

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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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.

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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. *

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