

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