

Who is an American Jew, What is an American Jew

By Jerry Klinger

Part 1 - Israel, the Holocaust & American Jewish Life

"Reform rabbis don't care what the Torah or Jewish law says about anything; it doesn't apply to them. At an interdenominational dialogue in which I participated some years ago, shortly after the Reform movement had endorsed Cesar Chavez's boycott of grapes picked by underpaid Chicano laborers, a Conservative rabbi infuriated his Reform Counterpart by observing: 'A reform rabbi who publicly eats pork on Yom Kippur will not get into trouble with the Central Conference of American Rabbis (the Reform rabbinical association) unless he has grapes for desert.'"

"Jewish Humor" Rabbi Joseph Telushkin

"He who molds public opinion is more powerful than he who makes laws." Abraham Lincoln.

Email from Safed,:

American: *American Jews did not get off the boat yesterday.*

Safed: *What does that mean?*

American: *It means that American Jews have been part of the American experience for 350 years. We did not just arrive.*

Safed: *Ah, now I understand.. just like we are not Jews here in Israel but transplanted Russians, Poles, Americans etc and have no ties to the Holy Land. Yes, I am more than just a little aware of the privilege of living here that in fact is why I decided to become observantly Jewish and how it has heightened my life and my understanding of just who and how we are - something very special indeed.*

Between 1967 and 2005 American Jewry tried to define itself with great efforts. Confluent streams of American Jewish life flowed, searching for definition of whom and what was an American Jew. Sometimes the flow was direct and other times it was confused. Israel, the Holocaust, Feminism, save Russian Jewry, Tikkun Olam, religious and cultural revivalism were definitions which at first blush seemed to be Jewishly at cross currents with each other. Each theme rose to the level of religion and passion. Each thematic attempt at defining American Judaism impacted not just American Jews but the larger American society to varying degrees

May 16, 1967: Gamal Abdu L-Nasser, President of Egypt, Commander of the Egyptian military armies, ordered the United Nations Emergency Force, which had been stationed in the Sinai desert between Egypt and Israel since 1956, to immediately withdraw. Secretary – General of the United Nations U Thant immediately complied.

"As of today, there no longer exists an international emergency force to protect Israel. We shall exercise patience no more. We shall not complain any more to the UN about Israel. The sole method we shall apply against Israel is total war, which will result in the extermination of Zionist existence."

"Voice of the Arabs" May 18, 1967

May 22: Egypt closed the Straits of Tiran to all Israeli shipping and all ships heading to Israel's Red Sea port of Eilat. The blockade cut off Israel's only supply route with Asia and stopped its main lifeline flow of oil from its primary supplier, Iran.

May 23: The blockade was in place. Israel mobilized for war.

May 27: Nasser said "*The Jews threaten to make war. I reply: Welcome! We are ready for war.*"...."*Our basic objective will be the destruction of Israel. The Arab people want to fight.*"

May 28: "*We will not accept any...coexistence with Israel...Today the issue is not the establishment of peace between the Arab states and Israel....The war with Israel is in effect since 1948.*"

Jordan, Syria and Egypt militarily joined to destroy Israel. The Jordan legion poised to strike Israel, at its narrowest points from the Jordanian West Bank, Palestinian lands that had been annexed to Jordan. The Legion eagerly waited from inside the divided city of Jerusalem ready to plunge into the heart of Israel. Syrian gunners set their heavy weapons range sites on the Jewish villages below them from the Golan Heights. Egyptian armor ran up to the borders of Israel deep within the Gaza strip and along the Negev waiting for the impending order to start the final destruction and slaughter of the Jews.

The United States miserably failed to diplomatically raise the world effort to do anything to stop the coming war.

250,000 troops, more than 2,000 tanks and 700 aircraft ringed Israel.

The second Holocaust was imminent.

The second Holocaust was immediately screaming for more Jewish blood, only the Jews would not wait for the Holocaust to occur. They did not sit quietly with their necks turned up to the butchers knives as so many of their ancestors had done when the crusaders searched for and murdered Jews. They did not wait for the Jew hating cry of Hep Hep to fill the air as Jews died. Israel did not wait for death. Israel struck first, fast and hard.

In the early morning hours of June 5, 1967 Israeli jets screamed through the skies. The Jews did not wait for the coming knife but struck first, totally decimating the Arab Air forces of Egypt, Syria and Jordan. In six days the War was over. Little Israel, in what was viewed as nothing short of a miraculous salvation, had defeated almost certain death.

They had not just defeated but totally decimated the combined armies of Egypt, Jordan, Syria and heavy support from Iraq and the Palestinians. Israel conquered the Sinai Peninsula all the way to the Suez Canal. The West bank of Jordan, Jerusalem, Gaza, and the Golan Heights fell to the Israel Defense Forces. The world was astonished. The world was shocked. Little David had not only smitten Goliath but had become Goliath.

American Jews had stood by once again wringing their hands, impotent to prevent another Holocaust. This time they could not deny that they did not know of it. Diplomatic protestations were useless; only the force of Jewish arms, the force of Jewish resistance had saved Jewish lives. The Israeli Jew had stood up to the world and the world was different forever.

American Jews filled with pride and astonishment quickly identified with Israel. As extraordinary as the establishment and the fight for the State of Israel had been when five Arab armies invaded and were defeated in 1948, yet American Jews did not identify with the rag tag collection of Holocaust survivors and exiled refugees from Arab Judenrein lands and their accomplishment. American Jews generally were content to buy Israel bonds and send charitable donations to Israel but certainly not their sons or daughters.

In 1950 the American Jewish Committee fearful of the age old Anti-Semitic threatening accusation of dual loyalty established an understanding with the young State of Israel. Known as the Blaustein-Ben Gurion agreement it called for certain ideas to maintain peaceful American Jewish and Israeli-Jewish relations. The struggling young country was in no position to challenge American Jewry.

It was agreed:

that Jews of the U.S. as a community and as individuals have only one political allegiance and that was to the United States of America

that the Government and people of Israel respect the integrity of Jewish life in the democratic countries and the rights of the Jewish communities to develop their indigenous social, economic, and cultural aspirations, in accordance with their own needs and institutions

that Israel fully accepts the fact that the Jews in the U.S. do not live in exile and that America is home for them.

Israel reborn, would not let the American Jewish world sit torpidly, self assuredly, ignoring their recent horrific European history. The story of modern Israel arising from the ashes gripped the imagination of the American Jewish popular author Leon Uris. In 1958 he wrote the American best selling novel Exodus. The novel was named after the famed Hagganah refugee ship, the Baltimore based President Garfield, renamed the Exodus.

In 1960, Otto Preminger produced the movie Exodus. The novel and the movie along with the haunting theme music by Ferrante and Teicher made a major impact on American perceptions and understanding of Israel. The story of the Exodus resonated with American's perception of themselves and the frontier experience.

May 23, 1960, Israel startled the world when an Israeli undercover team kidnapped and spirited away the master murderer of the Holocaust, Adolph Eichmann. Eichmann had been living quietly and openly in an Argentinean suburb of Buenos Aires under the tacit protection of the Argentinean government.

Israel did not wait for the effects of diplomatic efforts to bring Eichman to trial. Israel knew too well and understood too clearly that an anti-Semitic world and the pro Nazi Argentinean government of Juan Peron would not if ever let Eichmann fall into Jewish hands.

The Holocaust was a crime specifically against the people of Israel, against all Jews worldwide. Israel acted in the name of all Jews, worldwide. Israel brought to justice in Jerusalem the mastermind of the great Anti-Semitic European machine responsible for murdering 6,000,000 Jews.

Eichman was tried in open court in Jerusalem. The story of the most barbarous failure of humanity was made public and the world was horrified. The world was horrified at the unfolding story of the Holocaust and the audacity of Israel. Eichmann was found guilty and hung. His cremated ashes were dumped far at sea.

It had only been 15 years since the end of WWII, many of the Holocaust's survivors, traumatized and damaged for life, were trying to rebuild their lives in Israel and the U.S. The survivors never forgot their brethren. They remembered them but American Jewry did not want to hear the story – they were busy building new lives. The Eichman trial forced the beginning of a reevaluation.

1961 Raoul Hilberg's book "*The Destruction of European Jewry*" appeared. Slowly and inexorably the memories came forward, but it was only slowly. Hannah Arendt, wrote "*Eichmann in Jerusalem*" in 1963. She stressed the disastrous role of the Judenraten, the Jewish councils during the Holocaust "the darkest chapter of the whole dark story." August 1966, Commentary magazine's symposium on the state of Jewish belief, the Holocaust was not so much as mentioned. The Holocaust was of such an immense evil that surely it could never be repeated again in Human history.

Yet in 1967, history threatened to repeat itself and to the same victims. If Israel could be destroyed, could American Jewry be next; 1967 was a new defining period.

After 1967, Israel's security became non-negotiable for Jews worldwide. Jews no longer sat quietly, especially in the face of Christian quietude. American Jews consciously launched a major crusade to sensitize the Christian community about the Holocaust.

Perhaps the single most important event to make the Holocaust known to the American public was the Gerald Green T.V. show "*The Holocaust*", 1978. The realistic program, eventually seen by more than 220 million Americans and Europeans, affected people deeply - none more so than U.S. Senator John Danforth, of Missouri, himself an ordained Episcopal minister.

Danforth proposed the establishment of a national Holocaust day. With President Carter's support an annual ceremony at the capital began which was soon followed by all 50 states. During the same period a network of private American Holocaust centers began rising. Survivors were ageing and their need to memorialize, never far below the surface, burst forth. By 1988, 19 Holocaust museums, 48 Holocaust resource centers, 34 Holocaust archival facilities, 12 Holocaust memorials, 25 research institutes and five libraries.

President Carter, in 1978, was eager to sell F-15 advanced fighter Jets to Saudi Arabia. He wanted leverage over the Israel lobby that opposed the fighter sales. At a dinner on Nov. 1, 1978, for Menahem Begin, the Israeli Conservative Prime Minister, Carter announced the establishment of a presidential commission recognizing the Holocaust. The commission was under the chairmanship of Eli Wiesel, a Holocaust survivor and later Nobel Prize winner for Literature about the Holocaust (1986).

Carter recommended, not just a National Day of Holocaust Remembrance, but the creation of the Holocaust Memorial Council and Museum. 1980, Congress approved, construction of the U.S. National Holocaust Memorial Museum. Construction began, 1988, on U.S. donated land. The project was privately funded by generously opened wallets of both Jews and Non Jews; real American openness, generosity and good will. The museum opened in 1993 to the public. The mission statement of the museum reads:

"The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum is America's national institution for the documentation, study, and interpretation of Holocaust history, and serves as this country's memorial to the millions of people murdered during the Holocaust.....the Museum's primary mission is to advance and disseminate knowledge about this unprecedented tragedy; to preserve the memory of those who suffered; and to encourage its visitors to reflect upon the moral and spiritual questions raised by the events of the Holocaust as well as their own responsibilities as citizens of a democracy."

Jewish studies programs – flooded American campuses of higher learning. They focused on the bible and then the Holocaust. The almost vacuous higher education courses reflected much of Jewish education on the secondary level – Bible (Torah), the Birth of Israel and a virtual emptiness for the rest.

There was a dark side to the rush to emphasize the Holocaust. Professor Ismar Schorsch of the Jewish Theological Seminary wrote an article in Midstream Magazine, 1981, "*Re-Escalating Martyrology*".

"By transforming the Holocaust into a surrogate Judaism, we lend unwitting confirmation to the crucial view that attributes Jewish survival to anti-Semitism. To be sure, hostility can temporarily function as a cohesive force; but not over the millennia. Jews persevered because Judaism was able to satisfy their deepest existential needs. By saturating our young and old with the nightmare of the Holocaust, we will only generate an ephemeral, secular Trotzjudentum, (Judaism of defiance), without substance."

"The ultimate reason... for not implanting the Holocaust at the very center of American Judaism, is not tactical but theological... The extermination of six million Jews is a theological 'black hole' so dense that it fails to emit even a single ray of light. A collapsed star can never serve as a source of illumination."

More than 20 years after the end of the Holocaust, August 1966, Commentary magazine did a symposium on the state of Jewish belief; the Holocaust was not so much as mentioned. Yet the

search for meaning, from that which was almost beyond understanding, continued. In 1966, Conservative Rabbi Richard Rubenstein's collection of essays "*After Auschwitz*",

"No Jewish theology will possess even a remote degree of relevance to contemporary Jewish life if it ignores the question of God and the death camps."

Rubenstein argued for a new theology transforming powerlessness into power – symbolized by modern Israel. On the other hand, Eliezer Berkovits, - asked not where was God but where was man.

Emil Fackenheim, 1978, composed the 614th commandment. The 614th commandment stated that Israel must survive.

"Jews are forbidden to grant posthumous victories to Hitler. They are commanded to survive as Jews, lest the Jewish people perish. They are commanded to remember the victims of Auschwitz, lest their memory perish... They are forbidden to despair of the God of Israel lest Judaism perish. To find a purpose for the Holocaust was blasphemous, responding to it was inescapable."

Focus on the Holocaust rose to almost religious level. National programs of memorial blossomed across the nation on *Yom HaShoah*, the day of (remembering) the holocaust, held annually just prior to the holiday of Passover.

The Holocaust generation by 2005 was dying and many synagogue programs had been eliminated and reduced to modestly attended city-wide programs. For most American Rabbis, the Holocaust was a theological disaster. It was a monster of such immense proportion that it had no theological answer. There were attempts to create Holocaust Seders but that was not successful. No Holocaust specific prayer has been adopted into general American Jewish liturgy. When faced directly, the Rabbis could not answer the eternal why. It was better to let it rest and die away. The children of the WWII generation and the grandchildren of the WWII generation were having children and they did not want the Holocaust to traumatize their children or become the centerpiece of Jewish life.

Anne Frank, the famous Dutch Jewish diarist who perished in Bergen Belsen at 16, wrote in her diary about human desires.

"Feb. 23 1944, Riches can all be lost, but that happiness in your own heart can only be veiled, and it will still bring you happiness again, as long as you live. As long as you can look fearlessly up into the heavens, as long as you know that you are pure within and that you will still find happiness."

A conservative American Rabbi who did not want to face the Holocaust but when asked about it candidly remarked, perhaps in two or three hundred years we will approach the Holocaust and religiously understand but not now.

In spite of all American Jewish religious reticence at looking at the Holocaust religiously an extraordinary nascent inquiry is inching forward in Israel. In the Haredi community, the

community of the ultra-ultra Orthodox, for the first time the subject of the Holocaust has been breeched. The dark theological questions are being asked. Perhaps they too will not find any answers but they are willing to ask to examine and build the spiritual memorials that American Jewry has failed to do.

The eternal why of the Holocaust may never be answered yet the need for understanding of "why" remains." American Jews, whether from the right or left, sought justification for the unanswerable with an answer – the birth of Israel. From the Reconstructionist Prayer Book, "*God's loving acts have not abandoned us, and God has brought together our scattered kin from the distant corners of the earth.*" From Gates of the Seasons – the Reform Jewish guide to the Jewish year "*on Yom HaShoah, we mourn, the death of six million Jews slaughtered by the Nazis but our grief gives way to rejoicing when we join in the celebration of Israel's rebirth on Yom HaAtsmaut (Israel Independence Day).*"

The Jewish Publication Society published more titles about Israel (28) in the decade between 1967 and 1977 than in the two decades before. Israel quickly became identified with American frontier imagery and infused with democratic ideals. Contrary and as a real foil to Israel, Arab enemies of Israel were armed by the anti-democratic communist, anti-Western world.

American Jewish attendance at *Yom HaAtsmaut* celebrations became central defining moments. Attendance at Israel day or Israel Independence day programming frequently surpassed the central religious holiday which defined Jews for millennia – Simchat Torah (Joy of the Torah). During the holiday young Jewish children parade around the synagogue carrying little white and blue flags of Israel with prominent Stars of David and little flags of Torahs. American Jewish pride and identity with little Israel swelled to religious levels.

Not all American Jews reacted with a sense of reawakened Jewish identity tied to Israel. Rabbi Joachim Prinz, of the American Jewish Committee, never known for its pro-Zionist leaning, warned that because of two things American spiritual Judaism was headed for extinction, intermarriage and American Jewry's fixation with Israel. Prinz called it *Israelotry*.

The miraculous salvation of Israel, in the 1967's Six Day War, was both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand Israel survived destruction. On the other hand Israel was now the Goliath of the Middle East and over the lives of almost 2,000,000 intractable Palestinians.

At first American Christian communities, like American Jewish, communities were stunned by the immensity of the Israeli victory. It was not long afterward that the Federal Council of Churches of Christ declared that it can not condone by silence territorial expansion by armed force. The council ignored the causes of the war or the decades of Israeli suffering at the hands of Arab brutal aggression. The Council soon pressed for American contact with the Palestine Liberation Organization, a shadowy organization under the leadership of Yasser Arafat, dedicated to the destruction of Israel.

Maybe the Council's motives were based in Christian compassion for the Palestinians. The terrible situation of the Palestinian peoples, themselves historically never a people but an amalgamation of migrating Arab communities, exacerbated and distorted historic realities. The

Palestinians were locked into displaced person camps after the 1948 Arab rejection of the partition plan and later military defeat. Neighboring Arab governments were *not* willing to integrate their fellow Palestinian Arabs.

The lands voted in the United Nations Partition Plan to establish Palestine were annexed by Jordan and dominated by Egypt. The lands were never turned over to Palestinian control. Instead the Palestinians remained willing and unwilling, political pawns in the Arab world, to be used to destroy Israel in the future. Abba Eban, Israeli Knesset member and internationally recognized foreign statesman, once commented about peace efforts with the Palestinians, "*the Palestinians are a remarkable people, they never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity.*"

Post June 1967 root changes in American Jewish support for Israel began to emerge from the generation of anti-Establishment Jews nurtured in the wake of the anti-Vietnam war era of the 1960's. American Jewish anti-Zionist, radical liberalism, in the three decades following 1967, would forget history and the millennia of the Jewish experience. They would try to write the future by reshaping the past and the Jewish link to Israel hoping to be accepted as Americans and not just Jews.

Other American Jews turned inward when they felt betrayed by radical liberalism. American Jewish women advanced to the forefront of a dynamic American yearning for equality and freedom – American Feminism. Still other American Jews reached inwardly to find a reawakening connection to God and an American approach to Judaism. American Jews refused to turn their backs on the huge community of Russian Jewry faced with cultural extinction. "*Never Again*" was a plaintive cry with resonance. If the Holocaust and Israel could not define what an American Jew was, what can?