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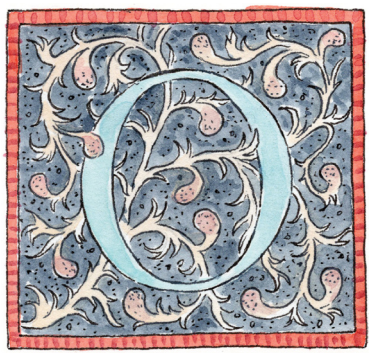
The Promise of Something Better

What the end of the postwar era portends



CTOBER 7 and its aftermath rang down the final curtain on the postwar era in American Jewish history, a period that saw Jews improve their lot decade by decade, rising by every measure: socially, economically, politically, and culturally. The Jewish religion, too, rose in status during this period, especially once the nation's self-definition as "Christian" gave way to "Judeo-Christian" and the notion of a tri-faith America — Protestant-Catholic-Jew — achieved mainstream acceptance. Postwar America became home to the largest Jewish community by far in the Diaspora, now more than 17 times the size of its nearest rival (France) and only a little smaller than the Jewish community of Israel. Jews who had lived for centuries in the rest of the world, especially Eastern Europe, Iran, the Arab world, and Latin America, fled to the United States and Israel

during the postwar era, seeking security, freedom, and opportunity.

While American Jewry's status and numbers were rising, anti-Jewish discrimination as well as other forms of anti-Jewish hatred in the United States were subsiding. By the 1990s, most of my students at Brandeis told me that they *never* had personally experienced antisemitism; they had only heard about it from their grandparents. One former student wrote a book titled *The Death of American Antisemitism*, published in 2000, the year Democratic Senator Joseph Lieberman became the first Jew—a practicing Orthodox Jew, no less—ever chosen as a vice presidential candidate by a major American political party.

Disturbing signs of change began to appear early in the 21st century. The horrors of September 11, 2001, resulted in an unexpected surge of antisemitism. Although many at the time dismissed as extreme and marginal the claims that Jews and Israel had mysteriously received advanced warning about 9/11 or were secretly responsible for the attacks, we can recognize them today as a rehearsal for the tactics of inversion that would reappear with a vengeance after October 7. In the 22-year span between these two events, the shared script was to insist that Jewish power, rather than hatred of Jews, was to blame for mass violence.

This very familiar anti-Jewish energy continued to pick up steam unbeknownst to many, but not to all. As early as 2002, Harvard University's Jewish president, Larry Summers, warned of "disturbing evidence of an upturn in antisemitism globally and . . . closer to home." He saw germinating, likely on his own campus, what many others did not. Subsequent years saw waves of peaks and declines in antisemitic acts. But ever since the shouts of "Jews will not replace us" at the 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville and the massacre at

Pittsburgh's Tree of Life Synagogue in 2018, things have only gotten worse. Today, practically every synagogue and Jewish institution in America has developed or updated security procedures, locked its entrances, and quietly prepared for active-shooter threats such as the daylong hostage crisis at Congregation Beth Israel in Colleyville, Texas, in 2022, or the truck ramming of Temple Israel in West Bloomfield, Michigan, in 2026. Instead of shocking the country into following a different direction, these and other antisemitic events have spawned admirers and would-be copycats.

The situation has not been without comedic relief or, perhaps more accurately, commentary. *Eretz Nehederet* (Hebrew for "A Wonderful Country"), Israel's version of *Saturday Night Live*, captured the current dynamic in a now-viral sketch featuring Jennifer, a bubbly American Jew, and Eli, a wizened secular Israeli, who run into each other at Ben-Gurion Airport, Jennifer immigrating and Eli emigrating. In braided dialogue, they thank their study of Jewish history for teaching them that "when it's time to leave…one morning you wake up and you realize it's not the same country you grew up in." Eli, apparently recalling the rockets that rained down on him in Israel, laments that "it's no longer safe for us to live here." Jennifer, referencing the New York City mayoral election, responds that where she lives is "not safe for Jews anymore." Each thinks the other is crazy.

Leaving Eli aside, the fascinating element for an American viewer is that Jennifer decides to immigrate to Israel because she feels unsafe in New York. Until the 21st century, American Jews generally made aliyah for religious, ideological, or economic reasons but rarely, if ever, out of fear. Israelis who did employ scare tactics to encourage aliyah (as a teacher of mine did years ago) were met with laughter and derision. Now, journalists regularly point to "concern about rising antisemitism" to explain why inquiries from American Jews about moving abroad have risen. The actual number of American immi-

grants remains small (about 3,500 in 2025), but the 80 percent rise in inquiries to Nefesh B'Nefesh, which supports aliyah efforts, buttresses the claim that the postwar era is over.

A brilliant cover story by Franklin Foer in *The Atlantic*, "The Golden Age of American Jews Is Ending," rings even more truthfully today than it did when it was published two years ago. Surging antisemitism and anti-Zionism, Foer argues, reflect the collapse of the whole liberal order that made America attractive to postwar Jews in the first place. The "distinct strain of liberalism" that Jews espoused and helped to shape — one that combined defense of civil liberties, protection of minority rights (including the rights of Jews), and an ethos of pluralism — made that "Golden Age" possible. The belief that Judaism and Americanism reinforce each other, the two traditions converging in a common path (what I once called "the cult of synthesis in American Jewish life"), led Jews to believe that Jewish religious values and liberal American values were synonymous, while antisemitism and anti-black racism were dangerous and un-American.

Today, the end of American Jewry's Golden Age is likewise synonymous with the end of America's postwar liberal consensus. Growing numbers on the political Left and Right scorn concepts — including equal opportunity, merit, and cosmopolitanism — that Americans have long held dear. These emerging centers of gravity also look askance at the once venerated American and Jewish values of neutrality, objectivity, color-blindness, and tolerance. On both sides of the spectrum, many fall prey to conspiracy theories that blame scapegoats — Israel, immigrants, colonial oppressors, Epstein, Soros, and, inevitably, Jews — for all of the nation's ills. Surging antisemitism and anti-Zionism, Foer reminds us, are symptoms of a society in danger. They reflect, he warns, "the decay of democratic habits, a leading indicator of rising authoritarianism."

Young Jews on college campuses feel the demise of the postwar

era with particular intensity. While their parents and grandparents gloried in the new opportunities that the era opened up to them after discrimination in housing, education, employment, and leisure was outlawed, they themselves now confront overt discrimination from fellow students, biased faculty, or ideologically hostile diversity officers. Sympathetic as many of them are to increasing the opportunities for marginalized groups, they feel dismayed when they themselves are marginalized in the process and when people prejudiced against them are gaslighting them into thinking that antisemitism couldn't possibly happen in 21st-century America. It's as surreal as it is real. Academia has become the most pronounced site of what Jacob Savage has chronicled as "the erasure of Jews from American life," with the percentage of elite American academics under 30 who are Jewish dropping from about 21 percent back when I was hired to only 4 percent today. The number of Jewish editors at the *Harvard Law Review* declined by about 50 percent in a single decade. The percentage of self-identifying Jewish students at Harvard is actually lower, Savage reports, than in the dark days of the school's Jewish quota. (In the past decade, that percentage has declined by 50 percent.) Parallel declines have characterized many other Ivy League schools, with the honorable exceptions of Brown and Dartmouth. Practically no Jews win MacArthur Fellowships anymore—something that, as recently as 2019, was utterly commonplace. Jewish-authored books have trouble finding publishers and winning book prizes. Young Jews have even been excluded from leadership within liberal organizations such as the American Civil Liberties Union that their parents and grandparents helped to create.

Unsurprisingly, the end of the postwar era has alarmed many Jews. Some, like *Eretz Nehederet*'s Jennifer, ask themselves whether it is time to leave. History provides no shortage of examples to justify such concerns. Anyone who grew up with stories of relatives who left Europe

"just in time" — or did not and "paid the price" — must at least be thinking about a contingency plan if their darkest fears come to pass.

America, however, is not Europe. And Jews are far from the only minority in the United States today to feel targeted and frightened. There are also numerous examples of persecuted Americans — Catholics, Mormons, and Chinese immigrants in the 19th century, German and Japanese immigrants in the 20th — who rebounded, experiencing new life and fresh vigor without having to pull up stakes and start life anew someplace else. One suspects that many of the Jews who support Pennsylvania Governor Josh Shapiro for the 2028 Democratic presidential nomination see in him the promise of just such a rebound.

America has long oscillated between periods of revolutionary change and eras of restoration that saw some of the change rolled back. The American Revolution was followed, under John Adams, by the Alien and Sedition Acts. The Civil War and Reconstruction were partially reversed by the Redeemers and Jim Crow laws that worked against many equal rights and integrationist policies. Mass immigration and the celebration of immigrants were followed, after World War I, by cruel restrictions, the Prohibition amendment, and Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer's raids on "radicals," all of which looked to restore America, turning it back into the kind of society it had been in 1890, before mass immigration. Making America great again is something of an American pastime.

Significantly, every restorationist era in America's past subsequently gave way to the renewal of American freedom — most famously Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal and the Great Society policies of Lyndon B. Johnson. Whether the future repeats history's cycle of two steps forward, one step back remains to be seen, but

anyone looking to learn from history must keep that possibility in mind. As Martin Luther King Jr. liked to observe, echoing abolitionist preacher Theodore Parker, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

In the meantime, the Jewish community is understandably turning inward, "choosing continuity over social acceptance," as Mijal Bitton has recently put it in these pages. Key to this strategy, which she associates with the Sephardic tradition of the Middle East and North Africa, is also the energy radiating from "the surge," the so-called October 8 Jews who have turned or returned to Jewish life in response to the horrors of October 7. The young Jewish leaders waging today's fight against antisemitism at major universities; the Jews who have flocked to Jewish institutions over the past two years to align publicly with their own people; the unprecedented number of post–October 7 converts to Judaism, many of them Christian spouses of Jews who, in defiance of persecution, seek to embrace their partner's faith; the grassroots leaders battling antisemitism in workplaces, civic arenas, schools, higher education, and the cultural sphere and building new Jewish communities; the adult Jewish learners who throng courses about Jews and Israel; the parents who switch their children into Jewish day schools and summer camps; the college students who crowd into Hillel and Chabad houses; and the multitudes who have visited or plan to visit Israel since the hour of its tragedy — all show by their actions that Jews need not be merely passive victims of antisemitism and discrimination. They can respond through a combination of Jewish pride, resilience, and defiance. Fostering "surging" Jews, history suggests, will prove more effective in the long term than fighting incorrigible enemies.

Turning inward and shoring up inner resources reflect Jewish muscle memory, recalling what Jews have successfully done during

previous bouts of antisemitism. In the late 19th century, for example, anti-Jewish discrimination during the Gilded Age led young Jews such as Cyrus Adler and Henrietta Szold to establish great Jewish cultural projects and institutions, including the Jewish Publication Society, the *Jewish Encyclopedia*, the Jewish Theological Seminary, and Hadassah. The result was the Jewish awakening that shaped 20th-century American Jewish life. Similarly, when antisemitism peaked again after World War I, a new generation of Jewish leaders established synagogue centers, Yeshiva College, Jewish educational camps, and Jewish day schools, among other important innovations, in response to quotas, restrictions, and the rantings of antisemites such as Henry Ford and Father Charles Coughlin. Will the current moment turn out to be another "great awakening" for American Jews? While it's too early to know, our actions will certainly make a big difference.

Now, as the postwar era in American Jewish history concludes and another movement of restoration begins in the country, accompanied yet again by antisemitism, a parallel opportunity awaits. If we nurture the current surge and tap into its energy, we can pave the way for a new, stronger era of American Jewish life, demonstrating afresh the paradox that those who seek to undermine Jewish life frequently stimulate its revitalization. ✳

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