

SOME THOUGHTS ON THE PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE
OF AMERICAN JEWRY*

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Jewry in America is exceptional among the world's Jewrys, much as the United States is an exceptional country. Jews won acceptance as fully equal citizens here earlier than elsewhere. They have been exceptionally successful in intellectual, business and political endeavors. The dominant ethos of American culture has been congruent with Jewish values. However, success here and in Israel seemingly undermines the conditions for survival, encourages intermarriage and cultural assimilation.

I am obviously extremely pleased to receive the first Marshall Sklare Memorial Award for a career of distinguished scholarship in the study of Jewry. I am most pleased to so honor Marshall's memory, yet, I must say it is also a sad event. Just as parents should not outlive their children, professors should not outlive their students. As we all know, Marshall died much too young. In terms of professor and student relationship, the only consolation is that the age difference between Marshall and myself was not very great. I started as a member of the graduate faculty at Columbia when I was quite young and he had a career, other careers, before he turned to academe which kind of equalized the age factor. I could spend all of my time going into a discussion of Marshall and his work. His doctoral dissertation, the classic book *Conservative Judaism* (Sklare 1955), is, I think, one of the most important sociological studies of denominationalism done in the United States. His most recent work (Sklare 1993), a collection of his essays, gives one a clear impression of the contributions which Marshall made over time to the study of the Jewish community and of Jews in America.

The first article I ever wrote (Lipset 1955) dealing with Jews *per se* discussed "Jewish Sociologists and the Sociologists of the Jews." In that essay, I made a point which in part has been answered. I raised the question why were there so many Jewish sociologists and so few sociologists of the Jews. The fact was that in the fifties and earlier, many of the Jewish sociologists were uninterested in Jews either in ethnic or religious terms. But even if they were personally involved as Jews

and/or practiced Judaism, they avoided studying Jews *per se*. Their neglect had a very negative impact on our scholarly understanding of the Jewish situation in America. Non-Jews in the social sciences, with very rare exceptions, also tended to ignore the Jews. In part, I think, they did so because there were so many Jews in the discipline who could analyze their own community that they felt there was no need for them to do research on Jews. There were plenty of other groups and situations they could work on. However, as I just noted, the Jews around them did not study Jews. Of course, the growth of this organization, the Association for the Social Scientific Study of Jewry, attests to the fact, as does Marshall's career, that the concern that there are few Jewish sociologists studying Jews is no longer as serious a problem as it once was. There is now an abundant literature: general books about Jews in America, specialized studies, Jewish demography, the National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) and the work going on around it. All of these attest to the existence of a large number of Jews working in the field. Hence, my earlier article is rather out of date. In any case, I want to talk today briefly on the future of American Jewry.

To attempt an exercise in futurology is, of course, a daunting task. If one were to go back to any time before 1930 and ask what people would have said then about the future of the Jews, they obviously would have erred greatly. Indeed, there is almost no period in which social scientists or others have been able to predict with any degree of accuracy where a community or a nation is heading (Lipset 1980).

To understand American Jews it is important to recognize that they are exceptional among the world's Jewries. Their experience on this continent differs qualitatively from that of their coreligionists in other countries (Lipset 1989). Jews won acceptance as fully equal citizens earlier here than elsewhere. They have faced much less discrimination in the United States than in any other Christian nation. Although never more than 3.7% of the population and now only about 2.5%, they tend to be given one-third of the religious representation. In many public ceremonies one sees a priest, a rabbi and a minister. Currently there are thirty-three Representatives and ten Senators in Congress, many of them represent areas that have few Jews in the population.

As Goldscheider and Zuckerman (1986: 183) note, "the pace of socio-economic change and the levels of occupation and income attained are exceptional features of Jews compared to non-Jews." Various national surveys, including those conducted by Steve Cohen (1989) and by the various demographers involved in NJPS as well as others, all

point to the fact that Jewish income is much higher than that of non-Jews, perhaps twice as high. Kosmin and Lachman (1993:260) report that Jews have the highest median annual household income, \$36,700, among thirty different religious groups. An analysis of the four hundred richest Americans as reported by *Forbes* finds that two fifths of the wealthiest forty are Jews, as are about a quarter of the total list (Kosmin 1988).

Jews are obviously disproportionately represented among many sections of elites which are largely drawn from the college educated. A study of leading intellectuals found 45 % are Jewish (Kadushin 1974); something approaching 30 % of professors at the major universities are Jewish (Lipset and Ladd 1971); among high level civil servants, 21 %; among partners in the leading law firms of New York and Washington 40 %; among reporters, editors, and executives of the major print and broadcast media 25 %; and among the directors, writers and producers of the top fifty grossing motion pictures from the sixties to the eighties, 59 %, the same percentage of people involved in two or more prime time television series (Rothman, Lichter and Lichter, forthcoming).

These achievements, which are extraordinary, given the proportion of Jews in the population, are related, of course, to their scholastic accomplishments. At the beginning of 1990, about 85 % of college-age Jews were enrolled in higher education as compared to two-fifths for the population as a whole. Moreover, as is the case for Jewish faculty, they are heavily located in the better, more selective, schools. An American Council of Education survey of college freshmen found that those with Jewish parentage have significantly higher secondary grades than their gentile counterparts in spite of the fact that a much larger proportion of Jews were going to college. Moreover, Jews seemingly perform better as undergraduates as evidenced by their disproportionate membership in Phi Beta Kappa.

It has been argued that the ability of Jews to do so well in America reflects the fact that Jewish characteristics and values have been especially congruent with the larger national culture (Feingold 1982: 189). The sociologist Robert Park (1950: 354-355), who is not Jewish, once suggested that Jewish history be taught in the schools so that Americans could learn what America is about. Park argued that in their drive and achievement, the Jews were quintessential Americans. That is, Park believed that if you examined all the ethnic groups in America, including those of English background, the most American group, the group which embodied American values most, was the Jews. Thus, if you want to understand America you would do it better by studying the

Jews than by analyzing the English or the Germans or any other group. I am not arguing that Park was necessarily correct. I think he may have overstated the point. Nevertheless, I think there is some point to Park's notion. Furthermore, some evidence in support of such assumptions can be found in Max Weber's analysis of the relationship between the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism in America, in East European Jews' reaction to Benjamin Franklin, and in the contemporary links between Margaret Thatcher, the capitalist reformer, and British Jews.

Weber (1935:54-55), in explaining the economic success of the United States, notes that the Puritans brought with them the religiously derived values conducive to capitalism: rationality, hard work, savings, a strong achievement drive. These values were expressed in the secular writings of Benjamin Franklin whom Weber quoted as the quintessential expression of the capitalist ethic. Franklin's values not only appealed to Americans, they found an enthusiastic audience in Eastern Europe among Jews to whom they also resonated as consistent with their religious beliefs and secular culture. Franklin's writings were translated into Yiddish around 1800 and were read devoutly and discussed in Talmudic discourse fashion by young Jews in Poland and Russia after they had completed their daily religious studies in the yeshivas (Lebeson 1975). Indeed, Weber (1968: 622-623) himself pointed to the kinship of Puritanism and Calvinism with Judaism. Weber noted Puritans felt their similarity to Judaism. Jews were welcome in Puritan areas. In the United States, for example, they were admitted without much ado whatsoever.

The linkage of Protestant sectarian and Jewish values to the bourgeois market ethic and the classic laissez faire liberalism of Americanism is to be noted in the closing decades of this century in the relationship which Margaret Thatcher (Blond 1988: 14-15) has had to British Jews. She admires them as hardworking, self-made, people who believe that God helps those who help themselves. She chose to represent the most Jewish district in Britain, Finchley, and appointed five Jews to cabinet posts at different times. She also designated the Chief Rabbi, Immanuel Jakobovits, as a member of the House of Lords. In commenting on the latter action, various British publications noted that she much prefers the tough minded self-help work-oriented values of the Chief Rabbi to the soft Tory welfare emphasis of the Archbishop of Canterbury.

Moreover, Margaret Thatcher detests the aristocracy and especially the Queen. The differences which newspapers reported from time to

time between her and the Queen were not just an argument between two ladies who somehow did not like each other. They were a disagreement between one, the Queen, who represented the essence of Tory *noblesse oblige* and aristocratic values, and another, who embodies the essence of bourgeois egalitarian competitive values, norms which Thatcher found prevalent in America and among Jews. As a classical liberal, she strongly emphasized these values and saw them practiced by Jews (Thatcher 1993).

From its origins, America has been a universalistic culture, slavery and the black situation apart (a big "apart"). Nevertheless, it is true. America has been the purest example of a bourgeois society, one that has followed capitalist market norms uninterfered with by beliefs derived from feudalism. These norms assume, and America as the purest market economy or society embodies, an emphasis on the values of meritocracy, on a society open to talent, open to the most efficient, to the most competent. As the self-conscious center of liberal and increasingly populist revolutions from 1776 on, the United States has been viewed by Americans and others as open to newcomers. One becomes an American by joining the party, accepting the Creed. This, of course, is what Jews were able to do here. Americans encouraged Jews to play an equal role. This is explicit in George Washington's message to the Jews of Newport in 1790. In it, he said that in the United States all possess alike the liberty of conscience and the immunities of citizenship. Even more significantly the first President emphasized that the patronizing concept of toleration of one class of people by another has no place in America. Jews are as much American, and on the same basis, as everyone else. Washington (1895: 91-92) was condemning the idea of tolerance in 1790, saying that it is an invidious concept, that if Jews are "tolerated" they are inferior. At a time when Jews had no rights anywhere in the world except perhaps in the emerging French Revolution, Washington recognized that the concept of tolerance denotes second class citizenship. Jefferson and Madison also noted that America was different from Europe, that the discrimination against Judaism prevailing there did not exist here. In Jefferson's words all were on an equal footing in the United States. Jefferson rejoiced over the presence of Jews in the country because they would ensure the religious diversity which in his judgement is the best protector of liberty.

One can describe many events in American history which reflect the positive relationship between Americanism and Americans on the one hand and Judaism on the other. John Adams, our second President,

was a Zionist long before there were many Jewish Zionists. One of the most amazing laws enacted in America or any other place was passed in 1810, the Sunday Mails bill, which provided that the mails be delivered on Sunday and that certain government offices be kept open on that day (Rohrer 1987). The law was much debated of course. Yet, in 1836, a Senate majority reaffirmed that, as they put it, "Jews, Mohammadens, Infidels and Atheists have the same rights as Christians in the United States." Some Senators, among them some deeply devout Protestant sectarians, noted that the idea that American is a Christian country is wrong, that every religious group is equal in this country. Of course, I do not mean to imply we have had no anti-Semitism here. We obviously have. There have been serious waves of anti-semitism. One of the worst occurred in the 1930s. However, scholars agree that on the comparative scale there is no country which has been as open and as accepting of Jews as the United States has been.

I think one can safely say that the State of Israel would not be in the situation it is in today if it were not for the help and the support it received, and continues to secure, from the United States. While many can debate as to why the United States has been supportive of the State of Israel, it is important to recognize that in diplomatic discourse which long preceded the founding of the State of Israel the United States repeatedly evinced a concern for the position of the Jews. A book which came out in the 1940s dealing with the diplomatic memoranda or concerns of the United States about Jews in the rest of the world reports that starting in 1840, with respect to the persecution of Jews in Syria, down to the 1920s, the State Department often and consistently sought to intervene on behalf of Jews against anti-Semitic activities (Adler and Margalith 1943). From the time that Czarist pogroms became a public issue in the 1880s, the State Department sent memos almost every year to Russia complaining about the treatment of Jews. There are memoranda from Secretaries of State to ambassadors to Romania and Russia and other places which instruct them that it has been the historic and consistent policy of the United States to be concerned with the position of the Hebrew people and to demand that they receive the same rights as everyone else. These efforts to protect or support the Jews in Eastern Europe could not be explained by the existence of an AIPAC or its equivalent. To the contrary, they reflected the sense of identity which many American Protestants felt with the Jews and their outrage about persecution. The eventual concern of the United States for the State of Israel may be viewed as a continuation of this pattern.

It is, of course, true that the record of the United States with respect to the Holocaust and persecution of the Jews in the 1930s was not a good one. One should not respond to this with any degree of denial. It is a fact. The only thing that can be said is that the record of all other countries was as bad, in many cases worse. There is a book about Canada, *None Is Too Many* (Abella 1983), documenting Canada's record. It would not admit a single Jew during the 1930s. However, as significant as the failure of the nations of the world to help Jews is, the fact is the Yishuv in Palestine did not have a great record for saving East European Jewry either. Ben Gurion and others did not put a great priority on rescuing the Eastern European Jews.¹

Thankfully, the problem of survival facing Diaspora Jewry in the West is not one of persecution. In America it is assimilation, a process which goes back to colonial days and continues down to the present. It is interesting to note, for example, that there were 250,000 German Jews in the United States in 1880, before the East European migration. If these people had all stayed Jewish, millions of their descendants would be Jewish today. But they are not. Their numbers did not decline because they were persecuted. They fell off because they intermarried. Indeed, if you trace the descendants of colonial families, as Earl Raab and I report in a recently completed book on the American Jewish Community, you will discover early Jewish settler families in Georgia and other places who remained Jewish for a long time, but are now Christian. For example, there are the Sheftalls of Georgia. The family is still there; there are people of that name. If you interview them you discover they know their ancestors were Jewish. However, by some point in the nineteenth century or earlier, many of them ceased being Jewish. The fact of intermarriage, of assimilation, has reduced the number of Jews in the American population.

At the present time, we have a community which has five or six million members, but which is on the whole secularized. While the majority of Jews do adhere in one way or another to a Jewish denomination, they have a lower rate of synagogue attendance and of religious observance than the Christian community. Jews, as NJPS has documented, currently have an extremely high rate of intermarriage. Depending on which analysis of the data is used, somewhere between 50 and 57 percent of marriages involving Jews in the five year period between 1985 and 1990 were with non-Jews. Moreover, the rate of conversion by non-Jews married to Jews has not been increasing. Indeed, it has been going down. Furthermore, while the majority of Jewish partners in intermarried couples tend to look on their families

as Jewish, their children are less involved, less committed, less likely to be Jewishly educated (Lipset 1994). Thus, the pattern of assimilation into the larger community which undermined the German Jews in America is now happening to those whose families came from Eastern Europe.

There are two factors, other than religious commitment, which have operated in this country to keep Jews Jewish: one, is anti-Semitism, or more correctly foreboding about anti-Semitism and relations with the larger community; the second, is commitment to the state of Israel and the role which Israel plays in the commitment of American and other Diaspora Jews to Jewishness. As many have said, Israel has become the religion of the Jewish people, a secular one of course.

These two secular conditions are declining, weakening considerably. First, in spite of the fact that we have periodic incidents of anti-Semitism, which I think are over dramatized, anti-Semitism has continued to decline in this country. As Lucy Dawidowicz (1982: 51) once pointed out, there is almost no position that is not open to Jews in this country. Some of the statistics noted above are an indication of such openness, as are public opinion data showing a steady fall in acceptance of anti-Semitic sentiments. Second, as the Middle East moves towards peace, the anxiety which American Jews have had about Israel should decline and their commitments to Jewish organizations which their concerns inspired will also fall off. In fact, data from NJPS indicates that the proportion of Jews who say they are committed, or, in the terms the survey used, anxious or concerned about Israel, declines sharply with age. Younger Jews are much less dedicated than older ones. Projecting an America which is even less anti-Semitic and a world in which Israel is much more secure provokes the question what will keep American Jews Jewish, what will prevent them from melting in the melting pot.²

It is difficult for any group to maintain its identity unless it has a solid core. Fortunately, Jews do have such a core, one which has maintained them. For the most part, of course, that core has been religion. However, religious identification has grown weaker. Thus, we have to recognize that in the future we are going to be dealing with a remnant. Of course, such a problem has beset Jews of all generations. In the past, many Jews stopped being Jewish for good reasons, if you consider assimilation good, or for bad ones such as persecution. Hence, a great concern has developed among Jewish philanthropists, scholars, community leaders and others who care about Jewish continuity to

identify what might be done to improve the possibilities for the maintenance of a sizeable Jewish community.

It is necessary to be to be realistic in this regard. We have to recognize that unless conditions turn very bad, unless there is a serious revival of anti-Semitism and/or serious threats to the State of Israel, a sharp decline in the number of Jews is likely.

In closing, I would like to just raise an issue for further study. Perhaps it goes beyond the sociology of the Jews *per se*. The question was raised for me by a judge in Washington who inquires every time I meet him, "How many people are there in the United States who are of Jewish ancestry and know it?" I always promise to get the answer for him, but, in fact, I never have. My best guess is that it would be in the order of 10 million. Does it make any difference to these people that they are aware of their Jewish ancestry? There is some evidence that it does. They are not Jews by any criterion commonly used to determine who is a Jew. Nevertheless, having a Jewish background in the American context is not viewed negatively, as it once was everywhere in the Diaspora. Here and now part-Jews can feel proud of their ancestry, and tell their children about their Jewish background. Many read books about Jews and have some sense of interest and involvement in things "Jewish." I think such a background plays a positive role. I suspect it affects political opinions. Thus, we should be interested not simply in the question of who is a Jew and how do Jews behave but in the Jewish impact on American society, I suggest the next population survey should also look at people who are part Jewish, It should do so not because we want to identify them as Jews, but to understand the contribution of Jews have made to America.

NOTES

* This article is based on remarks made at the annual meeting of the Association for the Social Scientific Study of Jewry, December 20, 1993, following presentation of the Marshal Sklare Award for Distinguished Scholarship to Professor Lipset.

¹ I think one of the problems is that during the 1930s, neither Jews nor non-Jews really believed the Holocaust was happening. It is true they were all told about it. It was described in horrific detail by eyewitnesses who came to Washington and to Palestine. However, I think the reaction of everybody, including Jews, was: "Of course it is terrible. Terrible things are happening. People are being killed, but it is impossible for anyone to believe that there is a systematic effort to wipe out all Jews in Europe." The reports were not dismissed, they were ignored because the dominant view was that the most important task was to defeat the Nazis. The notion that six million would be killed was so unimaginable that leaders ranging from Franklin Roosevelt to David Ben Gurion

could not really accept it. They did not act as if they believed it. Nevertheless, the failure to act is a very negative aspect of record.

² I should note here parenthetically that all the talk about the extent to which the revival, supposed revival, of identity and multiculturalism is upsetting the melting pot is exaggerated. Of course, feelings about the position of Blacks have led to strong concern, discussion and interest in the idea of maintaining the culture of ethnic groups. Yet, the intermarriage rates among whites show there is almost a random distribution of groups intermarrying. Eighty percent of the Irish are married to non-Irish; the majority of Japanese Americans are wed to people of non-Japanese background; the majority of Catholics are married to non-Catholics. Jews, with an intermarriage rate of 57%, in the five years preceding the 1990 NJPS, tend to be less intermarried than some other groups, but the percentage is going up. The United States is a country in which there is "melting," in which whites are "melting." The most rapidly growing ethnic group in the United States in terms of identification is "European American." One-third of all Americans when offered choices of what their identity is, say, "European." Of course, this response may be a counter-reaction to the idea of "African American." If there are "African Americans," then there must be "European Americans." However, it is also a reaction to the fact that many have a mixture of Irish, Italian, and Jewish grandparents and do not know what to call themselves other than "European."

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