

Some of Americans' Best Friends Are...

Bethamie Horowitz | Fri. Mar 19, 2004

With the release of Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ" and surging hostility toward Jews overseas, many American Jews are feeling rumblings of dread about the possibility of a wave of antisemitism arriving on these shores.

In light of these anxieties, it's worth looking at how Americans really feel about their Jewish fellow citizens. Fortunately, there is a treasure trove of reliable information to be found in a number of recent studies of the American population. And their results should offer a certain relief: The Jewish community is woven tightly — and more securely than ever — into the fabric of American society.

More than half of Americans (58%) reported personally knowing a Jewish person, according to the General Social Survey 2000. Meanwhile, the National Survey of Religion and Ethnicity 2000 found that more than two-fifths (43%) of Americans said that at least some of their closest friends are Jewish. This result is surprisingly high considering that Jews make up only a little more than 2% of the American population.

Social connections to Jews are particularly extensive among certain segments of the American public. Four-fifths of Americans with graduate degrees reported close friendships with Jews, compared to less than one-third of those who had not completed high school. People living in metropolitan areas are more likely to have Jewish friends than those living in rural areas. People working as professionals, managers, executives, or in finance or technical fields (i.e. "knowledge workers") are also more likely than other Americans to have such friendships. And a higher proportion of whites than blacks or Hispanics reported these connections.

Along with a growing breadth of social ties between Jews and other Americans, having a Jewish relative has also become more common. Approximately one-tenth of Americans report having Jewish relatives, according to the GSS (9%) and NSRE (11.5%). One's Jewish family members or ancestry may even be a source of pride for a person in the public eye. (Think of Madeleine Albright, Tom Stoppard, Wesley Clark, Howard Dean and John Kerry.)

The positive connections between Jews and non-Jewish Americans is particularly striking given the situation that prevailed only a hundred years ago. At the beginning of the 20th century, Jews were seen as a distinct and separate race, and were not particularly welcome in high society. In 1905 the news of a marriage between a young Jewish immigrant woman and the scion of a prominent New York WASP family was so out of the ordinary that it made the front page of The New York Times.

While the Jewish community usually perceives rising rates of intermarriage as problematic, they are also an indication of the degree to which Jews have succeeded at

integrating into American society. Only 13% of Americans say they would object to a close relative marrying a Jewish person, according to the GSS.

Along with social integration have come increasingly positive attitudes toward Jews. While many Jews worry that they are perceived as wielding inordinate power, other Americans are more likely to rate Jews as having too little influence (22%) rather than “too much” (12%), according to a 2000 survey by the National Conference for Community and Justice. The majority of Americans (57%) feel that Jews have “the right amount” of influence in our society today, while 10% say they “don’t know.” By way of comparison, 22% of Americans see fundamentalist Christians as having too much influence, 23% say they have too little influence, 37% say they have the right amount of influence and 18% “don’t know.”

Moreover, more than half (53%) of Americans view Jews as having made a positive contribution to America, placing Jews second only to the English — the founders of this country — as the most highly valued of the ethnic groups included in the GSS. For a group formerly known as a “pariah people,” we’ve come a long way.

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