasing number of American Jews consider themselves “Jews of no religion,” relying instead on cultural or ethnic markers of identity. Cosgrove does not believe that this type of identity can be sustained over generations. “It is only by way of mitzvot, the positive acts of Jewish identification, the language and behaviors of the Jewish religion, that Judaism will survive.” He calls for “a cross-communal effort to recover and reclaim the language and practice of mitzvot” that requires reinvigorated vehicles for transmission of Jewish knowledge, inspiring explorations of life’s existential questions through a Jewish

frame, and “communal reinforcement”—the building of strong, interconnected communities—to “make it all stick.”

IZABELLA TABAROVSKY draws our attention to the unique model that Russian-speaking Jews (RSJs) can offer for building a Jewish identity grounded in pride and peoplehood. The combination of the Soviet Union’s ferocious antisemitism and its treatment of Jews as a distinct nationality prevented Jewish assimilation, even as the state outlawed most forms of religious practice. When RSJs were finally able to emigrate en masse, they took with them their strong Jewish identity, their web of Jewish social ties, and their indelible connection to Israel. Today, as they both build their own initiatives and assume leadership roles in mainstream Jewish organizations, RSJs can offer “unique strengths and insights” to the broader community, including an ability to see through propagandistic anti-Zionist rhetoric, much of which draws on old Soviet tropes. Tabarovsky recommends tapping into this well of intellectual and human capital, while better incorporating the Russian Jewish story into Jewish education, as part of the recipe for Jewish continuity in America.

Novelist **HOWARD JACOBSON** writes with an audience of Jewish university students in mind. He dissects contemporary antisemitic stereotypes, above all those relating to Israel, offering a new guide to the ideologically perplexed, a model of pride and pragmatism. “Insist on your primary right to be believed,” he urges young Jews, when they encounter antisemitism. And do not adopt a “supine, conciliatory” stance—the “I am not responsible for Israel’s actions” approach—that “implicitly concedes the case against Israel.” Jacobson demonstrates that, whatever Israel’s flaws, attacks on it are so far beyond rational critique that one can no longer see them as outside the historic tradition of the vilification of Jews.

ANNIKA HERNROTH-ROTHSTEIN describes the lengths to which engaged European Jews go to preserve Jewish life on a continent

where they experience antisemitism as a pervasive force in everyday life. Eighty-nine percent of Jews in a recent EU study felt that antisemitism had increased in their country over the past five years, leading nearly 40 percent of them to consider emigration. For people living in fear, even in some ways in hiding, “Jewish observance is an act of rebellion....Constantly fighting for your identity means constantly affirming your identity.” Hernroth-Rothstein is no longer worried for the Jews of Europe, who will leave if they must. The real tragedy is Europe, which once again failed to absorb from the Jews a model for a healthy engagement with faith, identity, tradition, nationalism, and peoplehood. “I do not weep for the Jews of Europe, I weep for Europe itself,” she concludes, writing from her new home in Ghana.

As a leader of a major Israeli civic organization, **EILON SCHWARTZ** offers a vision for the Israeli future based on a “politics of the common good” that brings profoundly different kinds of people together to create a society that “works, well enough, for all of us.” In any heterogeneous society, such a politics can be built only on an acceptance of “deep diversity” and an abandonment of the assumption that others will, one day, convert to one’s worldview. Schwartz is speaking, in particular, to his own community of Western liberals, whose “fundamentalist liberalism” too often begets not progress, but angry backlash. As an alternative—one that can serve as a model for the United States as well—he describes the ways that Israelis of widely different backgrounds are acknowledging the validity of other views, embracing rather than flattening cultural differences, and building authentic personal relationships that are not conditional on ideological agreement. Bringing a “less confident, more curious posture toward what needs to be done” in society is not only pragmatic; it is also more generous, gracious, and humane.

The Haredi writer **JONATHAN ROSENBLUM** also prescribes cross-cultural connections as necessary for Jewish continuity,

describing successful initiatives in Israel that are bringing together Haredi and nonreligious Jews to learn without an expectation of conversion. The future of the Jewish people, Rosenblum argues, depends both on more Jews of all backgrounds engaging with Jewish content, and on strengthening bonds of Jewish peoplehood through more Jews connecting to one another. Even beyond the Jewish particulars, Rosenblum argues that exposure to Haredi life can offer important lessons for human continuity. Haredi societies rank high, he notes, in the measures of eudaimonic happiness: a sense of transcendence, a place in a community, and the knowledge that life has both coherence and purpose.

DARCY R. FRYER tackles the critical issue of conversion. Stereotypes about converts and “skittishness” about conversion must be overcome, she argues, not only because increased rates of conversion would help to mitigate existential fears about the Jewish future, but also because there are so many more souls and lives that could be touched by Jewish beliefs, wisdom, and community. She suggests creating programs based on universal human needs; opening the doors widely to all, even in Jewish educational institutions and summer camps; and addressing the real financial, logistical, social, and emotional challenges to conversion. Doing so will build Jewish communities that are more welcoming not only to prospective and newly converted Jews but also to so many Jews sitting on the margins of Jewish life.

LIEL LEIBOVITZ takes stock of the contemporary cultural moment. “The mad howls drawing out rational discourse,” he writes, mark an “epochal upheaval,” dividing the world into “us vs. them.” Zionists and anti-Zionists serve as a shorthand for two competing worldviews: communitarian versus individualist; and “family, faith, and nation” versus disdain for tradition, family, America, and Israel. To survive, he argues, “you must stand with your people.” He offers seven pillars for building strong Jewish communities that can last

far into the future. Among them: “Think small” by building decentralized, intimate, local communities united by Jewish knowledge, even if Jewish practice looks different from place to place. Ignore the haters, especially online. Stop seeking the approval of those who disdain the Jews, and embrace those who love them — even if the latter group is very different from the American elite. Learn and practice Judaism in whatever way works for you. And take care of, and invest in, the professionals who are taking care of the community, to enable them to do their jobs more effectively, easily, creatively, and joyfully.

JEFFREY R. SOLOMON’s diagnosis of the maladies afflicting Jewish organizations rests on insights derived from a long career in Jewish communal service, including decades in Jewish philanthropy. Jewish continuity in America requires resilient, robust, and adaptable Jewish institutions. Yet even with widely available knowledge about how to build high-performing nonprofits, Jewish organizations fall short. This is due in large part to the tricky dynamic whereby a spirit of “family” tends to guide communal work, which can also lead to too much familiarity, incorrect assumptions (why use data to guide decisions when we “know” our own audience so well?), and dysfunction. Board members need to take their roles more seriously and implement better governance policies. Executives need to understand, inspire, and take better care of their employees. And decision-making must be informed by data. The pandemic laid bare the weaknesses of Jewish organizations as well as the opportunities before them.

To survive, Solomon concludes, echoing generations of Jewish leaders, “we can — and we must — adapt.” *

MOSES RECEIVED TORAH AT SINAI, AND TRANSMITTED
IT TO JOSHUA, JOSHUA TO THE ELDERS, AND
THE ELDERS TO THE PROPHETS, AND THE PROPHETS
TO THE MEMBERS OF THE GREAT ASSEMBLY.
THEY SAID THREE THINGS: BE PATIENT IN
[THE ADMINISTRATION OF] JUSTICE, RAISE MANY
DISCIPLES, AND MAKE A FENCE AROUND THE TORAH.

— PIRKEI AVOT 1:1

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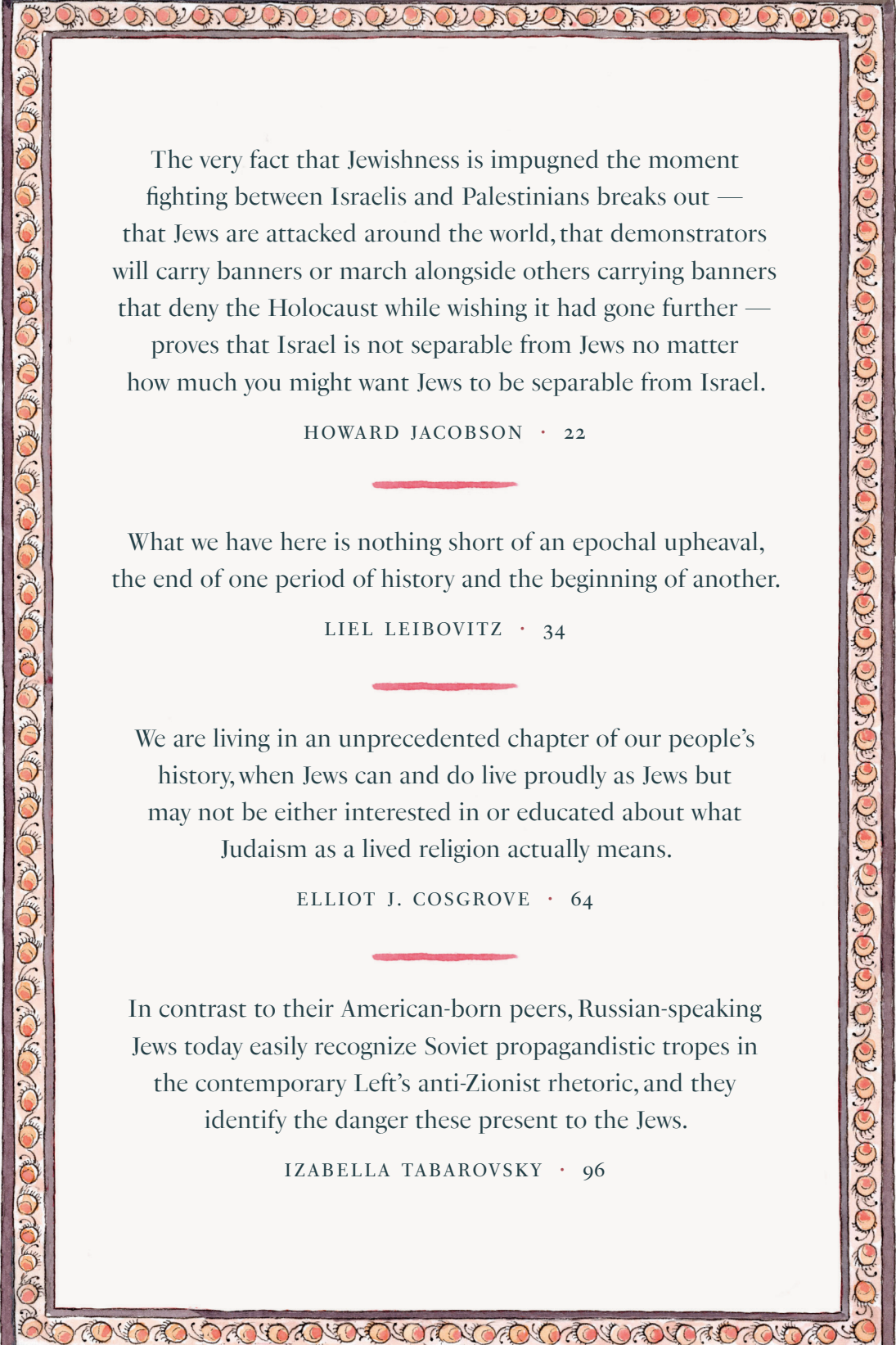


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וַיִּרְאוּ אֶת אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַתִּחַת
רַגְלָיו כַּמַּעֲשֵׂה לְבִנְתָּהּ הַסִּפִּיר
וּכְעֶצֶם הַשָּׁמַיִם לְטָהָר:

— שמות כד:י



The very fact that Jewishness is impugned the moment fighting between Israelis and Palestinians breaks out — that Jews are attacked around the world, that demonstrators will carry banners or march alongside others carrying banners that deny the Holocaust while wishing it had gone further — proves that Israel is not separable from Jews no matter how much you might want Jews to be separable from Israel.

HOWARD JACOBSON • 22

What we have here is nothing short of an epochal upheaval, the end of one period of history and the beginning of another.

LIEL LEIBOVITZ • 34

We are living in an unprecedented chapter of our people's history, when Jews can and do live proudly as Jews but may not be either interested in or educated about what Judaism as a lived religion actually means.

ELLIOT J. COSGROVE • 64

In contrast to their American-born peers, Russian-speaking Jews today easily recognize Soviet propagandistic tropes in the contemporary Left's anti-Zionist rhetoric, and they identify the danger these present to the Jews.

IZABELLA TABAROVSKY • 96