

On American Jewish Identity

Chaim I. Waxman

Since 1967 there has been a noticeable change in the self-identification of Jews both in the United States and in Israel. I have previously written in these pages on the changes in the American-Jewish academic community (June 15, 1973 issue). In Israel the change manifests itself in the current attitude of Israeli Jews toward Diaspora Jewry as compared to their attitudes in the early 1960s. In short, there has been, beginning with 1967, an unquestionable strengthening of the common bonds between Israeli and world Jewry. I have recently returned from a brief visit to Israel and have found this feeling of oneness to have become even stronger than earlier, as a result of the response to the Yom Kippur War and its aftermath. As one Israeli Jew put it: "We (Israeli and Diaspora Jewry) are not partners. In a partnership, each party to the partnership has the option to dissolve it if business doesn't are well. We are brothers; we are together for better and, God forbid, or worse."

That the creation of the State of Israel cannot be the end goal of Zionism is now clearer than ever. For the past several years a number of Israeli writers were cautioning lest the self-identification of Israeli Jews as Israelis overshadows their self-identity as Jews. This is, for example, one of the major themes of Eliezer Schweid, an Israeli philosopher whose provocative essays have recently been published in English under the title, *Israel at the Crossroads* (Jewish Publication Society). Schweid forcefully argues that the mere existence of Israel cannot, by itself, assure "the birth of a great and complete Jewish culture," which is, for him, the true meaning of Zionism. Even in the State of Israel, "spiritual creativity re-

quires purposeful transmission and conscious nurturing on the basis of a clearly intended decision. This is certainly a process that entails great difficulties." The establishment of the state, Israel, can be no more than an essential tool, a prerequisite if you will, which may make that goal realizable. But without that purposeful transmission and conscious nurturing, the existence of Israel solely as a political reality can serve to drive a wedge between Israeli and Diaspora Jewry because of the potential conflict between the Israeli Jew's political-national identity and his religious-cultural identity.

That the existence of the State of Israel has not solved the problem of identity for Diaspora Jewry, certainly American Jewry, is even more obvious. In certain respects the problem looms larger than ever, and has been the subject of a number of recent works by American-Jewish thinkers. Milton Himmelfarb defines the problem as the tensions between tradition and modernity, universalism and particularism (*The Jews of Modernity*, Basic Books). One of his major arguments insofar as American Jewry is concerned is that, in contrast with all other groups in America, Jews continue to be "off the graph," that is, Jews continue to be the most politically liberal of America's religious and ethnic groups.

Charles S. Liebman, however, sees a not-too-distant crisis for American-Jewish liberalism (Liebman's book, *The Ambivalent American Jew*, Jewish Publication Society, was reviewed in these pages, Nov. 9, 1973). Liebman's pessimism vis-à-vis the future of American-Jewish liberalism, indeed the future of American Judaism itself, derives from his analysis of the incompatibility between the values of integration into American society, on the one hand, and the values of Jewish group survival, on the other. How ironic that Liebman chose to resolve this dilemma for himself by moving to Israel, only to find that

living in Israel by itself does not resolve the basic problem. On the contrary, Liebman found, just as Schweid has written, that precisely in Israel the problem can become even more glaring and difficult.

It is to this kind of ambivalent American Jew that Eugene B. Borowitz addresses his new book, *The Mask Jews Wear: The Self-Deceptions of American Jewry* (Simon and Schuster, \$7.95). In this contemporary attempt at a "guide for the perplexed," Borowitz proceeds to systematically debunk the various manifestations of modern Jewish "Marranhood," that is, the various ways in which the "modern Marrano" hides his Jewish identity from others and from his or her self.

The modern Marrano is basically different from the original Marranos of 14th and 15th century Spain. The Spanish Marranos were Jews who were forced to hide their Jewishness from all except themselves. Publicly, and only publicly, they practiced the Catholicism which was forced upon them. The modern American-Jewish Marrano, on the other hand, persistently argues even to himself that his norms and values are not rooted in Judaism but in urban, sophisticated, American liberalism.

After tracing the development of modern Marranhood to the experiences of Jewish immigrants to the United States during the period of peak Jewish immigration, 1880-1920, and the effects of the acculturation process upon them and, especially, their children, Borowitz devotes a number of chapters toward examining the self-imposed limitations which many American Jews placed upon their Jewish identities. For contemporary American Jewry, Borowitz correctly asserts, the problem is not so much one of almost complete denial of Jewish roots, but rather an eclipse of identity. The self-identity of American Jews is schizophrenic, or better, compartmentalized. We are willing, and even anxious, to assert our Jewish identity within certain restricted spheres of our lives, but we do not allow ourselves to be encompassed by a total Jewish identity. Borowitz argues for a reassertion of Jewish faith and belief along with Jewish nationalism and culture. If we would only stop eclipsing our Jewishness, if our Jewishness were to become the center of our total beings rather than left on the periphery, then, he asserts, "we might hope to

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surmount the crisis of our civilization . . . we would have an unusually valuable help in maintaining an honorable integrity in our existence."

There is no question that were Borowitz's call heeded, the future of American Jewry would look much brighter. As it stands, it appears that there are two opposite trends taking place simultaneously. (The phenomenon of opposite trends occurring simultaneously is not unique in our times. Other manifestations of such situations are discussed by Zbigniew K. Brzezinski, in his work, *Between Two Ages*, Viking Press.) In comparison with, for example, ten years ago, the evidence from a number of variables indicates that those who do identify themselves as Jewish do so more intensively than they did in the past, and conversely, those who do not primarily identify themselves as Jewish do so to an even lesser extent than in the past. When viewing certain data indicating the Jewish strength of American Jewry, there are grounds for limited optimism. Borowitz must be optimistic; otherwise he would not have written this book as he did. Yet, at the same time, there are so many indicators which can only serve to counter even that limited optimism, that one is forced to conclude that the future is, to say the least, precarious.

This Jewish precariousness pertains not only to the American Jewish community, nor only to the whole of Diaspora Jewry. Israel, too, has its share of Jewish precariousness. Whereas in American society the problem manifests itself as the conflict between universalism—identifying as American—and particularism—identifying as a Jew—in Israel, as has been indicated earlier, the problem manifests itself as the conflict between Jewish universalism and Israeli particularism. Borowitz discusses the problem of Jewish identity and the State of Israel in a very cogent chapter which stresses that American Jewry most assuredly cannot rest with having its Jewish values derived solely from the State of Israel. He reaffirms that it is preposterous to presume that American Jewry will be able to survive and thrive Jewishly solely by implanting an Israeli-based Jewishness in the American Jewish community. Jewishness cannot rest upon, nor be transmitted in the form of Israeli art, music, newspapers, and food. As another observer of the scene put it during my recent visit to Israel, "American Jewry will survive

only on the strength of its Jewish education, and make no mistake about it, Jewish education is not restricted solely to the classroom." He was echoing Borowitz in calling for American Jews to live a completely Jewish life and not to rely upon what are, at best, but secondary sources and reinforcers of Jewish identity.

For all of his succinct analysis, Borowitz still leaves one unsatisfied. As I view it, he has neglected to sufficiently elaborate upon what must rank as one of the most critical problems facing American (and Israeli) Jewry, namely, the almost total absence of moral leadership in the Jewish community. There are no leaders whose authority and influence in the realm of Jewish values is widely recognized. Moreover, in the American Jewish community there is no consensus upon nor even discussion of what, are, actually, Jewish values. It is thus no coincidence that whereas Liebman devotes much of his book to a refutation of the notion that Jewish values are synonymous with American liberal values, in other words, he discusses what Jewish values are not, he has virtually no discussion of what are, then, Jewish values.

There are, undoubtedly, various reasons for the paucity of moral leaders and leadership in contemporary Jewish society. Two interrelated reasons, however, are directly related to the struggle between Jewish values and a number of modern American values. As is well known, American Jews are a very achievement-oriented group. Almost all of their youth attend college and many go on to graduate schools. Along this course, Jews have, to a disproportionate extent, become imbued with the values of science and technology, particularly the scientific dogma to be value free. Having so internalized the doctrine of value neutrality, more than a generation of the brightest of American Jewry has been snatched from immersion into the a-scientific, murky waters of Jewish morality and Jewish values. Social science in particular has taught our youth not to make value judgments (at least that is the way many teachers and students have understood scientific "objectivity"), and are not, nor do they wish to be, aware of their values.

Moreover, the privatization of religion in modern Western society, alluded to by both Liebman and Borowitz, has resulted in the restriction of the domain not only of religious prac-

tice, but also in the confinement of religious values to the private sphere. At the same time, more and more aspects of our behavior are in the public sphere, with the net result that religious values, if held to at all, play a very minor role in the totality of our everyday life.

Finally, for many, the liberal tenet of pluralism is taken to mean that all life styles are legitimate (so long, perhaps, as they don't violate the law, some would argue that usually it is only the law which is illegitimate). American society, they argue, is made up of many different subcultures, each with its own standards, and standards, after all, are culturally relative. One's own standards are not superior to those of others. Ironically, a myth has been created that values can be separate but equal, that is, I may have different, but certainly not superior values than you. Rarely, if ever, is the question posed why and how values can be transmitted to children if there is nothing special, superior, about them. Ethnocentrism has become such a pejorative that many are blind to the fact that one does not adhere to a set of values unless he believes them to be better, more significant, more meaningful, than others. Whether or not one wishes to admit it, ethnocentrism, to a certain extent, is a prerequisite to group formation and group solidarity. In a very real sense, ethnocentrism is to the group what self-esteem is to the individual. Most certainly, too much of either can be a source of problems, but without them no group nor any individual would be able to properly function. Having unquestioningly internalized many of the ideologies of the day, modern Jewry has unwittingly contributed to the demise of Jewish values.

The tragicomedy in the whole process is that many of these modern liberal notions are, in fact, themselves rooted in extreme ethnocentrism. The privatization of religion is but one of the Western European liberal Christian notions which are preached as being in the spirit of universalism but are, as a number of scholars have recently shown, actually rooted in an ethnocentric particularism which requires conformity to its norms. (Daniel Berrigan has recently shed his sheep's clothing and publicly displayed his ethnocentric arrogance.) The so-called universalism of liberal Christianity is not really very different from the exclusivism of Islam which defines Dar al-Salam (House of

Peace) as Dar al-Islam (domain of Islam), and which requires expansion at the expense of Dar al-Harb, or non-Islam. Rosemary Radford Ruether, of Howard University School of Religion and Yale Divinity School, even asserts that imperialism and racism are the natural by-products of liberal Christian ethnocentrism disguised as universalism. Be that as it may, the threat of Western values as they have manifested themselves is beginning to be perceived.

But for the Jewish community it is not sufficient to be cognizant of the incompatibility of the values of modern society and Judaism. Alongside the interfaith Jewish-Christian dialogues in which a number of Jewish organizations are involved, perhaps it is time for an intra-Jewish dialogue on the all-important subject of Jewish values. American Jewry

has certainly become sufficiently (if not excessively) integrated into American society. Were the multitude of American-Jewish organizations to spend as much effort upon preserving and nurturing Judaism in America as they have heretofore spent upon integrating American Judaism into American society, the future might indeed look more promising. Liebman and Borowitz have underscored the fallacies of the past. It remains to be seen whether American Jewry has the will and the courage to learn from the past and to respond accordingly. Borowitz concludes his book by quoting the verse, "Hear, O Israel . . ." Perhaps it would not be inappropriate to also cite the saying of Rabbi Tarphon: "It is not for you to complete the work, [however] neither are you free to abstain from it."

inevitable that Osip Mandelstam will dominate the book. She was twenty when she met Osip, already a promising poet with solid achievements. Their marriage lasted almost twenty years and ended with Mandelstam's death in 1938. But for thirty years the purpose of protecting his work and enduring exile and harassment became Nadezhda's lifetime.

The times were dangerous for a man of Mandelstam's character and the reader is aware from the very beginning that a man of his sensibility and integrity could not survive a time of dogma. Nadezhda Mandelstam painfully remembers the events, the conversations, her own particular responses as a young, vivacious girl. She chooses to tell the story without a formal time sequence as if then and now merge into an unforgettable chronicle.

In the early years of the revolution, the poet saw with perceptive eyes that "they were founding their party on authority, like a church, . . ." Mandelstam was suspect from the beginning: he was a writer and an intellectual and he had contempt for those who adopted the special idiom and flexible morality for the sake of expediency and safety. Perhaps for his own safety, he failed to understand the dangers of the era. He managed to reach special heights in 1928 because he had the support of Bukharin, who himself later fell from favor and was executed in the purges of the 30s.

As a member of the group of Acmeist poets, the name of Mandelstam is usually associated with Anna Akhmatova, a great poet and loyal friend of the Mandelstams and Nikolai Gumilyov who was executed in the 20s. Between the executions and the exiles were the tragic suicides such as that of Mayakovski, the brilliant figure in Russian Futurism. For the creative artists, those who could not and would not run with the pack, the time was disillusioning and brutal. Nadezhda describes her husband pondering the events. There seemed in the early days a collapse of all legal standards. Where were the new legal codes, who would promulgate and apply them?

From the very beginning of the book, the author explores the concept of "self" lost through violent severing of all social ties: family, friends, religion and national groups. All decisions of life and death passed into the "mysterious" and frightening force of the State. The "I" had hoped

BOOKS & AUTHORS

The Mandelstams: A Chronicle of Courage

Hope Abandoned. By Nadezhda Mandelstam. Atheneum. \$13.95.

Reviewed by

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SEVENTY-FIVE, NADEZHDA MANDELSTAM has written two extraordinary books of memoirs which are among the best of autobiographical writings of our time. In both *Hope Against Hope* and in the current book, an aged yet vital woman recalls almost fifty years against the background of revolution, dislocation, anguish, and terror. Great writers, artists, scientists and revolutionaries are part of an epic canvas. And having lost all a human being can lose, a brilliant poet husband, beloved friends and relatives, she perhaps is too tired to dream and hope but she is also beyond fear. She has won one victory, a remark-

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able victory: the Soviet government was not able to destroy Osip Mandelstam's poetry. They had planned two deaths for the poet, his physical destruction and the obliteration of his work and reputation. And when Osip Mandelstam died thirty-six years ago in a Siberian slave labor camp, Nadezhda spent many years saving his poetry, aided by a few loyal, courageous friends. The safeguarding of her husband's work, the circulating of some of his poems in the underground, her refusal to permit the maligning of his reputation form the heart of her first book. In the second book, the events, time and people are the same and, yet, it is a document with a new dimension, a sudden transforming, a light from a new direction—Nadezhda herself, wise and bitter, tender and carping but always honest, pitilessly honest, with even those she loved long and well.

Even when the author sets herself a new task, the task of describing and analyzing what happened to herself during the almost sixty years, it is