

The Meaning of American Jewish History

By Jerry Klinger

"Anyone *meshugge* enough to call himself a Jew, IS a Jew."
- Ben-Gurion

"Before the beginning of the nineteenth century all Jews regarded Judaism as a privilege; since then most Jews have come to regard it as a burden."
- Mordechai Kaplan, *The Present Crisis in Judaism - Judaism as a Civilization*

"Without our traditions, our lives would be as shaky as... as a FIDDLER ON THE ROOF!"

One little time you pull out a prop, and where does it stop? Where does it stop? - "Tevye."
- *Fiddler on the Roof* by Jerry Bock and Sheldon Harnick

In the fall of 2005 a "Million Black Man March" is again being called for in Washington, D.C. by the virulently racist, anti-Semitic, Black Muslims (the Nation of Islam) and their leader, Louis Farrakhan. Jewish groups are demanding that mainstream Black leadership not attend and distance themselves from the organizers.

"The Anti-Defamation League, which has long criticized Farrakhan, urged other black leaders to separate their cause from him. When will someone in the African-American community stand up and say that the Million Man March had a positive message but the pied piper is a racist and anti-Semite?" said ADL director Abraham Foxman." USA Today 5/2/2005

Black leadership attended the last march in 1995 called for by Farrakhan. Many Black American leaders are expected to attend this one as well. The American Jewish historical experience is changing.

Jews, themselves a minority in America, have done more to defend minority rights, for all Americans, than any other minority group. Jews always intrinsically understood that they were only as safe as the least safe American. Today, American Jews are freer and more accepted into society than ever. American support for Israel, other than Jewish, is heavily conservative and Christian in character and it is stronger than ever. American Jews have realized in America the highest level of personal freedom and physical safety than anywhere else in the over 2,000 years since the Romans destroyed the land of Israel, driving the Jews into exile.

Yet American Jews are intermarrying with non-Jews at almost a 50% rate. 1/3 of all American Jewish households are interwoven with non-Jews. American Jewish identity with Israel is sharply declining. Since World War II, American Jews, as a percentage of the American population, are rapidly declining from a high of 5.5% to a current estimate of 3.2%. For most American Jews, identity as Jews is weaker than ever.

What exactly is an American Jew?

"In 1492 Columbus sailed the ocean blue" goes the children's rhyme. With Christopher Columbus on his voyages of discovery were Jews. American Jewish history began with Columbus but most historians peg American Jewish history not with the first isolated travelers but with the establishment of the first permanent Jewish community in North America, New Amsterdam in 1654.

September of 1654, twenty-three starved, terrified and virtually naked refugees from Recife, Brazil landed in New Amsterdam, present day New York. These Jews came seeking refuge and they stayed. They demanded and earned the right to join with their Christian neighbors in common defense of their common homes. They did not demand special privileges but rather the right of normalcy and acceptance, to risk all for the common good.

The Age of American Discovery to the establishment of the American government was from 1492 until 1776. American Jewish experience reflected limited immigration to America and a tenuous but growing minority acceptance. Jews were stunned to experience a new world where the value of the individual was not based purely upon one's parentage and religion or station of birth. Acceptance was based more upon what the individual brought to the table. What could they do to benefit the whole while at the same time benefiting themselves. Doors opened to the Jew as opposed to being slammed shut.

The American frontier experience had no desire to turn away settlement and help in any form, even from Jews. Discrimination, anti-Semitism, always just below the surface and frequently carried across the Atlantic with newer European immigrants, never successfully implanted itself into the American fiber. The American experience and population was so mixed, so fluid and mobile, that homogeneity surrendered to diversity and toleration, not because of desire but because of necessity.

The second major period of the American Jewish experience was from 1776 to 1828. The ideals of American freedom and democracy embodied in the young government and its document of structure – the U.S. Constitution was tested and embedded into American life. It was realized on a State-by-State basis. As the frontier pushed westward, the vestiges of European discrimination continued to be peeled away. It was not until 1828 that the final abandonment of legal discrimination against Jews vanished, with the Jew Bill of Maryland. It would still be many years until all subtle forms and even some overt forms of discrimination would dissolve but legal discrimination barring Jewish participation in American life was over.

The period of 1830 to 1880 was a period of significant Jewish immigration, integration and assimilation into the new welcoming American world. The first large scale American Jewish immigration was primarily Western European and German in character. The Germans imbued with the ideals of liberal German Judaism and the liberalism of the failed European revolutionary movements quickly blended into American life. Their beards were shorn, the *payyahs* (ritual hair side curls), were cut. The European interpretations of Jewish life and Torah were placed in secondary importance to American opportunism, acceptance and economic advancement.

The German Jew integrated into American society very, very rapidly and soon saw themselves as the natural leadership of American Jewry. German Jews evolved from backpacking

entrepreneurs to frontier merchants. They settled in numerous small communities, frequently acting as small retail merchants. They networked and brought in other Jews to settle and work in their businesses. They built communities.

When the Jewish community grew large enough they first created *Hevrah Kadishahs* (Jewish burial societies) and Jewish self care societies for the poor and the widowed. As the communities grew Jews came together to worship, especially for the High Holidays. It was very common for frontier newspaper ads to carry announcements of Jewish religious services being conducted in rented space. If the community proved stable and large enough, permanent Jewish houses of worship were established. The buildings were outward physical symbols of Jewish permanence and presence in a community. Sometimes Rabbis would be engaged but more often than not the individuals who were most knowledgeable would become the religious leaders of the community.

Jews lived with their Christian neighbors, not in ghettos but in blended communities. Jews learned to dress, speak and think American like their Christian neighbors. The early backpacking Jewish peddlers who, *schlepped* heavy merchandise bundles on their shoulders into the frontier communities, out of necessity chose to trim their beards, cut their *payyahs*, blink at observing the Sabbath and modify their *Kashrut* standards when a distant farmer invited them to dinner. Some tried to keep their old world religious standards but for the most part "to get along, Jews chose to go along."

The German Jews were the trailblazers, the midwives, of the American Jewish experience. Both literally and symbolically they broke down the barriers of discrimination and stereotypes of anti-Semitism. Whether as frontiersman, farmers, merchants or soldiers, Jews came to be viewed by Americans as Americans.

Jewish American rights, freedom and acceptance tended to flow not east to west. Freedom for all Americans evolved and tended to flow west to east. It was the dynamism of the frontier that was the catalyst of change. The east, where communities were more established, could luxuriate in European bigotry much more readily than the frontier. It wasn't that prejudice did not exist on the frontier but rather there was no room for it.

Jews were granted the same voting rights as all Americans were. They were elected to political offices in the West long before they were afforded the same recognition in the East.

Synagogues were built and functioning California before there was one in Washington, D.C. In Washington, D.C., the nation's capital, Jews had to play politics. They enlisted the help and influence of Commodore Uriah Levy. Levy became the first president of Washington Hebrew Congregation. He was also the highest-ranking Jew in the American military. Levy was needed to help steer legislation through congress giving Jews the right to build a permanent house of worship in Washington D.C. Jews were Federal Senators, State legislators, Judges, honored American patriots and soldiers, civic and community leaders before anti-Jewish discrimination diminished enough to allow a permanent house of worship in New Hampshire or Massachusetts.

Before the great population infusions of eastern European Jewry into America, between 1880 and 1920, American Jewry was heavily dominated by German Jews of Ashkenazic tradition. They supplanted the earlier Sephardic Jewish community for leadership. Sephardic Jewry had, as early as the 1730's in Georgia, come into conflict with Ashkenazic Jewry. Jew could not get along with Jew. The conflict in Georgia over religious expression only perplexed the non-Jewish world.

The inter-religious struggle of who is a Jew and whose tradition is right continues as a theme in American Jewish history. Contemporarily, the conflict of Ashkenazic vs. Sephardic interpretations of religious expression has been replaced by liberal vs. conservative or Orthodox Jewry vs. Reform Jewry. In contemporary terms, Orthodox Jewry is actively threatening to not recognize reform Jews as Jews to the bafflement of the non-Jewish world. It is astonishing to both Jew and non-Jew, that when American Jews are facing statistical survival, that the issue is an issue instead of a common crusade to come together.

In Seattle, Washington, the first synagogue, Ohev Shalom, was built in 1892. It was a magnificent building constructed by a common effort of Orthodox and Reform Jews to find common ground as Jews. Within three years, the communal effort collapsed in acrimony and bankruptcy. The community fractured and the synagogue was eventually sold and torn down. A Christian retirement home sits on the historic site today.

The period of 1880-1920 witnessed Jewish immigration rise to 2,000,000 people deeply and sincerely desirous to become Americans. The immigrants were generally of Eastern and Southern European background with Russian Jewry making up the lion's share. The new comers were called "*Greeneh*" or the green ones even by immigrants who had only arrived a short time before. To the American Jews of German background, the new Jewish immigrants were a threat to their very safety. German Jewry had found relative safety through integration and assimilation into America. To them, the new Jewish immigrants were absolutely medieval.

German Jewry integrated into American life within one generation, Eastern European Jewry did not fully integrate and assimilate for up to three generations. Eastern European Jewry tended to settle into established Jewish urban environments and attempted to recreate the world of European ghetto life that they were familiar with. But the pull of the dynamic, open and freeing American culture soon broke the responses. Eastern European Judaism, generally insular, needed isolation and independence from American openness to survive. The children of the immigrant world wanted to be American more than they wanted to be European Jews. The generations of the immigrants soon enriched America as they in turn were enriched by her freedom and safety and opportunity.

American Jewish history from 1920-1945 was a period of consolidation. Eastern European Jewry supplanted German Jewry for leadership and direction in American life. The Jewish community turned inward establishing Jewish Community Centers, umbrella organizations such as Federations and multiple levels of Jewish educational programming and communal support.

The Jewish Encyclopedia first appeared in America in 1905. For the first time it gave American Jews an appreciation, pride and respect for the sweep and impact of Jewish civilization outside of the Torah. The awareness of the richness of Jewish civilization continued growing from within.

To the world outside of the Jewish community, the period 1920-1945, is best characterized by Jews of the entertainment media. They were Jews privately, but publicly they went so far as to change their names to sound less Jewish and to avoid Jewish themes or overtly Jewish subjects. American Jews most of whom were only first generation were still feeling their way around and luxuriating in the astonishing reality of American acceptance and freedom.

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The dilemma of German Jewry in 1830 was the same for Russian Jewry in 1930. It is the same today as it has been for the three hundred and fifty years of American Jewish experience; as the expression goes in the South, "*to get along you have to go along.*" Jews in order to get along as a minority, with their history of precariousness, had to get along not by being different but rather by integrating (assimilating) into the broader American world. They could choose to be a little Jewish or a lot Jewish. They were free to choose "*to go along*" or not.

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The dark clouds and horror of World War II soon gripped the world. More than 550,000 American Jews fought in America's armies. Some defended America with their very lives. The after effects of the war changed the complacency of to get along one had to go along.

G.I.s returning from WWII were encouraged by a massive economic boom and government benefits sponsoring education and housing. Returning G.I.s wanted a car, a home on a ¼ acre of land, a family and a chicken in every pot. And, they got it. Physically centralized Jewish communities disintegrated into suburbanized Levitt style tract housing communities. The Jewish world changed from physically tight to physically loose. The central role of religion and ethnocentrism declined as Judaism was increasingly seen as equal to Christianity, without any superior, special or unique values. Jews increasingly lived in culturally integrated American environments. They needed to demonstrate the special character of being Jewish to themselves, their children and the broader Christian world around them.

The Jewish response was *Tikkun Olam*, to repair God's world for the better. On the one hand, as all Americans achieved their rights, America was better. On the other hand, as all American achieved their rights, Jewish rights and Jewish safety would be protected. Through the latter half of the twentieth century Jewish response to Jewish identity issues were primarily non-religious. The Holocaust movement, Feminism, Russian Jewry and pro Israel activism quickly became near religious definitions of who is a Jew.

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Jewish American survival is facing its greatest crisis in over three hundred years. Contemporary American Jews do not consciously worry about getting along anymore until they are shocked

back into historical reality by anti-Semitism or Jew bating and Jew hating around the world. Jews are integrated and assimilated into America but Jews are rapidly diminishing in absolute population numbers.

Jewish influence is being diminished by the emergence of many new and frequently antagonistic population groups. The Muslim American community, largely a community of post WWII immigration, is equal in size, if not greater than the American Jewish community. The massive recent immigration of Hispanic illegals into America are not imbued with American ideals or culture and have no particular reason to be overly supportive of Jewish sensitivities.

The increasing reality is that Jews are identifying themselves as simply another moral religion of no special stature or nature that is different from any other major religion. The question flows back to a simple one. When presented with the choice of why be Jewish, the question is changed to why be a Jew with all of its inconveniences.

The majority of American Jews do not know why, and cannot express why, they should choose to be Jewish. Gefilte fish, matzo ball soup, bagels, Yiddish language expressions in English, is not enough reason to choose to be Jewish. The tie to the land of Israel is getting vague. The recognition of the commonality of the Jewish people is increasingly unacknowledged. The uniqueness of Judaism is largely not understood or even emphasized in Jewish education.

Orthodoxy, both in America and Israel, blinks at the marriage of a Jewish woman to a non-Jewish man, especially about the sincerity of conversion or need for it. Orthodoxy howls if a Jewish man should marry a non-Jewish woman and then try to raise the children as Jews. In Israel, the Rabbis objected, then squirmed, then acquiesced, and recognized Ethiopian Jewry as Jews. They blink at Russian immigration and the marginality of Russian issues of who is a Jew. Shortly, they will blink again and convert en mass, 6,000 Bene Israel, from India. Orthodoxy insists that the European white skin, blond hair and blue eyes of Jews came strictly from non Jewish women going to a mikvah and converting according to traditional *Halacha* – an argument that requires major theoretical gymnastics.

The majority of American Jews are Jews primarily through the memory of cultural affiliations. Gastronomic Judaism or attending Jewish film festivals is considered being Jewish by some. The revival of Klezmer music, largely forgotten, only dates from 1973 when a random question stimulated musicologist Henry Sapoznik: Do American Jews have a music of their own?

Yiddish, once the language of the Jewish masses, is now a cultural shadow. "*Yiddish with Dick and Jane*," authored by Ellis Weiner and Barbara Davilman, 2004, is called a parody on the Dick and Jane readers of American kids in the 1940's and 1950's. The authors note that they dragged Yiddish into the book. Saying a few Yiddish words is overridden by the images and text of the book. The characters reflect no Jewish religious values and eat non-Kosher food at a Chinese restaurant.

Central characters in the popular modern cartoon spoof the "Simpsons" are satirical characterizations but often too close for comfort for Jews. "Krusty the clown is Jewish, very Jewish. Y Dalton, Mazur, and Siems, in their book *God in the Details*, see Krusty as 'a gross

caricature of a stereotypical secularized Jew corrupted by wealth and fame' who 'dislikes children (and) finances his lavish debt-ridden lifestyle by over-marketing his own image unabashedly.' (Mark Pinsky).

Jews are increasingly portrayed in stereotype by popular culture T.V. shows frequently in negative, self-deprecating situations, ironically by Jewish writers, as in the hugely popular Seinfeld series. Jews are never portrayed as positive role models by keeping kosher or observing the Sabbath or other rituals that separate them from the broader American culture. They are o.k. only if they have abandoned their distinctive Jewish identities. A Jewish American is o.k. only if they become more like the Christian world around them.

Popular recent movies like "Meet the Fokkers", starring Jews: Barbara Streisand, Dustin Hoffman, and Ben Stiller, affirm American integration and assimilation when the son marries a non-Jewish girl in a staged farce. The Jewish family, who live in Miami, are in touch with their feminine side. They are counter cultural liberals, whose Jewishness consists of throwing in various Yiddish terms. They see nothing wrong in their son marrying outside of their own people. The bride's family is portrayed as WASPs, macho, absurdly disconnected from human touch and love. The final scene is the wedding, under a chuppah, performed by a mail-order minister who spent 7 months on a Kibbutz in Israel. He is wearing a kippah, ogles the bride because he had an earlier love tryst with her and says a bracha over the wine in Hebrew. The groom is not wearing a kippah. "Meet the Fokkers" is portrayed as the finest example of American cultural amalgamation. No overt anti-Semitism is expressed or even tolerated. The truth though is terribly different.

American Jews do sociological study after study of American Jewish life. The studies confirm that the children of most intermarried couples will be non-affiliated individuals who will not bond with their Jewish heritage. The children and their parents may attend a pseudo Passover Seder, or exchange gifts on Chanukah, in imitation of the Christmas experience, but will not have strong ties to Israel, to Diaspora Jewry or traditional Jewish identity. Statistically the next generation will be lost to Judaism.

American political correctness insists on respecting cultural diversity. American popular culture insists on Jewish acceptance only if an individual is not too Jewish. The problem for American Jewish identity remains. Will culture alone preserve identity when Jews live in a land that is not Jewish. It forces the older question of who is a Jew. In Israel a person lives as a Jew whether they pray three times a day or eat pork and go to the beach on Yom Kippur. A Jew in Israel has tied their fate to that of the land and the people as a whole, no matter where they are. It was Israel that ultimately wanted and was willing to pay the social and economic price for the Soviet Jews, not American Jewry.

German Jewry, before the horror of the Holocaust, were the most assimilated Jews in the world. In pre WWII, German Jewish intermarriage rates were approaching 50%. German Jews were exterminated by the most civilized and cultured nation of the world.

American Jews have tied their fate and futures to being Americans. America has been a blessing and a curse for Jews. The catch 22 of American Jewish life is, "*if we are too Jewish we will not be accepted. But if we become too like them we will intermarry and lose our Jewish-ness.*"

Before the establishment of the State of Israel, American Jews fought amongst themselves whether or not America was the "New Jerusalem" and whether salvation, physical and spiritual, was being more American. Jews have never known, in all of Diaspora history as much freedom and acceptance as they have in America. Jews have never been freer to shorn the yoke of being Jewish voluntarily. As integrated, assimilated, accepted and acculturated as American Jews are, the Holocaust created an undeniable reality. Perhaps that is why Holocaust remembrance, though not a religious remembrance and studies have become one of the holy grails of American Jewish security.

No matter how safe, no matter how secure the Jew is, no matter how deep in the sand the Jew buries their head, ostrich-like, Israel is the ultimate safety net.

The Jewish American population will continue to decline because of low birth rates, deferred family formations and intermarriage. Non-affiliation to both community and synagogue remains shockingly high. Recreating the isolationism and rejectionism of European orthodox life, espoused by surviving Orthodox Rebbes, who came to America after the Shoah, does not reach or work for the vast majority of American Jewry.

Jewish day schools only educate a small percentage of the Jewish children. The default for most parents, who do not significantly teach Jewish life, culture, traditions and values at home, is the Jewish Sunday school at their local synagogue or temple. Many public school events are held on Friday evening – school dances, football games, etc. When given the choice between denying their children the social life of public schools or synagogue attendance most parents drop the synagogue. Good parents who love their children do not want to deny them any aspect of a rich childhood. The choice between Jewish life and Jewish restrictive values is simple – the Friday night football game wins out.

The greatest threat to Jewish American survival is internal; the Jewish conflict of matrilineal vs. patrilineal descent, whose parental pedigree is purer. Who is a Jew? Who decides? American Jewry is evolving, only the final direction is not codified in stone.

In Hebrew schools around the country, little children, first learning about Israel, make paper hats that they color themselves. They dance, in an imitative horah circle, singing in Hebrew, "*Dovid Melech Yisrael*," David, king of Israel. The words continue as they sing on, without understanding, "*Am Yisrael Chai, Am Yisrael Chai*," the "Nation of Israel lives." The words do not mean, the Nation of American Jewry lives or the Nation of Israeli Jewry lives, but rather the Nation of (all) Israel lives.

God promised the Jewish people that a surviving remnant would remain. God never said how large that remnant would be. The choice is Jewry's.