# A Look at American Jewry -- Past, Present and Future

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In this article, Ambassador Moses argues that the American Jewish community must look beyond its past and European roots to insure its survival. The key to its future lies in finding a source for future creativity, perhaps through the establishment of a center focusing on Jewish peoplehood that would receive unanimous support, or through a greater emphasis on Jewish knowledge, the Hebrew language, and ritual observance in order to maintain Jewish distinctiveness.

### **Jewish Survival**

"Am Yisrael Chai!" is usually thought of as a chant of triumph, proclaiming the miracle of the creation of the Jewish state in the ancestral Jewish homeland, 2000 years after the destruction of the Second Temple and the dispersion of the Jewish people. In the ensuing 62 years, Israel has survived, prospered and grown despite external threats to its existence. But, "Am Israel Chai" does not belong to Israel alone. The survival and, yes, triumph of American Jewry is just as amazing. American Jewry has survived, prospered and grown in the face of the twinned internal threats of assimilation and its more benign helpmate, indifference. No one can argue with the fact that Jews as individuals have prospered in America, but so, too, has the Jewish community. The same can be said for Jewish communities elsewhere, such as in Western Europe, parts of South America, Canada, Australia and other countries. Why?

In explaining Jewish survival, sociologists talk about the Jewish instinct for self-preservation as a minority after centuries of Christian and Muslim oppression, a tradition that emphasizes community over the individual, Jewish literacy associated with a religious tradition that extols learning and the centuries-old prohibition on Jews owning land, belonging to guilds or engaging in most forms of everyday commerce, leaving open chiefly money lending and trading that led Jews to enter into the professions and finance. This is all well and good as far as it goes, but it does

not withstand critical analysis. Other oppressed minorities have disappeared; religious traditions have waxed and waned. The emphasis on learning is not unique to Jews, nor is a sense of community. Each explanation in its turn leads to another question, causing one intellectually frustrated, non-Jewish sociologist to come happily to the "irrefutable" conclusion that "the Jews are God's chosen people." If so, there is still some explaining to do.

Rather than looking for explanations of why Jews have survived, it would be more useful, I suggest, to look at the present condition of the Jewish community in America. Admittedly, this is analogous to a doctor treating the symptoms without first diagnosing the underlying causes, but it is much easier and a lot more useful for people like me who find theories interesting to debate but not much help otherwise. The bottom line for this writer is that, despite 200 years of alarming identity erosion among America's Jews, the commitment of the Jewish people to survival as a self-identified and, in important respects, still a distinctive community in America remains intact.

The same can be said of Jewish communities elsewhere. Some are remnants of once vibrant Jewish communities that were devastated by the Holocaust, depopulated by the attraction of Zionism, oppressed by Islam and communism or affected by larger population shifts. But other, largely newer, Jewish communities are flourishing. For all practical purposes, Berlin was "Juderein" 65 years ago; today it has some 150,000 Jews, largely from the former Soviet Union. The Jewish rebirth in Germany is an historical phenomenon, repeating the emigration of Jews from East to West 200 years earlier, but it is not the only one to be reborn, leading one to conclude that there are common factors at work that are both peculiar to Jews and common to Jewish communities wherever they exist. However, it is enough for now to look at American Jewry, a community that is enormously complex, variegated and multilayered, and, to its credit, probably unmanageable. If you were to ask who speaks for American Jews, the answer is either no one or everyone.

### We know a lot about American Jews

One thing for sure: We American Jews know more about our collective selves than has ever been known about any group in the annals of human history. One can assume that this intense self examination stems from our concern about the future identity and commitment of the American Jewish community and our uneasiness living in a world inhabited by more than two billion Christians (a third of the world's population), almost as many Muslims and assorted other religions that dwarf our miniscule numbers.

We know, for example, that synagogues are gateway institutions. About 80 percent of American Jews become members at some point in their lives. Another 20 percent are totally unaffiliated. Putting it another way, about one-half of American Jews are either unaffiliated or loosely affiliated. In answers to surveys, they identify themselves as simply Jewish, full stop! This self-identification is not without meaning in today's America where, even if both parents are Jewish, you can identify yourself any way you want without much fuss. We also know that Jewish intermarriage skyrocketed over the last 50 years, reaching close to 50 percent of marriages in the United States involving at least one Jewish spouse. The numbers seem to be leveling off for reasons that speak, in part, to the growing percentage of Orthodox, which historically has had higher birth rates and lower intermarriage rates, and the awakening by the non-Orthodox to the threat of a vanishing Jewish community. Over 300 secular colleges and universities in the United States now teach courses in Jewish studies that instill pride among college-age Jews and, for non-Jews, dispel the notion that Jews in America are an arcane cult not penetrable by those not born Jewish. In the second half of the last century, attendance at Jewish day schools increased enormously, reinforcing Jewish identity and knowledge not only for students but for their parents as well, a point easily overlooked. And, lastly, the Jewish community, in ways subtle and not so subtle, has promoted intrafaith marriage.

There are a lot of other factors out there that impact on our lives as Jews. Like other Americans, we are on the move south, west and places in between. Jews are better

educated, represent a higher percentage of the work force in the professions, arts, sciences and technology than the general public and have reaped the benefits economically. Jews are more liberal politically than other white Americans, particularly white males.

We know that the Orthodox are only 12 percent of the American population, yet constitute 38 percent of the children in America receiving a Jewish education and have more children than non-Orthodox families, leading demographers to predict that the Orthodox will constitute a majority of American Jews before the end of the century.

## **Turning Inward**

About 20 years ago the American Jewish community woke up to the fact that the core problem for American Jewish survival was not what others had done to us but what we were doing to ourselves as a community, lacking Jewish knowledge, education and commitment. Like POGO, we had met the enemy and it was us. As might be expected, there was no shortage of opinions as to what was needed to ensure long-term Jewish survival. Education became the catch word. There are now more than 200,000 students enrolled in Jewish day schools. This is almost twice the number of Yeshiva and equivalent students in pre-Holocaust Europe. Programs to foster Jewish self-awareness such as Birthright Israel, its brothers, sisters and assorted progeny are deservedly getting attention and support, while the traditional Jewish defense organizations scramble. One, the American Jewish Congress, which led the legal fight for Jewish rights in the 1940s and 1950s, has all but disappeared. The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) is increasingly focused on combating criticism of Israel, while the American Jewish Committee has moved from proclaiming it is America's Oldest Human Rights Organization to a new tagline: "Global Jewish Advocacy," meaning, I suppose, defense of Israel and endangered Jewish communities around the globe.

This turning inward by the organized Jewish community, most prevalent among the Orthodox, can have other consequences as well. Despite the strong Jewish vote for

Barack Obama in the 2008 Presidential election, who is to say that as the threat from outside the Jewish community recedes and the community's focus stays fixed on strengthening Jewish internal life, Jewish voting patterns will not shift as well. Political support in America for Israel has already moved from the liberal agenda to the more conservative. It is increasingly the Orthodox and politically conservative members of the Jewish community who unreservedly support Israel, neither questioning its settlement policy nor calling for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. They support Likud and the religious parties in Israel, not Tzipi Livni's Kadima or Ehud Barak's Labor Party. For unaffiliated or loosely affiliated Jews, the opposite is likely to be true. A more conservative political profile in Israel, supported by the Christian right in America and like-minded elements in the Jewish community, may widen the gap between Jews supporting Israel at any price and those who want to see Israel as a light unto the nations fulfilling its earlier Zionist calling.

If you have any doubt about this, look at the reaction in the American press to Israel's interception of the Gaza flotilla in June of this year. Some on the left, Jews and non-Jews, responded with angry denunciation of the killing of nine "humanitarians" on board the Turkish vessel Mavi Marmara. Israel's conservative defenders wrote about Israel's right to defend itself against the Turkish Jihadist organization IHH. I have seen the same split in my own Modern Orthodox Synagogue. That same week I delivered the *drash* on the Torah reading of the week. In that reading titled *Shelach Lecha*, God commands Moses to <u>send</u> men to spy on the Land of Canaan. My talk centered on sending us to help others, the poor, the sick and the oppressed, so we may become "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." The response was split between conservative/traditionalists on one side, the less traditional/left on the other. In this same vein, a good friend of mine vocally laments the situation in a large American Jewish organization he once led where, as he sees it, there is no longer room for open discussion on major policy issues. Dissent from the organization's line gets short shrift. Even in my Modern Orthodox community there is an increasing pull from the rabbinate on the right on issues affecting conversion, acceptance of modern Biblical scholarship and theological premises

generally. This, too, can affect the future voting patterns of American Jews. However the Israel card ultimately plays out, in this writer's opinion, the American Jewish community is too large, independent in its thinking and moored to its sense of place in America, to move politically in lockstep with the current mood in Israel, and too tied to the liberal agenda based on its perceived minority status and, for lack of a better term, Jewish mindset, to move en masse from its liberal moorings.

Finally, what does the memory of the Holocaust portend for American Jewry? Even if the tragedy of the Holocaust, followed by the miracle of the creation of the State of Israel, lives forever in the memory of the Jewish people, it is now 65 years since the death camps were liberated, all the Holocaust memorials have been built, the history has been written, and the memoirs of survivors collect dust on library shelves. The vast majority of American Jews were not alive during the Holocaust and did not bear witness to the tragedy. They do not include themselves among the silent in the face of evil. The memory of the Holocaust will not touch them as it did my generation or even be a major element in their Jewish being. Grim pictures of Jews in the death camps speak to them of the past, not the future on which American Jewry will be built. In a word, the Holocaust is losing its emotive force for the simple reason that most Jews in America do not believe that we stand alone or that everyone is against us.

#### The Road Ahead

Where does this leave us? There will always be factors that divide us. My father, born in 1887 in Statesville, North Carolina, consistently voted Republican. It was the "respectable" thing to do, he said. My mother, a college graduate, many years his junior, was a lifelong Democrat. The family survived without a lot of angst and multiplied; so, too, has American Jewry. We are a community of individuals, not an individual community. Think of the Jewish community as Russian wooden nesting dolls. Each of the smaller dolls is different in appearance and size. One is a Chasid, another a Wall Street banker, the third a Reform woman rabbi, the next a public school teacher followed by a "techie," and then a neurosurgeon from Puerto Rico who converted when she married her Orthodox Jewish husband from Monsey, New

York, and on and on. Each, emerging out of the big doll named Jewish, has an equal claim to legitimacy and in defining the limits and boundaries of the Jewish community.

What are the factors that bring together such a diverse mixture of life styles, interests, religiosity (or absence thereof), occupations, and "weltschmerz," to form the Jewish community in America and are they likely to continue? I want to leave aside exogenous happenings, and that includes anti-Semitism, about which we can, and probably should, do little. This is a problem for the anti-Semites. If we truly want anti-Semitism to disappear, we should begin by abandoning our distinctiveness. If we lose our distinctiveness and become like everybody else, anti-Semitism will disappear and so will we.

At this point we need to look at the ties that bind us as a community, recognizing at the same time that there will always be divisions among us. If it were otherwise, we would not be human, and certainly not Jewish.

#### **European Roots**

Where to begin? Looking back a century or more, we see millions of Jewish immigrants coming to our shores. What did most Jewish emigrants have in common? The Jewish religion? Not really. A Jewish identity? True for most.

But at the outset most Jewish emigrants, like other groups coming to our shores, had two things in common: They were poor and they did not speak English. Learning English came first. One generation later American Jews spoke English, wrote in English and thought in English. They composed literature, songs, inspirational ideas, all in the American idiom. The next time you listen to Kate Smith sing "God Bless America," remember it was written by Irving Berlin, a cantor's son. So, too, "White Christmas." Arguably, first generation American Jewry was the most creative, not only in Jewish history, but in American history as well.

Economic advancement was less swift but just as dramatic. When measured by commonly accepted standards of success in America, Jews do not fit on the Bell

Curve, whether it be in the arts, science, law, medicine, finance, business ownership or the media.

In the beginning, American Jewish life was formed by European Jewish ideas and personalities. During the last two centuries, over three million Jews emigrated from Europe to the United States, more than one million since the rise of Hitler 70 years ago. European Jewry of yesteryear has carried over to the United States. The overconfined, self-absorbed, complacent, didactic, routinized Jewish life of Central and Eastern Europe burst forth with fresh energy and vigor on American soil.

No Jewish Hall of Fame would be complete without the names of Solomon Schechter born in Romania, Mordecai Menahem Kaplan born in Lithuania, Abraham Joshua Heschel born in Poland, Joseph Dov Soloveitchik born in Lithuania, and Menachem Mendel Schneersohn born in Russia. All emigrated from Europe to the United States, where Schechter became the principal architect of Conservative Judaism, Kaplan founded the Reconstructionist Movement, Heschel, a towering Jewish personality, influenced Jews broadly through his writing and teaching, Soloveitchik became the unchallenged leader of modern Orthodoxy, known simply as "the Rav," and Schneersohn, the Lubavitch Rebbe, was responsible for the movement's success in enlisting Jews to return to Orthodoxy.

This is past tense. We can no longer look to Europe or to European Jewry for fresh ideas or even inspiration. Jews from the former Soviet Union were the last wave of Jewish emigration from Europe to the United States.

## **Exit The Past**

We are now on our own, a community of 6 million, more or less, self-identified Jews. Except for the *Haredim* who isolate themselves from the larger community, we are part of the American Way. What happens across America affects us the way it does non-Jewish Americans. Let's face it. We have adapted a large part of our Jewish heritage to the American Way.

For liberty we have Chanukah.

For freedom we remind everyone that we were once slaves in the land of Egypt.

Talk about terrorists? Remember Amalek?

Drone bomb terrorists? Remember what Samuel did to the king of the Amalekites?

If it is the environment -- Hey, we celebrate Tu B'Shvat.

Now that we are on our own, we need to ask ourselves where will the creative force come from to keep Jewish life alive in America? Stripping away all the superfluity, there are two things American Jews and most other Americans hunger for: Connectedness and bringing meaning to our lives in ways that fulfill our spiritual needs, not always in that order and not always in combination with each other.

#### **Jewish Connectedness**

Admittedly, Jewish connectedness is hard to explain. It does not lend itself to critical analysis. Its tribal origins, so poignantly expressed in Joseph's Biblical words, "Achei anokei mvkesh" (I seek my brethren), no longer describe a nation of 12 tribes, but a people loosely bound by tradition that encompasses religion, history and culture. However explained, Jewish connectedness is real. All of us have experienced it in our own way. Regardless of national origins, life styles or interests, a common thread binds us. We react intuitively, if not always cerebrally. When we read about a Jew, good or bad, would our reaction be the same if that person was not Jewish? The honest answer is no.

Connectedness, not "Bowling Alone," is what most of us yearn for. The old neighborhoods are gone. Traditional family ties are weakening. No longer can we look to our extended families for support. The corner Jewish grocer and dry goods owner have been replaced by supermarkets and national chain stores. Where have all the Jews gone in small town America? Their names are remembered, if at all, in faded letters on storefront windows.

How do we reconnect? And if not with our extended families, with whom? How do we channel the universal yearning for connectedness into a Jewish enterprise? What better way to reinforce Jewish peoplehood than creating a "Mercaz Am Yisrael" (Center for the Jewish People) in Israel to display and demonstrate the diversity and connectiveness of Jewish life around the world -- historical, family connected, shared-destiny past, present and future, a never-ending panorama of Jewish possibilities bound by a common identity thread.

Remember, too, that cyberspace has no boundaries. Connectedness can now be universal. We can connect to Jews in Australia, to Jews in South Africa and, of course, to Jews in Israel. Our family has now expanded from an extended family of, say, 30 to a Jewish universe of 14 million.

The many scores of adult Jewish education programs across America are providing connectedness in another way, through education. Let's look at making Modern Hebrew the lingua franca of the Jewish people. Impossible, you say? But as Leon Wieseltier commented some years ago, "If American Jews can build swimming pools in their backyards, they can learn Hebrew."

There are hundreds of other programs out there that need to be encouraged and supported in transforming Jewish connectedness from the family and the neighborhood to the Jewish people more broadly. For 3,000 years we have been institutionalizing the Jewish religion, through Torah and its commandments, the First and Second Temples, followed by synagogue building wherever Jews have lived. Where are the institutions that celebrate Jewish Peoplehood? These are precious few, making the case for a Mercaz Am Yisrael all the more compelling.

## The Search For Meaning

However, for me the most challenging issue is the spiritual one, not for the Orthodox but for the 88 percent of American Jews who are not Orthodox and the more than 50 percent who are loosely affiliated, if at all. How do we take that which has come to us as absolute and make it relevant, and how do we take that which is relevant for us and make it absolute? If the answer does not lie in the certainty of belief (and

that would seem to be increasingly the case), the answer, at least for me, lies in the sanctity of the search.

Maybe this has always been true. Surely there is much in our religious tradition that emphasizes the centrality and importance of the *search* even if we seek and do not find. Is it not the very act of seeking that distinguishes man from beast and negates the conclusion that all is vanity? The Torah portion that comes most readily to mind is that of Jacob struggling with the angel, wrestling with his doubts, seeking certainty, only to be denied entrance into the realm of the certain. So, too, Moses who sought certainty by looking upon God, only to be told no. But the *search* goes on. Is this not the foundation and ultimately the reason for Jewish study?

What I said earlier about our ability to relate our Jewish tradition to the contemporary scene in America is not fanciful. It is real. In a word, it is the cornerstone to build upon, to make Jewish tradition relevant. It is the clay for us to mold. To succeed, first we need to be Jewishly knowledgeable. But knowledge alone is not enough. We also need to see in that knowledge value for us in how we live our lives as Jews.

If I may add one more word, the knowledge, and the value we see in that knowledge, has to be protected, preserved and passed on. Now I am talking about *ritual observance*. Without it, all *water runs to the sea*. Jewish survival depends on our being distinctive. Much of our distinctiveness is bound up with ritual observance. Without that, we would have disappeared long ago like the other nations of the earth. The issue is not modernity versus tradition, but survival versus disappearance. Until recently, "kashrut" and "kippot" were the exclusive province of the Orthodox. But then something happened. Non-Orthodox American Jewry looked into the abyss of non-distinctive Jewish life and recognized a threat to Jewish survival. Jewish ritual is returning in the non-Orthodox world. To measure the change, 60 years ago "kippot" and "talitot" wearing were *verboten* in Reform congregations that were racing to "Americanize" themselves. Today they are much in evidence across the Jewish religious spectrum.

I am not suggesting that Orthodoxy is the wave of the future for American Jewry. This will only happen if the rest of American Jewry largely disappears through assimilation or indifference, and if this were to happen, it would be an enormous loss for the Jewish world. Orthodoxy is an anchor of sorts, but as Lubavitch and other Orthodox groups know, much of their support comes from less traditional Jews. Call it "guilt feeling," "remembrance of days past," or a sense that only Orthodoxy is authentic Jewry. Regardless of why non-traditional Jews support Orthodox causes, Orthodoxy cannot be the totality of American Jewish life. The Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist all contribute enormously to the sum of Jewish life in America. Each represents an American Jewish yearning that, if left unfulfilled, would create a vast void that is not likely to be filled by anything that we currently describe as Jewish.

Did the religion emerge from the people, or did the people emerge from the religion? Which is primordial? Regardless of the answer, at this point we need both to survive, and, if we are to remain true to our past, to be a creative, energizing force for ourselves and, let's hope, the world.

#### Conclusion

I happen to think that the diversity of views and constant turmoil in the Jewish community is a good thing. It is a sign that the Jewish community is alive and (say it softly) well. No one knows what the future holds. Demographers and other professionals invariably get it wrong. The answer, I suppose, depends upon whether you are a Jewish optimist or a Jewish pessimist. I am on the side of the optimists. Historically, those who wagered against a Jewish future have lost. Maybe it is wishful thinking, but I believe that reinforcing our sense of Jewish peoplehood and continuing the search for meaning in our religious tradition, while at the same time recognizing that ritual holds an important place in our Jewish lives, will carry the day. It always has.