

Special Supplement

The American Jewish Committee 80th Anniversary

In 1906, an outbreak of pogroms in czarist Russia impelled a small group of distinguished American Jews to create the American Jewish Committee, dedicated to the protection of civil and religious rights of Jews the world over. Over the ensuing eight decades, the organization's agenda came to reflect the growing range of concerns of American Jews. On the occasion of its 80th anniversary, the American Jewish Committee celebrated its past and turned, with renewed dedication, to the challenges of the future.

In Appreciation

THE American Jewish Committee observed its 80th anniversary with a series of events held throughout the year, in different parts of the country. Thanks to the generosity of the following men and women, the anniversary year—including the annual meeting and celebration in Washington, D.C., May 14–18, 1986—will long be remembered as an inspiring landmark in the Committee's history.

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The Continued Vitality of the American Jewish Committee at 80

by HENRY L. FEINGOLD

WHEN THE NEED FOR change is greatest, we are most prone to reenact the stratagems that have been successful in the past. This holds true for organizations, no less so than for individuals. The plethora of Jewish organizations that clutters the American Jewish scene is specific to time and place, yet we rarely acknowledge that some of these groups have become obsolete. Instead, we allow them to continue, watching with amazement as they become things they were never meant to be.

The test of the continued viability of particular Jewish organizations must come from within. Ultimately the judgment should be based on how well the founding principles of the organization have stood the test of time. From that perspective, the American Jewish Committee (AJC) is more fortunate than other Jewish community-relations and defense organizations, whose missions were less broadly conceived. When the threat to American Jewish survival stems more from acceptance than from raging anti-Semitism, agencies whose agendas rest solely on a defense function are threatened with a loss of function. Success, no less so than failure, it needs to be pointed out, can be a cause of obsolescence. What role can Zionist organizations play when the principal goal of Zionist ideology, the establishment of a Jewish state, has been realized? Zionism, in its American Jewish version, has become so much a part of Jewish consciousness in the United States that it is difficult today to find any Jewish organization that does not lay claim to being Zionist, at least in the functional sense of being a staunch supporter of Israel. The mission that was once the sole preserve of Zionist organizations is today shared by all.

Sometimes history simply bypasses an organization. The founders of the Jewish "congress" movement prior to World War I railed against the "court Jews" of the AJC, preaching endlessly about the right of the "Jewish masses." Today it is the descendants of those masses who constitute the membership of the AJC. The Jewish masses have gone on to become individuated members of the middle class, seeking desperately to differentiate themselves from the masses.

The AJC, of course, has no special exemption from the ravages of time, and we will presently note those areas where it has been compelled to

reshape its mission to take account of new realities. Still, the agency continues to be remarkably vital. Indeed, the AJC's organizational culture and persona have grown more relevant to American Jewry as the descendants of the East European immigrants have become more like the German Jews they once held simultaneously in awe and contempt. Not all the reasons why the AJC continues to thrive are readily retrievable, but a fortunate confluence of heritage and present circumstance certainly has something to do with it.

The AJC never allowed its vision of the future to be colored by any blinding ideology. Such ideologies, of course, have inspired Jews in the past and continue to do so today, releasing enormous energy and talent. But there is another side to the coin; ideologies are highly perishable, and the debris of organizations that embraced them in the past litter the Jewish historical scene. The *halutz*, that product of Socialist-Zionist ideology, who once sang of the beauty of the soil, is hardly heard from at present. Today beauty is produced in the kibbutz beauty parlor, and salvation comes from calculating the profits generated by the kibbutz factory. All people eventually discover what the AJC's founders learned naturally from functioning in an American environment: life precedes ideology and, when necessary, breaks through the confines that the latter seeks to impose.

Of the 59 prominent Jews who were invited to convene on November 11, 1906, to establish the AJC, over a third were native born, and a high percentage of the remainder had arrived in the United States when they were quite young. Their American experience shaped the AJC founders into operationalists, men who were drawn more to common sense than to ideological fervor. To the newly arrived East European immigrants, who were likely to identify Jewishness with ideological heat, such types must have seemed alien. But it was precisely the penchant for pragmatism of the AJC founders that was crucial for long-range policy planning. This is one of the keys to the ongoing relevance of the AJC.

Clear evidence of the insight of the AJC founders into how a free society operates can be seen in the two areas where the organization has always been a pacesetter: information strategy and political tactics. Louis Marshall, the second president of the AJC, seemed to understand intuitively—there were no college courses in “communication arts” in his day—that the production and dissemination of information as building blocks for the perception of reality were crucial elements in modern society. Marshall grasped the fact that American society permitted all groups, including Jews, to have input in shaping—Marshall preferred the term “educating”—public opinion. Great care was thus taken by the AJC to build a capacity for the production and dissemination of information into the organization. Over the years, AJC-sponsored research, its use of the media, and its official

publications have given the organization an influence which belies its comparatively small membership. Works like the five-volume *Studies in Prejudice*, the two-volume Lakeville study, and the various National Surveys of American Jews have not only produced important data but are in themselves historical data.

A clear sense of how a free society operates also shaped the political tactics of the AJC founders, which were based on a combination of "education" and coalition building. The latter has today become a commonplace in Jewish community-relations work, since without it a group that constitutes only 2.5 percent of the American population would easily be overshadowed by groups with greater numbers and more urgent agendas. Still, it was the AJC that pioneered efforts in this area.

The AJC founders were fearful that the East European immigrants arriving on these shores would, as a result of centuries of physical and spiritual ghettoization, revert to separatism in the United States and thereby become as vulnerable here as they had been in Europe. The problem, as the AJC leaders defined it, was to change their perceptions, which had been shaped by an experience with government and politics at their most malignant. Men like Louis Marshall could not understand how political action outside normal channels could have an impact on public policy. Why go on strike or talk about revolution, if the legal instruments for change were available to Jews? Why agitate in the streets if the education process could be used to build public opinion to support Jewish interests? If conflicting interests did indeed exist, Marshall maintained, they could be reconciled within the system. What was important to him was that in the United States there was no prohibition against Jews projecting influence. Indeed, Marshall dreamed of Jews educating the entire world with their "civilizing ideas."

Young, affluent, and often well educated, the early leaders of the AJC matched the mold of Progressive reformers. It was the Progressives, represented by "Teddy" Roosevelt in the White House and Charles E. Hughes and Woodrow Wilson in their respective state capitols, who had instilled a new sense of buoyancy in the American people. A confident feeling was about in the nation that despite failures, especially in the governance of cities, the American experiment would again be set aright. For their part, the AJC leaders' optimism about American society led naturally to a confidence regarding the future of American Jewry. And this confidence, in turn, was buttressed by a firm belief, which they shared with their relatives in Germany, that the full emancipation of Jews was assured. This optimism may seem naive in a post-Holocaust world, but many of the founding generation of the AJC did in fact live to see the granting of full civil and political rights under the Weimar constitution—which was written by a Jew. Were they alive today, the early AJC leaders might well argue that it

was not their assumptions that were unreasonable, but rather the course of history.

Proud of the remarkable economic achievement of their group, which they attributed to the unprecedented freedom and opportunity provided by American society, the early AJC leaders could not imagine anything but a happy outcome to the American Jewish experience. Many of them no doubt believed that how Jews fared in the larger society was related more to the continued growth of the gross national product than to the abstract principles of ideology. It seemed inconceivable to them that over the long run a group like the Jews, which demonstrated the entrepreneurial energy and civic virtue so esteemed by the host culture, could long be excluded on the basis of religious prejudice. A thriving market economy, the AJC leaders reasoned, could not long abide measurements of value which did not relate to utility. And American Jews quite clearly possessed such utility.

The early AJC leaders were fully aware that the American system was not yet perfect from a Jewish standpoint. There was, for example, discrimination in some resort areas and social clubs. Moreover, some distressing stereotypes appeared in the press, and occasionally the charge was put forward that Jews were malingerers when it came to fulfilling their military obligations. In addition, there were the vexing activities of Christian missionaries and such shocking incidents as the lynching of Leo Frank in Georgia. Still, the AJC leaders took it for granted that things would improve, and especially so if Jews took care to appear like everyone else and to be good, loyal Americans. What they could not foresee was that the very freedom and openness of American society, which they had come to cherish, would bring in their wake a new set of problems for American Jews, problems that were no less threatening than exclusion.

Such leading AJC figures as Jacob Schiff, Louis Marshall, Oscar Straus, and Cyrus Adler were genuinely convinced that a confluence existed between American and Jewish values. Indeed, to them it seemed almost as if the American experiment were based on a Judaic idea. After all, Judaism, or at least the "Old Testament" Hebraic ethos, was cherished by the Puritans. That gave Jews an extra measure of legitimacy, and it was legitimation, most certainly, that was of primary interest to the founders of the AJC. When Oscar Straus established the American Jewish Historical Society in 1892, he commissioned Meyer Kayserling to write a book about the Jewish involvement in the discovery of America. The result was the still useful *Christopher Columbus and the Participation of the Jews in the Spanish and Portuguese Discoveries*. Straus must have been gratified with the volume, since Kayserling not only maintained that Columbus may have been a Marrano but also demonstrated that Marranos had financed several other voyages of discovery. Jews, it appeared, had not only been "present at the

creation," but were, at least in some sense, the actual creators of the Republic.

Small wonder, then, that the AJC leaders viewed themselves as being as fully American as Jewish, looking upon American society as something of a derivative Jewish culture. It must have warmed the hearts of the surviving founders of the AJC when, in 1923, Robert Park, the distinguished non-Jewish social theorist, earnestly suggested that Jewish ethics be taught in high schools as the model of the American ethos. That was what the AJC leaders had felt all along. They saw no problem in being at once Jewish and American, no such thing as the "two-cultures" problem later identified by sociologists, but only confluence and harmony.

Even on the matter of Zionism, the original AJC approach falls remarkably close to where most American Jews locate themselves today. That may come as a surprise to those who believe that the AJC was founded by adamant anti-Zionists. There were, of course, some such individuals among the AJC founders. But there were also men like Julian Mack and Judah Magnes, who were outspoken political Zionists, and others, like Jacob Schiff and Louis Marshall, who considered themselves cultural Zionists. Jacob Schiff was joined by a number of other prominent AJC figures in extending generous financial support to the budding educational and cultural institutions of the *Yishuv*. During World War I, AJC leaders played an important role in providing sustenance to the hard-pressed Jewish community in Palestine. In 1918 the AJC officially endorsed the Balfour Declaration. In 1929 Louis Marshall and several other prominent individuals associated with the AJC were coopted as members of the expanded Jewish Agency, the political and administrative body created by the British government to help administer the Palestine Mandate.

Since the creation of the State of Israel, the AJC has come fully to terms with the aspirations and program of political Zionism. The very idea of a Jewish state struck terror in the hearts of some early AJC leaders, who dreaded the specter of "dual loyalty." That great fear, which was a reflection of their own insecurity, was needless. American Jewry has not negated its loyalty to the United States. Rather, it has followed the prescription of Louis Brandeis, when he wrote: "Practical experience and observation convince me that to be good Americans, we must be better Jews, and to be better Jews we must be Zionists." Brandeis's formulation, including its sequence of loyalties—American, Jewish, Zionist—has proved over time to be eminently acceptable to most American Jews. Support of Israel ranks near the top of what has been identified as the "civil religion" of American Jewry. At the same time, the number of American Jews choosing to settle in Israel remains low, the phenomenon being largely confined to the Orthodox sector of the community. American Jewry as a whole has come to view

Israel as an invaluable source of Jewish energy that can be enlisted in the cause of American Jewish survival.

In recent years the AJC's links to Israel have been strengthened in a number of significant ways. An Institute on American Jewish-Israeli Relations has been established, which in typical AJC fashion seeks to correct misperceptions on both sides by providing accurate information through research. The AJC has also founded the Matthew and Edna Brown Young Israeli Leadership Program to transfer important political skills to emerging leaders in Israeli society and to familiarize them with the workings of religious and political pluralism in the United States. A Hebrew-language journal, *Tefutsot Israel*, informs Israeli readers about events and problems relating to American Jewry.

II

Time has been relatively kind to the AJC, but it has not left the organization totally untouched. Thus, some problems that were once thought to be critical have either been solved or have taken on less menacing proportions. On the other hand, a number of victories that were once proudly tolled seem insignificant in retrospect. Most importantly, various problems that were only dimly foreseen in the past now loom large, while some solutions implemented in an earlier period appear inappropriate in present circumstances.

Anti-Semitism was a core problem for the AJC prior to World War II. In 1929, Cyrus Sulzberger sounded the alarm about an impending wave of anti-Semitism, which did in fact materialize during the troubled 1930s. Today, however, when American Jewry seems more threatened by absorption into a benevolent society, such concerns have lost their edge. No student of Jewish history would ever counsel a relaxing of defenses against the dreaded malady of anti-Semitism; it is too enduring a phenomenon for that. But surely the sounding of an alarm about a sustained loss of American Jewish particularity deserves a higher priority.

Similarly, the struggle waged by the AJC to assure Jewish students access to the nation's best colleges and professional schools has much less relevance today. The motivating factor in this situation was not merely the awareness that schools like Harvard offered a superior education but also the recognition that certification from such schools yielded access to the inner citadels of power in American society. With a little help from Sputnik and the courts, the education battle has been won. There is no Ivy League college today with a Jewish enrollment of less than ten percent, and in the prestigious professional schools the figures often climb to three times that.

A strong Jewish presence on campus, among both students and faculty, as well as a proliferation of Jewish studies programs, seems so natural today that it is difficult to imagine that the situation could ever have been otherwise. That is why the recent spate of research about the formal and informal quotas that once obtained at schools like Wellesley, Sarah Lawrence, and Yale produces gasps of disbelief among the Jewish students attending those institutions today. There are even some Jewish survivalists who have begun to ask if the victory is not an empty one. They see the prestige colleges, with their beautiful campuses, talented students, and liberal arts programs, as seductive traps, leading students away from a strong commitment to the Jewish community.

The struggle—ultimately unsuccessful—against immigration restriction was a key priority of the AJC in the 1920s. In 1965, too late for the Jewish victims of the Holocaust who might have found a haven here, a new immigration law went into effect, making a crucial distinction between normal immigrants and people in dire need of a place of refuge. Today there are fewer Jews in the refugee stream. Moreover, a haven for Jews exists in Israel. At present the problem is not where to put refugee Jews, but rather how to get them out of places like the Soviet Union and Syria.

There is one major instance in the history of the AJC in which the strategies that worked well in the past simply proved ineffective in a new context. That was during the 1930s and 1940s, when the AJC, despite its talent for coalition building, its political influence, and its skills in communication and education, could not convince officials of the Roosevelt administration to open the nation's doors to Jewish refugees and to forcefully impress upon the Nazis that the mass murder of Jews would not be tolerated. In retrospect it is clear that the quiet behind-the-scenes approach that the AJC preferred was inappropriate in the context of the Holocaust. The AJC leaders remained loyal to the Roosevelt administration even after it became clear that the U.S. State Department was undermining all attempts at rescue. What Reinhold Niebuhr once observed about Jews generally seems particularly true of the AJC's wartime leadership. Niebuhr felt that Jews were theologically unable to fully imagine evil, especially the satanic evil represented by the Nazi regime in Berlin. Instead the AJC leaders were convinced that what worked before would work again. Still, it is difficult to say if a more vocal approach would have made much difference with regard to the outcome. Even if American officials had been willing to act, it seems impossible that they could have convinced the Nazi leaders to abandon their plans for a "final solution" after the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941. Regimes which dream up programs of mass murder are probably closed off to moral suasion, and until mid-1943 that was the only weapon Washington had available in combating Nazism.

A key concern of the AJC in the past was the welfare of Jewish communities abroad. Threats to far-flung Jewish communities still exist today, but now a sovereign Jewish state seems best able to cope with such situations. Indeed, Israel even has the capacity to bring to justice individuals whose hands are stained with Jewish blood. Moreover, new organizations have been established whose exclusive concern is aiding Jews in Russia, Iran, Ethiopia, or wherever. The defense function has long since ceased being the exclusive preserve of the AJC.

On the American scene, as we have noted, the need to protect the civil and religious rights of Jews has grown somewhat less urgent. The key problem today is restoring the inner vitality of American Jewry. What does it avail to safeguard the rights and interests of American Jews if they voluntarily choose to consign themselves to oblivion? This, indeed, is a new page in the American Jewish experience, and one that remains largely untouched by the AJC's formal legacy.

III

There are many American Jews who have no sense of an inner Jewish crisis. Why assume that things are bad, they ask, when things appear to be so good? Indeed, things are good, and it is the very success of American Jewry that makes the challenge to its survival so difficult to perceive. Forgotten is the fact that the remarkable success story is written primarily in terms of achievement in the secular society—the highest per capita income of any group; the highest level of formal education of any group; and so on. Jews are justifiably proud of the disproportionate role they play in the elites that assure the smooth functioning of American society. Still, despite their success, and, indeed, in some sense because of it, Jewish survival has become more problematic than ever before.

The sad truth is that individual achievement does not necessarily translate into communal well-being, and the full cost of the “making it” ethos to Jewish life has yet to be calculated. The statistics of success—scientized artifacts from beginning to end—measure only what is countable: so many lawyers; so many physicians; so high a per capita income; and so on. They tell us nothing about the inner spirit required for Jewish survival in a free society. Even if every American Jewish child attends an Ivy League college and becomes a skilled professional, it cannot be assumed that the collective Jewish enterprise will thereby be strengthened. The generation that founded the AJC linked its achievement and its good fortune to serving the Jewish community. Today, in contrast, only a small percentage of those who

possess the financial and intellectual resources needed to play a leadership role in Jewish life choose to become involved. Ties to the Jewish community are voluntary and, in a growing number of cases, they have become extremely tenuous. What has clearly happened is that there has been an erosion in the Jewish cultural nexus which, in the past, produced the values that made Jews want to give, serve, and belong.

The secular mind-set, which a few generations ago was still tempered by traditional Jewish values, has taken an increasingly strong hold in American Jewish life. The impact of this on Jewish culture is hardly neutral, since the kind of intense Calvinist secularism that dominates American culture is highly fragmentizing; it insists on separating things which in other cultures continue to remain bound together. Thus, in the United States, it is not only church that is separated from state, but also ethics from etiquette, art from religion, theory from practice, health from happiness, and so on. The consequence of this fragmentizing process is particularly problematic for the Jewish enterprise: it has led to the separation of the religious component—Judaism—from the ethnic-peoplehood component—Jewishness.

A secular Jew is a person who is convinced that it is possible to be Jewish without being Judaic. Such a person considers himself or herself free to choose the degree of adherence to the tenets of the faith, to reshape those tenets, or to abandon them altogether. For many generations, secular Jews—Bundists, Yiddishists, Labor Zionists, and all shades of universalists—were able to share the same Jewish world as “observant” Jews. In recent years, however, several controversial matters, including the “who is a Jew” issue as embodied in the question of patrilineal descent, have led to a widening of the gulf between the various groups in Jewish life. If not narrowed, this gulf may prove more threatening to Jewish survival than the demographic decline which is also linked to modern secular assumptions. “Pluralism,” “unity in diversity,” and the other traditional assumptions that once helped to bridge the divisions that have existed among Jews since the Emancipation appear to have lost their healing properties.

In a sense the American Jewish life equation itself has grown larger since the founding of the AJC. The good things have become better and the bad things have become worse. Poverty and its attendant ills have almost vanished from the Jewish scene. A once marginal immigrant group now occupies a central place in American society. But the sense of belonging to a distinct people with its own worthwhile culture has also waned: American Jewry is becoming more American and less Jewish. Without a common base in experience and some shared values, the idea that affluent, professional Jews should act together for the greater good of all Jews—the essence of the AJC sensibility—may prove insufficient for Jewish survival.

IV

Where do the profound alterations in the American Jewish condition leave the AJC? Clearly the organization is located at the flashpoint of change. Moreover, it would appear that key elements of the AJC's organizational culture and persona have taken on increased importance for American Jews. The German-Jewish founders of the AJC were in approximately the same situation in their society that most American Jews find themselves in today. The former also needed to balance the claims of secular and Jewish culture, of individual and community needs, of freedom and responsibility. Perhaps sensing this, thousands of contemporary Jewish professionals, both male and female—gifted lawyers, skilled surgeons, successful managers in the public and private sectors—have in recent years entered the ranks of the AJC. By dint of its tradition, the AJC is the likeliest conduit to enlist such Jews for a greater Jewish purpose.

As early as 1962, John Slawson, then executive vice-president of the AJC, determined to turn the agency's programming in a more survivalist direction. But the question of how to change an organization whose sensibility is basically secular into a vehicle for Judaic enrichment is not easily answered. AJC members, to be sure, have been culturally enriched by participating in the summer seminar programs of the Academy for Jewish Studies. Similarly, telecourses in basic Judaism and the radio series "Jewish Viewpoints" have been well received by the membership. These and other programs have helped to make the AJC "less a committee and more Jewish." Still unanswered, however, is the question of how to reach out to a wider Jewish audience. And, most importantly of all, with what kind of message? Indeed, what kind of Judaism should a secular organization seek to project?

We need not search far for the answer. The AJC's propensity for generating information and research may be construed as a transmuted element of traditional Judaic culture. Whatever the matter under examination, be it the nature of anti-Semitism, the impact of intermarriage, and so on, the approach to the subject is related to the tradition of *lernen*, of close study of text, which is at the core of the Jewish tradition. True, the methods used are scientific, but the passion to be at the juncture where information and abstraction converge stems from a classical Jewish outlook. That does not mean people who are drawn to the AJC are talmudists dressed in modern garb. Rather, it places the talent for information strategy, which the AJC has cultivated since its very inception, within the Jewish fold. It is a contemporary way in which the AJC fulfills a Judaizing role.

Rather than focusing on texts, the AJC concentrates on Jewish life itself. In one way or another what American Jews are talking about is usually

linked to an AJC study. Time and again Jewish agencies discover that the requisite research that defines a particular problem has already been undertaken by the AJC. And the tradition continues. In "Project 2000" the AJC seeks to open a window into the future, anticipating the emerging trends in Jewish life at the end of the 20th century and beyond, and developing policy recommendations around them. Soon a series of pamphlets will be available reporting the findings of a conference on "New Perspectives in American Jewish Sociology." While certainly not Talmud, the role such information plays in keeping the Jewish enterprise vital should be evident.

In keeping with its desire to project information to the widest possible audience, the AJC maintains the most extensive and diverse publications program of any Jewish organization. Appearing under AJC auspices are the *American Jewish Year Book*, *Commentary*, *Present Tense*, *AJC Journal*, *Washington Report*, and a number of issue-oriented newsletters, occasional studies, and position papers. Future plans call for making broad use of the electronic media to supplement printed materials.

The AJC did not expand its membership until 1944. Before that time, the organization was composed of a handful of influential laymen and a small professional staff. AJC leaders were convinced that people of weight and influence, individuals who were already well connected in the general community, could best represent the Jewish interest. The broadening of the AJC membership was based less on the sudden conviction that democracy should prevail than on the fact that over the years the "select few" had become the "select many." The number of American Jews who qualify for leadership at present has increased dramatically. At the same time, there has been a noticeable decline in the number of such Jews who manifest a compelling desire to use their wealth and position to serve the interests of the Jewish community. It is difficult to conceive of the survival of American Jewry without the resources of this elite element.

The need of the hour, then, is to persuade free Jews to make a commitment for a greater Jewish purpose. "Free Jews" is the key term here, going to the very heart of the matter. There is no force in post-Emancipation Jewish life that can compel Jews to be Jewish. Beyond that, the habit of linking freedom to responsibility, which stands at the center of the Jewish tradition, has been largely forgotten. Freedom, properly understood, should encompass not only civil and political rights, but also the freedom bestowed by individual estate and talent. At present, only a small percentage of the increasing number of American Jews who are blessed with the latter form of freedom—that based on personal resources, whether intellectual, spiritual, or financial—have been mobilized for Jewish survival. Many of them, unfortunately, are content to use their freedom to feed the cult of "self-fulfillment" that is yet another fruit of the modern secular ethos.

In the Jewish tradition, self-fulfillment is possible only in a familial and communal context, one in which freedom is always linked to responsibility. Classically, Jews live through community, rather than outside or against it. Today, free modern Jews need to be persuaded to behave in a fashion that came naturally to most Jews in the past: to participate in the work of Jewish communal organizations and to generally discharge vital Jewish communal functions. The founders of the AJC were keenly aware that history and kinship had assigned them special responsibility. It is that sense of responsibility which needs to be communicated to the American Jewish elite of today. Without it, the hope for Jewish survival under conditions of freedom is greatly diminished.

v

It would be easiest, of course, for the AJC to go on as before, to continue doing what it has always done so well. "If it ain't broke," the American maxim has it, "don't fix it." However, given the realities of American Jewish life at present, sticking with the stratagems and agendas of the past would be a prescription for disaster. Let us be clear about it: the signs of Jewish well-being in the United States are external, more like the flush on the cheeks of a consumptive patient than a symptom of good health. The statistics of success do not address the primary threat to American Jewish survival, which is internal, a matter of the spirit. That is the real meaning of the perceptible decline in Jewish commitment that we are witnessing today.

Is there a role that the AJC can play in helping to meet this new challenge? A great deal depends on how well the AJC understands its own organizational culture. Over the years, it has been an effective intergroup-relations and defense agency, guarding against a palpable external threat. Can the AJC now shift gears and face a threat that emanates largely from within? The foregoing discussion has pointed up several aspects of the AJC character that ideally suit it to play such a role.

The founders of the AJC were modern and urbane, firmly entrenched in the upper middle class, and proudly American. Yet, at the same time, they found a way to be Jewishly committed. Over the years, the AJC has brought thousands of free modern Jews into the arena of Jewish life, making them activists in the Jewish community. It is indeed possible to motivate such Jews to serve a larger Jewish purpose. The history of the AJC bears witness to that fact. The AJC has served American Jewry well for these past 80 years. May it continue to flourish to the traditional 120th year of life—and beyond.

Looking Ahead: The American Jewish Committee at 80

by DAVID M. GORDIS

ANNIVERSARIES ARE APPROPRIATE times for reflection—not only for individuals, but for organizations as well. And it is particularly appropriate for the American Jewish Committee, for which thoughtful reflection is a defining characteristic. In the most significant ethical treatise our people has produced, *The Ethics of the Fathers*, one of our sages set down for us, almost two millennia ago, the underlying motivation for the reflective process. He wrote:

Consider three things and you will not go astray:
Know from where you have come;
And where you are going;
And before whom you are destined to give an accounting.

Throughout its 80-year existence, the American Jewish Committee has sought to understand the past. We have sought to uncover the underlying causes of society's major problems and challenges. Our research regarding the roots of prejudice, the nature of ethnicity, and the ramifications of pluralism has enriched our understanding, both of the social pathology of our age and of how people behave within their own groups and with others. We have examined our Jewish values and explored their pertinence to contemporary realities. We have sought to anticipate events and to help plan for, guide, and shape the world in which we live. And our memories have constantly been harnessed to serve the future.

In that spirit we have pioneered in the struggle for human rights, on behalf of Jews and all others who have suffered physical abuse, prejudice and discrimination, hunger, poverty, and tyranny over mind and spirit, anywhere in the world. Our work on the international scene through the Jacob Blaustein Institute for the Advancement of Human Rights has broken new ground and set a high standard for all who labor in this field. In

Note: Text of address by David M. Gordis, executive vice-president of the American Jewish Committee, at the Committee's 80th-anniversary celebration, May 15, 1986, in Washington, D.C.

our own country, we have taken strong policy positions on issues involving civil rights, public education, immigration, law enforcement, and electoral reform. We have stood, and will continue to stand, in the front ranks in the battle to protect the constitutional separation of church and state.

At the same time we have been concerned about the apparent decline in values in our land—the general sense that such concepts as honesty, patriotism, and mutual respect and dignity do not command the importance they once did in the marketplace of ideas. Therefore we have helped spur the search for ways to teach common-core values in our society. Not Christian values, not even Judeo-Christian values, but values shared by all. And that transition is important. For while the values of many of us are shaped by our particular religious and ideological positions, those values must become nonparochial when they enter the public arena. In this country of diversity, Jews and Christians and Muslims and Buddhists and nonbelievers all share the responsibility for shaping the discourse on values, public ethics, and morality. And so we are concerned about inculcating beliefs that we can hold in common, not those determined by the outlook of one or another religious group. And in all of our efforts, we have been aware of our accountability—to the Jewish community, to the general community, and, perhaps most meaningfully, to our own traditions of excellence in whatever we undertake.

From its very beginning, this agency undertook to serve the needs of our people by advancing the freedoms of all people, and to do so responsibly and effectively, retaining our allegiance to the ethical principles of Judaism, to American democratic values, and to the humanistic insights of enlightened Western tradition. Over the years, we have held steadfastly to the conviction that these three sources of our character, far from being incompatible, are mutually reinforcing—are, indeed, the foundation upon which a creative Jewish life in America can and will continue to be built. We have always seen American Jews as full partners in the forging of the American character, and we are convinced that our Jewish community's creative vitality is enhanced by its interaction with American values. We reject assimilation. We seek, rather, acculturation and integration. And by word and deed we declare that this goal is both attainable and desirable.

It is this conviction—or, more precisely, the recent challenges to this conviction—that I should like to address here today. As we reflect on the past and seek to define the American Jewish Committee's role in Jewish and American public life in the years ahead, I think it is vital that we reaffirm our world view and understand the challenges to it, so that we ourselves are absolutely clear about our position and can promote it effectively in the Jewish and general communities.

II

The validity of our traditional AJC agenda has been challenged recently by powerful and prominent voices urging a sharp narrowing of Jewish concerns. More and more frequently in Jewish organizational life we hear the assertion that the only issue for Jews is Israel—that statements and positions on Israel are the sole criterion by which political candidates should be judged or supported, financially or otherwise. To a considerable extent, the creation of single-issue PACs is an expression of this phenomenon.

In that narrow framework, political and religious leaders whose views on the separation of church and state, on matters of social policy and other public concerns run counter to the views of most American Jews—and may even threaten vital Jewish interests here and abroad—are transformed overnight into Jewish heroes on the basis of a carefully crafted statement or two in support of Israel. Alliances are urged and political alignments pressed upon the Jewish community on the basis of this single issue. The separation of church and state, we are told, is not that important; Israel needs all the friends she can get, whatever the price paid for this friendship. Is the nation weighing policy alternatives regarding the levels of military appropriations and the funding of social programs? We are assured by some that we need not concern ourselves with determining a proper balance among national priorities or make painful choices. There is just a single principle to be applied: It is inconsistent for those who advocate support for Israel to oppose any military program at any time. How easy—and how tempting! With one stroke we are relieved of the need to consider vital issues carefully and to advocate what we feel is best for our country, for Israel, and for the world.

True to its past, and concerned about tomorrow, the American Jewish Committee rejects this single-issue agenda. Our commitment to Israel's strength, security, and vitality is unshakable. Our efforts to promote understanding of, and support for, Israel's needs are wide and deep, as is our determination to strengthen Israel-Diaspora relations and increase intergroup understanding inside Israel. Israel is a prime focus of our coalition building and our international diplomatic and cultural activities. But our credibility is rooted in the breadth of our concerns as Americans *and* as Jews. Our support of Israel derives both from our Jewish consciousness and from our commitment to America and its democratic values. It gains in effectiveness because we are recognized not as narrow advocates of self-interest, but as fully involved participants in the entire range of American and international issues. We reject out of hand the notion that our Jewish and general loyalties conflict with one another.

Let me stress that our rejection of the single-issue agenda goes deeper than the matter of effectiveness and credibility. We have no quarrel with organizations that focus exclusively on pro-Israel advocacy. We support AIPAC and participate in its work. What we reject is the confusion of that portion of the Jewish agenda, important as it is, with the whole. Israel is the critical center of Jewish life, and we are in awe of its accomplishments and its significance for all Jews everywhere. Israel is a threshold issue for us. We cannot and will not support candidates for public office who are unsympathetic to our concerns for Israel's security and future. But we are a world people. From thousands of years of living on the margins of often-hostile societies, Jews have distilled a sensitivity for the disadvantaged and the oppressed which we have put to good use in this free American climate.

American Jews have pursued justice and compassion in line with the authentic spirit and teachings of our heritage. This pursuit wears no label, either conservative or liberal. It is what defines us as a Jewish community living in the spirit of prophetic values. As participants and leaders in the movements to protect and extend human rights and improve intergroup relations, we have made an indelible contribution to the growth and enhancement of American life. I am convinced that the overwhelming majority of American Jews remains committed to that participation—even though some influential leaders, who have grown disheartened because these efforts are sometimes painful and never easy, urge us to turn away from our traditional social concerns and to formulate our positions in the narrowest self-interest.

III

Besides propounding a myopic view of Jewish concerns, some advocates of a narrow communal agenda also criticize the American Jewish Committee's traditional nonpartisanship. Technically and legally, of course, all Jewish communal agencies are nonpartisan—and no one is suggesting that this be changed. But a pattern of political alignment by national Jewish agencies has developed over the past few years, and there are pressures for the AJC to conform. Indeed, some American Jewish leaders have found it expedient to indicate broad Jewish support for one or another policy of the current administration, even when there is little evidence of such support.

Advocates of partisanship in Jewish public life argue that a political party or administration will support Jewish interests only if American Jews articulate their support for that party or administration's goals and ideology. We challenge that assertion. In recent days, for example, the suggestion has been made that the Jewish community actively support the sale of arms to

Saudi Arabia. It is a suggestion that a number of us have characterized as unrealistic. For strategic considerations, as well as a concern to be as helpful and supportive as we possibly can to an administration which has been a remarkable friend to Israel and to many Jewish needs, we have said we would not go to battle against this sale. The feeling has been conveyed that, in fact, the strategic balance will not be substantially altered by the reduced package proposed. But to expect anyone in the American Jewish community to actively support a proposal to supply arms to a government which is at war with the State of Israel—a government which has sought in every way possible to obstruct the peace process, and has supported and bankrolled international terrorism through Syria—is naive and unrealistic.

This is not a partisan matter. American Jews are not homogeneous in their political views and it is a distortion to portray them as such. The membership and leadership of the American Jewish Committee reflect a broad range of political views, and we feel strongly that Jews should be represented all across the American political spectrum. We do not believe that any political party or ideology has a monopoly on virtue, principle, or morality. But we believe with equal firmness that Jewish organizations must stand apart from, and above, partisan politics. Our policy positions must be determined through careful analysis of the issues, and in light of our broad interests, values, and objectives, not by the need to conform to any party line. To trade away the opportunity to bring a Jewish perspective to bear on the shaping of American society for some real or imagined *quid pro quo* would betray our vision of American pluralism and of Jews as full participants in this society. For both ethical and practical reasons, the American Jewish Committee has rejected partisanship *de facto* as well as *de jure*. I hope that we will continue to do so.

Another AJC approach that periodically comes under pressure is our disinclination to join umbrella organizations. The most significant case in point is our long-standing decision to participate as observers, rather than members, of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations. We do not deny that it is important, in some instances, for the Jewish community to coordinate its policies and sometimes even to speak with a single voice. Umbrella organizations such as the Presidents' Conference, the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council, and such special-purpose umbrella groups as the National Conference on Soviet Jewry were created to foster such communication and coordination—and we work closely with them. We participate in their deliberations and make our wide-ranging expertise available to them. Our commitment to cooperation and coordination explains our membership in NJCRAC and the National Conference, and our active observer role in the Presidents' Conference. Recently, however, the leaders of some umbrella organizations,

and some of the organizations themselves, have moved beyond coordination and presumed to speak for the total Jewish community—and even, in a sense, to govern it. But the AJC delegates to no other organization the right to speak on its behalf, except when an explicit decision to that effect has been taken by our Board of Governors.

The positions of the American Jewish Committee are respected and influential because they are thoughtful, richly nuanced, and informed by our own style and our own perspectives. They are not aimed at attaining a common denominator among all Jewish organizations, because we do not feel that is either realistic or desirable. Our positions are formulated carefully and represent our own views and perceptions. Through our national office, our offices in Washington and throughout the United States, and in Israel, Europe, and Latin America, we will continue to make our individual voice heard. We reaffirm the value of pluralism, not only for the larger society but for the Jewish community as well. While Jews are united in our commitment to creative Jewish continuity, we are enriched and strengthened by our diversity within that unity, and it is the American Jewish Committee's goal to maintain that diversity.

Our commitment to Jewish pluralism is one reason for our serious concern about the exacerbation of tensions among the religious ideological groups in Jewish life. Political realities in Israel have exacerbated these tensions in the United States, and we are working hard to bring together individuals from the different groups, both here and in Israel, who seek to restore civility to Jewish interrelationships. The very existence of a single Jewish people is at stake here. Unless we can close the fissures that have developed, we face the possible bifurcation of the Jewish people and the emergence of two separate Jewish communities that will not intermarry and will barely interact except in conflict. It is vital that we apply our human-relations and bridge-building skills to this most ominous challenge now facing us.

IV

In order to appreciate the central thrust and particular timeliness of the AJC's outlook and message, some historical perspective is necessary. Modern Jewish life began with the Emancipation's promise to the Jews of Western Europe that they could have full social and political acceptance if they divested themselves of that which made them Jewish. This offer was met both by individual Jews and the Jewish community with ambivalence, and their responses ranged from assimilation at one extreme to rejection of the offer and self-imposed isolation at the other. Though a range of

responses continues to exist, even today, two great epochal events of the modern Jewish experience—the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel—have transformed the picture.

The Holocaust demonstrated the limitless capacity of so-called “enlightened” people for the most extreme degenerate behavior and proved there were limits to the possibility of Jewish assimilation, even for those who found that goal desirable and attractive. It also challenged Jews to defy a hostile world and seize the responsibility for continued Jewish existence. Then, from the ashes of Jewish destruction, came the national rebirth of Israel, quickening the pulse of every Jew and exhilarating the Jewish community the world over. In the United States, a vigorous and creative reconstruction of Jewish community life began. New institutions were created; a resurgence of interest and affiliation, particularly within the liberal movements in Jewish religious life, became apparent; and the seeds of communal organizational structure began to sprout.

Post-World War II Jewry has been shaped by these two extraordinary events in contemporary Jewish history. Until now, however, American Jews have not succeeded in integrating our responses to these events and developing a balanced view of ourselves and our relationship with the world. Our behavior as a community continues to swing between two psychological extremes: an exaggerated self-confidence bordering on triumphalism on the one hand, and a sense of vulnerability bordering on paranoia on the other. We have not yet found our equilibrium—and this is precisely the challenge the American Jewish Committee offers the Jewish community as we look toward the 21st century. We assert that America must be seen as the third major experience of modern Jewish life. It offers Jews full participation as Jews and invites us to contribute a Jewish perspective to the building of this nation without sacrificing our character as Jews. Developing a coherent vision of contemporary life from a uniquely American Jewish viewpoint has been the AJC’s hallmark for the past 80 years, and it is the principal task to which we must address ourselves.

This is why, on our 80th anniversary, we celebrate American life and commit ourselves anew to American and Jewish pluralism. This is why we reject the dangerous and unwise single-issue agenda which, by stressing Israel as the sole determinant of our political behavior, suggests to the larger community that we are less than fully loyal Americans, and are not concerned with the broad range of issues confronting American life. America is a new phenomenon in Jewish history. The AJC is not Pollyanna enough to think that Jews have no problems here. There continues to be anti-Semitism in this country, and we continue to be vigilant to manifestations of it when they occur. But if we are to take America seriously, we must overcome the mentality of an embattled minority in a hostile world.

This nation is not hostile to us; and we must not make defensiveness our fundamental mode of interaction with the larger society. We share the responsibility of shaping this society, and we must do so out of loyalty to Jewish values and commitments, not a narrowing of focus, not a defensiveness, not a new, self-imposed ghettoization. We must finally accept the notion that we are influential insiders, not tolerated outsiders in this land; and we must learn to use our influence wisely. At the same time, we must not delude ourselves into an exaggerated view of our power. America is responsive to Israel's needs, not because of the wealth and influence of American Jews, but because Americans resonate to Israel's struggles and ideals and view Israel as an ally, strategically and ideologically. Jewish influence should be used to articulate that reality in the political system, not with triumphalism and arrogance, but with intelligence and wisdom.

The complexity of American Jewish life requires a degree of coordination and communication, but it does not require a King of the Jews. The era of *shtadlanut* is over. Politically, philosophically, and ideologically, Jews properly approach the complex issues of this society in all of our diversity. We must welcome this pluralism and find ways to communicate with one another without hostility and recrimination. Except for those limited areas where we choose to speak as one, we must make clear to the larger society that there is no single voice that speaks for all American Jews.

Only if we come to terms with both American pluralism and Jewish pluralism can we engage the many serious issues of Jewish life that we have hardly touched upon. What should be the relationship between world Jewry and Israel? Beyond political and economic support, how do we internalize the reality of Israel in our experience and in the experience of those who will follow us? Can a nonfundamentalist Jewish religious ideology move us, engage us, have relevance for the decisions that we make? Do traditional Jewish values still command our loyalty, and if so, how do we apply them to our public lives—as Jews, and as citizens of the larger society? How do we transmit them to future generations? In all our diversity, how do we maintain the integrity of the Jewish community and exercise full partnership in determining the contours of American public policy?

The American Jewish Committee has pointed the way. Not by narrowing our concerns or by a meanness of spirit. Not by a rigid partisanship in Jewish communal organization. Rather, through a new integration of Jewish life, characterized by vigilance, but not fear; confidence, but not triumphalism; consolidation of our gains without turning away from the needs of others; attention to our particular concerns without overlooking the breadth and universal dimensions of our tradition—and allegiance to our ideological commitments without vilification of those who differ.

The threshold of a new and extraordinary period of Jewish life is before us here in America. As we begin our second 80 years, the American Jewish Committee stands poised to lead the way with enthusiasm, with skill, with informed commitment to principle, and with faith in what the future will bring.

Honors and Awards

DURING ITS 80th-anniversary year, the American Jewish Committee honored a number of individuals for outstanding contributions to the betterment of the human condition in this country and abroad.

The American Liberties Medallion

The medallion is the highest honor AJC has to bestow. It is given in recognition of a lifetime of exceptional service in the cause of human liberty and human rights.

In May 1986 the American Liberties Medallion was presented by AJC president Howard I. Friedman to U.S. Secretary of State *George P. Shultz*, “a statesman and humanitarian dedicated to both his country’s national interests and the conscience and hopes of all mankind.”

The Mass Media Award

This award is given to an individual and/or institution for a distinguished record of journalistic excellence, dedication to public enlightenment, and commitment to freedom of the press.

In May 1986 the Mass Media Award was presented by AJC honorary vice-president Ruth R. Goddard to *Norman Lear*, innovative television writer, producer, and director, “for exceptional contributions to the preservation of core American values through television.”

The Akiba Award

This award honors an individual and/or institution for outstanding contributions to the enrichment of Jewish life through scholarship, leadership, literature, and communal activity.

In May 1986 the Akiba Award was presented by Howard Gilbert, chair of the Jewish Communal Affairs Commission, to *Abram L. Sachar*, first president and chancellor emeritus of Brandeis University, for “his innovative educational leadership, which has made the single Jewish-sponsored university in the United States one of the outstanding institutions of higher learning in the nation.”

The Distinguished Leadership Award

This award honors men and women in the American Jewish Committee who have provided special inspiration and leadership in fulfilling the organization's goals both nationally and in their own communities.

In November 1985 the Distinguished Leadership Award was presented by AJC honorary president Maynard I. Wishner to *David B. Fleeman*, AJC national vice-president and past president of the Committee's Greater Miami chapter, for his decades of service to a host of social and philanthropic causes, Jewish and non-Jewish, in the local community and on the national scene.

In May 1986 the Distinguished Leadership Award was presented by AJC honorary president Maynard I. Wishner to outgoing president *Howard I. Friedman*, in recognition of his "special contribution to improving Vatican-Jewish relations and in appreciation of his outstanding leadership, insightful intelligence, and dedication that have served the American Jewish Committee to its everlasting gain."

Special Awards

In November 1985 the AJC conferred special awards on two individuals who had labored to make the closing conference of the United Nations Decade for Women in Nairobi a success.

Mimi Alperin, chair of AJC's Interreligious Affairs Commission and coleader of AJC's delegation to the NGO Forum in Nairobi, presented a special citation to *Dame Nita Barrow*, convener of the Forum of Non-Governmental Organizations at Nairobi, "in grateful recognition of [her] successful stewardship of the NGO Forum at the United Nations Decade for Women Conference, which helped make it a vehicle of positive dialogue and constructive cooperation."

Suzanne Elson, chair of the AJC's Women's Issues Committee and coleader of the AJC's delegation to the NGO Forum in Nairobi, presented a special citation to U.S. Undersecretary of State Designate *Alan L. Keyes*, "in grateful recognition of [his] vigorous and eloquent articulation of America's commitment to the ideals of universality, tolerance, and peace, expounded in the United Nations Charter, at the UN Decade for Women Conference."

In May 1986, on the occasion of Israel's 38th anniversary, Howard I. Friedman, the AJC's outgoing president, presented a special citation to Israel's ambassador to the United States, *Meir Rosenne*, "in celebration of the inseparable bonds between American Jews and Israel."

80th-Anniversary Planning Committee

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