

ISRAEL'S CRISIS: ITS EFFECT ON THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMUNITY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR JEWISH COMMUNAL SERVICE *

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THE assigned subject for this paper seems tonight a rather irreverent topic; once again, our more conventional deliberations have been violated, in a way which threatens to become corrosively familiar. The intervals between our national calamities grew perilously short; what was once incredible now becomes conventional, we stagger from bullet to fire and back to bullet, there is no respite. Nor have I any solace to offer, or comfort to share; in the enduring battle between the noble and the base, between the graceful and the tawdry, this has been a cruel year for the children of light. Last June, our night was lit by roaring jets and massive artillery; this June, our day was darkened by a lonely pistol.

The bracketing of this twelve-month past by gunpowder would be evident enough even were it not for the weird, tragicomic circumstance which joins this June and last in substance as well as symbol. And I think you will understand if this newest wound is still too raw, this latest frustration still too bitter, to permit last year's miracle to engage all my attention. I will, in due course, arrive at my assigned topic, but I ask forbearance with what will seem a somewhat meandering route.

* Presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Conference of Jewish Communal Service, Detroit, Michigan, June 8, 1968.

The Proneness of Liberals to Reject the Past

I begin with a disclaimer. The recurrent and shattering events of recent months have evoked a substantial discussion of the alleged sickness of this nation and its purported source. I am not analyst enough to know whether we are sick, nor, if we are, am I thoroughly persuaded that there is a relationship between the specific traumas which have occasioned the discussion and the sickness itself. I do not know, nor do I know how to find out. But sick or well, it is clear beyond question that we are a distressed people, and that our distress and confusion, though encouraged by cataclysm, are nurtured in less dramatic ways. And because, in the long run, the steady erosion of civil society may be as ruinous as the sudden rending of the social fabric, it is that distress, that confusion, that erosion that I want to explore.

I will likely seem crotchety to some, and I know that I risk displeasure of some in what I am about to say. I choose this time and this place not only because such thoughts are uppermost this week, and not only because my audience, in their professional capacities, are so often called upon to deal with the consequences of our civic malaise, but because I fear that we of the liberal intelligentsia bear a measure of responsibility

for the present unrest. And though I would not wish to add to our already overburdened sense of guilt, I am myself oppressed these days by the conviction that it is in our own postures and programs, at least as much as in the excesses of the gun fanciers and the aberrations of the deranged, that we must make repairs.

Specifically, I believe that the lawlessness we now again lament is itself the symptom of a rootlessness we have for long endorsed. I submit that liberals, far from being the maligned and impotent class we conjure up in our self-portraits, have set the official tone and temper of this country for some time now—witness, for example, *Time* and *Life* magazines today compared to *Time* and *Life* when we were growing up—and that the thrust of our enterprise has been the systematic destruction of almost every prop by which societies and families are normally sustained. Psychoanalysis has won, and cultural relativism has won, and science and rationality have won; the idols are mocked, the atavisms derided, the myths are scorned, and all this by our popular media. We snicker at the frantic flailings of those who have not kept up with us, and now find themselves helplessly suspended between past and future. Yet it is we who have destroyed the past, quite purposefully, and it is we who have failed to define the future.

Now I am surely not the first to suggest that the modern world is marked by a crisis in values. For more than a century, if not since human history began, this has been a common complaint, indeed has been the standard cliché of ideological conservatives. But it is only in recent years that this crisis has made itself manifest in the lives of ordinary people, for it is only in recent years that the liberal dogmas have become the established truths for society. Habits and traditions, customs and conventions, have all been undermined, and people no longer know

what to think about God, about the relationships between parents and children, between husbands and wives, between themselves and their neighbors. As Irving Kristol has suggested, "it is easy to snicker, as popular humor now does, at the typical father trying, and hopelessly failing, to give guidance to his daughter about the regulation of her sexual life. Yet this father, even though he may join the snickering at himself, is all too likely to feel deep down that he has been unmanned by some kind of nebulous conspiracy, and that older certainties are to be preferred to a newer sophistication that is primarily destructive."¹

It is possible, of course, that a new and better world will spring from the ashes of the old, but it is important, desperately important, that we acknowledge the degree to which we have as yet failed to map that newer world, to provide our citizens with reasonable instruction for its navigation. Neither the government, nor the church, nor the school, nor the family provide the authoritative guidance over morals and values they once provided. Indeed, we have insisted that these institutions not be taken very seriously at all. Where, then, is one to turn?

We may, of course, dismiss the question. We may assert that the enduring verities are natural casualties of the transition from the pre-modern to the post-modern world, and that no progress can come without a measure of discomfort. Our conventional wisdom, after all, suggests that it is the residual forces of darkness which plague us still, the neanderthals who impede utopia. Unmask the Ku Klux Klan, expose the John Birch Society, oppose the National Rifle Association, and all will be well. Perhaps that is so. Certainly much would be better. But in the end, these, too, must

¹ Irving Kristol, "Comment: New Right, New Left," *The Public Interest*, Summer, 1966, pp. 3-7.

somehow be replaced. Once we have pulled out all the weeds, the very deeply rooted weeds, we must know what to plant in their stead.

Consider, once again, the mass media—the large circulation magazines, the films, television, even many urban newspapers. Where a decade or two ago such instruments could be turned to with confidence that they would reinforce the traditional understandings of society, today they have been captured. We have captured them. There is no question that the message of the media today is far more sophisticated, far more enlightened, and far better informed than it was just a short while ago. At the same time, and for the same reasons, it is also far more destabilizing. Mystery is destroyed, for mystery is mumbo-jumbo, and has no place in a rational society. Symbols are destroyed, for we know too much to take them seriously, and symbols impede science. The sacred is destroyed, for it serves no useful purpose, and we are committed to the secular.

If I am correct in my assertion that liberals now enjoy far more power over the civic ideologies of our society than we had thought possible, then it seems to me there is an obvious corollary that we must begin to exercise far more responsibility than we had thought necessary. We are no longer embattled defenders of a minority ideology; we are no longer on the barricades, where some excessive zeal is forgivable. We are now the priests, the elders of society, and more caution and more precision is required of us.

The Impulse Toward Community Reawakened by Israel's War

Such caution and such precision, I believe, point in the direction of a rather more generous tolerance than we have typically displayed towards the needs most people feel for some sense of place, some sense of rootedness, some sense of

past. And this brings me quite directly to the topic of the Six Day War and its effects on us. For among the many things which we discovered, in that brief encounter with ourselves, was the very powerful residue of gut emotion we could still feel. We, who had thought ourselves among the most rational, the most intellectual, the most dispassionate of men, discovered vast areas of mystery, of emotion, of involvement and of passion. Particularly among our academic colleagues, so many of whom had so long supposed they had successfully extirpated all vestige of unexamined feeling, all parochialism of commitment, the discovery was astonishing, and often led to some embarrassment. I rather suspect that this is one major source for the subsequent defection, which took the form of a bending over backward to re-establish total secularity of commitment.

Those among us who followed such a course, from radical dispassion to genuine involvement and back to radical dispassion, ought not be condemned. For against the moment of self-discovery, which might have led to more enduring understandings, one must place the lifetime of ideological commitment to a world order resting on pure intellect. Having read Mannheim, those of whom I speak had concluded that time and space were irrelevant, that the community to be preferred was the community of free-floating intellectuals. The temporary discovery that even the most free-floating were still anchored in space and anchored in time could not be reconciled with the more durable conviction that all anchors ought be hoisted in the name of progress.

Though I sympathize with the dilemma, I do not share it, for my own commitment is to a world in which the word "parochial" is no pejorative. Among the more impressive victories of liberal dogma has been the destruction of the intellectual basis for community, for

private understandings and emotional cement. We have abhorred the good fences which make good neighbors, not recognizing that the fences are there to stave off the uprooting flood. We have, in short, been so preoccupied with the problem of communal insularity that we have failed to devote adequate attention to the problem of communal instability. It is, if you will, as if we had divided the social labor, assigning to conservatives the problem of preserving a sense of order, of time and place, of community, and taken to ourselves the problem of promoting brotherhood, interaction, openness. Perhaps, if there were any real conservatives left, that division might still be viable. But I am increasingly persuaded that we ourselves are now called upon to do both jobs, that if we occupy ourselves exclusively with breaking down the barriers between man and his neighbor no one will be left to watch over the fragile membranes which tell us who and where we are.

I would not wish to be misunderstood, for there is enough of an argument here without compounding it through misinterpretation. I do not speak on behalf of neo-feudalism or a return to ethnocentric ideologies. I speak, instead, for balance, for an understanding of what Moynihan has called the "sweaty facts of tribalism," for an empathy with those who cling to memory as against those who commit themselves to vision.

I believe, in short, that one lesson we should have learned from our own reactions to the Six Day War is the viability, indeed, the urgency, of the impulse to community. There is another lesson as well, no less important, and, it seems to me, much less observed. It has to do with the nature of community assertiveness. Our community, as you know at least as well as any, has thrived on public relations. No group, surely, comes by its paranoia more honestly than we, and none has responded with a more elabo-

rate, and, in the main, successful network of defense agencies. When, therefore, our world was threatened last June, the instinctive response of the organized community was to intervene with the relevant public officials, seeking quietly and politely their support for Israel's position. Israel was on the verge of destruction, and we combed our hair, polished our shoes, straightened our ties, and made representations. That is what we had taught ourselves to do, and if you find the statement somewhat exaggerated, I enter into the record the heated discussion in one large Jewish community when several of its leaders proposed a mass rally of support for Israel. The first debate was on the question of whether a rally was advisable at all, since public demonstrations run counter to the public relations manuals. The compromise that was eventually reached—this was, may I remind you, just days before the war itself—was to hold the rally, but not to publicize it. And the second debate, quite protracted, was on the question of whether we should sing Hatikvah at the rally and display the flag of Israel. It is hard to imagine how anyone could have planned a rally on behalf of Israel in those gloomy days without scheduling the singing of Hatikvah and raising Israel's flag. But there it is.

In the event, of course, we lost our cool completely. By June 5, we had tossed aside the manuals and were behaving in unprecedentedly disruptive ways. We begged, we pleaded, we demanded, we insisted, we threatened, we promised, we were aggressive, petulant, temperamental. We threw a tantrum.

And, against all prediction, the roof did not cave in. There was no outpouring of anti-Semitic sentiment. There was no serious backlash. I know, of course, that some notable Christian clergymen were less concerned than we should have liked and had reason to expect, and that a few even gave vent to anti-Semitism. But,

by and large, the Christian community not only accepted our emotional outburst, but sympathized with it.

There is a lesson here, which I think has not so much been misread as neglected. The lesson is not that anti-Semitism is dead, for it is not, nor is the lesson that temper tantrums are invariably rewarded, for they are not. The lesson is that we have been more defensive than we need have been, that we have been more concerned than we need have been with image, that there is far more room for assertiveness than we had dared suppose.

I am not going to pursue the implications of this lesson for Jewish communal service. What it means, or might come to mean, is for you to judge. My own diffident understanding suggests that what we ought to have learned in last June's aftermath supports rather strongly those who would renew and re-emphasize, in the institutions and agencies of our community, our parochial concern with things Jewish and our links with the State of Israel. If Jewish communal service seems far from where the action is, the thrust of what I have been saying is that it is precisely our own community where the action needs to be. Those who would devote their energies to grouting our social mosaic must be joined by those who seek to care for each of the stones, one by one. But I shall let the matter rest there, for there is still another issue I would raise.

Negro Anti-Semitism and Jewish Backlash

I no longer speak in public without making some reference to the continuing problem of the relations between the races in this country, for I know of no problem which calls for more careful and sustained attention. And in the context of this meeting, I think it particularly appropriate to raise that special prob-

lem which deals with the relationships between Jews and Negroes. I think it will be seen, as I proceed, that far from being a second topic, these matters are very closely linked to what I have been saying.

It is only very recently that I have felt it useful to enter the discussion of Negro anti-Semitism. Until a few weeks ago, I consistently refused all invitations to speak out on this subject, for I felt that the intrinsic importance of the question did not merit the attention it was receiving. But it has become painfully clear that a policy of silence is of no avail. However undeservedly, the issue of black anti-Semitism has emerged as a major preoccupation of large numbers of people. It has achieved a self-sustaining momentum of its own, and, though it be distressing, I am afraid that we must recognize that relations between our two communities are likely to get worse—much worse—before they begin to get better. Hence silence is no longer a viable posture. The question has become what to say rather than whether to speak out.

In deciding what to say, however, we are bound by the limited uses of rational argument. In general, for example, much of the writing on the subject emphasizes the peculiar frequency and intimacy of contact between Negro and Jew, and designates that contact as the major source of the current problem. But such a thesis, whatever its status as explanation, is simply not very effective as solution. Jews will no more be placated by head-counts of the large number of Jewish merchants in the ghetto, will no sooner accept that argument as a sufficient explanation for anti-Semitism, than Negroes will forgive white racial bigotry which seeks to justify itself by reference to the high crime rates of the ghetto. The fact that the sources of a problem are plausible, and may even evoke sympathy, does not reduce the felt impact of the problem itself.

That is not to say that reason is not needed, that perspective must not be asserted and protected. But we must know that reference to the numerous studies which show that Negroes are, in general, less anti-Semitic than many white Christians, or that most Negroes do not distinguish between Jews and other whites, or that when Negroes do make such distinctions, they are usually made in favor of Jews—all these are of limited value. In the wrenching confusion of our times, the more relevant statistic, to many people, will remain the number of Jewish merchants whose stores have been burned and looted, and the number—not the proportion, but the number—of Negro leaders who have made specific anti-Semitic statements. Similarly, many Negroes will be less impressed with the abstraction of traditional Jewish commitment to civil rights than with the reality of the Jew as central representative of a largely oppressive society, a role which is a fact of public life especially in New York City.

Withdrawing from the battle, we may empathize with those Negroes who, viewing the incredible success of the maligned Jew, feel they must choose between rejecting themselves for their own lack of success, on the one hand, and imputing dishonesty to the Jew, and hence discounting his success, on the other. Withdrawing from the battle, we may empathize with the paranoid streak which is so much a part of Jewish communal life, a paranoia which makes of every whispered unpleasantry an organized campaign of malice, of every minor act of rudeness an onslaught of aggression.

But the Negro anti-Semites and the Jewish backslashers are not withdrawn from the battle. Their capacities for empathy are minimal at best. They are nervous, they are angry, they are sensitive, and there is just enough truth in the charges and counter-charges to make

the voice of calm reason an unwelcome intrusion.

Negroes have their grievances, and Jews have theirs. We are both of us more sensitive than people with less harrowing memories, and we pay a price for our exaggerated sensitivities. It is human to expect gratitude for acts of charity, and it is no less human to feel patronized by acts of charity. It is human to stereotype, and it is no less human to resent being stereotyped. If Jews lump together the explicit anti-Semitism of a LeRoi Jones and the often incidental damage done to Jews in the course of urban rampage, then Negroes often lump together the malice of a Jewish merchant and the symbol of the Jew as ineffectual do-gooder. None of us is subtle, these are not subtle times, freedom and fire are not subtle.

Even were the reasoned responses to all the diverse excesses more credible, they would still be insufficient. They would be insufficient because it is fundamentally patronizing to explain bigotry by reference to history, and leave it there. Bigotry deserves a response of outrage as well as a sense of perspective. Indeed, I would suggest that the perspective becomes more credible if coupled to the outrage. We do not countenance the Ku Klux Klan even though they come by their bigotry honestly; no more should we patronize the Negro bigot by interpreting his anti-Semitism as a passing symbol of adolescent acting-out. Anti-Semitism is an obscenity, and Negro anti-Semitism is a perverse obscenity. It is quite plain that Negroes have far more to gain, and have, in fact, gained far more, from Jews, than they have lost. Nor, finally, will it do to explain away Jewish backlash as an understandable response by people who have too often been victims. To explain is not to explain away, and condemnation is needed in equal measure.

My own disposition, in any case, is to

go beyond the analysis of origins and the description of incidence. It is, I think, more appropriate that we turn our own attention from the question of Negro anti-Semitism to the question of Jewish response, and I find it impossible, in so doing, to isolate our response to anti-Semitism from our response to the broader malaise which besets us all these days.

No one can deny that backlash is growing apace, and, though Jews may still be more liberal than others, they are less immune to the disease of bigotry than we should hope. Yet I do not believe that backlash is, by any means, the dominant response of Jews, or, for that matter, of others, to our present difficulties. The more prevalent reaction, by far, is genuine confusion. And I would begin the effort to clarify one aspect of that confusion by turning away from the special problems of the moment to two points which seem to me of more durable significance.

Jews a Beneficiary of Strengthened Acceptance of American Diversity

First: When all is said and done, I believe that the Jewish community may find itself the unintended beneficiary, rather than the undeserving victim, of the current turmoil. My reasoning here is as follows:

When Jews arrived in this country in their masses, the basic tactic we employed to gain admission to American society was a denial of our difference. We threw off our kapotes with alacrity, shaved our sideburns, studied English, took pride in the German Jews who had already made it, who were accepted, more or less, as gentlemen, sought out rabbis to lead our congregations who could impress others with their accents and their elegance. In time, America dropped its barriers, allowed us to join its country clubs, decided that we were

not, at least not all of us, wild-eyed and bushy-headed, and made its peace, a peace nowhere better expressed than in our elevation from a paltry three percent of the country's population to full partnership status in its religious community—one-third, Catholic, one-third, Protestant, one-third, Jew. From three percent to thirty-three percent. What more could we have sought? What more could we have expected? What more could we have achieved?

In brief, our success in America has been based on widespread Christian acceptance of our classical argument, "Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die?"

These are, of course, the words of Shylock, and though they might come from a more respected source, they express with great precision what it is we tried to say, and what our neighbors, at long last, came to believe.

Our argument, as you have no doubt recognized, was supported by the prevailing wisdom of liberal ideology. But, powerfully though we argued, and successful though we have been, the results are not without problem.

The problem is embedded in the success. For we convinced not only our neighbors, but also ourselves, and most particularly, our children. We began, rather cleverly, and not very honestly, by thinking, "If it will help us to survive, let's tell them we're not different." But we said it so well, and so persuasively, that our posture soon was changed, and we thought to ourselves "We are not different, so why are they oppressing us?"

Negroes, until recently, had tried

much the same approach, and who can blame them? The basic argument of liberals, from at least the turn of the century, was that Negroeness was a trivial variable, an accident with no social meaning, that the ideal society, therefore, was the color-blind society. The basic message of the white community—of the best of the white community, mind you—to the Negro went something like this: "If you can manage to distinguish yourself from your unfortunate brethren, if you can demonstrate that you are not lazy, shiftless, given to violence, aggressively sexual, illiterate and drunk, then, with reservations, we will let you in. Remember, however, that when you enter, you must not look back. If you must invite your old friends to visit you, make certain that you don't invite too many at one time, and that none is blacker than you. Otherwise, we shall begin to suspect your own credentials. In fact, it would be best if you didn't seek out your old friends at all, for now that you can live with us, of what use are your yesterdays to you? You have been graced, and we do not see your blackness; you must not see it either. We shall be color blind, so long as there are not too many of you, and so long as you, in turn, promise to forget your past, to be a cultural amnesiac.

It might have worked, had we been serious. Many Negroes took elaborate steps to lighten their skin, to straighten their hair, to adjust their behavior. But we, who had said we would admit the black man if only he was not too black, continued as a nation to see only the blackness, and not the man. The liberal ethic notwithstanding, the Negro in white eyes was black until he could prove that he was white, and the proof had to convince a very skeptical jury.

In brief: white America could cope, somehow, with the integration of occasional citizens of darker skin, but was never serious about integration of the

Negro community. Negroes in large numbers have now understood that integration for the masses was and remains a myth, and have turned from denial of identity to assertion of identity.

When *we* had the opportunity to push back the boundaries of this society, to force the society to come to grips with real difference, we muffed it. We chose instead to defend by denial, and then hastened to cover our idiosyncratic tracks lest we be caught in a lie. Now the opportunity has been taken up by others. I am not optimistic, not at all, about America's capacity to accommodate the new militancy. But if that militancy succeeds, it will succeed because America will have learned to live with difference. If, therefore, it succeeds, we ourselves will be among its unintended beneficiaries.

I leave for another time and another place what to me is the burning question for the Jewish community. If America learns at last that diversity is enriching, where will we be then? Will we be ready to be different, or will the decades of denial have sapped our strength?

There are those, of course, who would argue that we had best not risk our miraculous success, that we had best not push our luck too far, that if the Negro has become assertive more than we it is not through choice but through necessity. And I must answer that we may die of success just as surely as we may die of struggle, that to suppose that America cannot contain a Jewish community that dares to assert itself, in all its distinctiveness, is to sell this country short and to mistake the powerful new mood of these days, is to ignore the leading lessons of last June. The shuffling, stuttering humility belongs to Uncle Tom and the American Council for Judaism. It is dishonest, and, what is worse, it is suicidal.

Now the Negroes may lose their cur-

rent point with or without us. If they lose, so do we. Without us, they may win, and then, once again, where will we be? With us, the chance of victory, for Negro and for Jew, and therefore for America itself, increases. Therefore, the real question is not so much where will we be then, but where are we now?

I am arguing, from all this, that one must separate out the ideological implications of the new Negro cohesiveness from its occasional anti-Semitic manifestations. There is no necessary linkage between the two, and to reject the one because of the other is to risk drowning the baby with the bath.

My final point is closely related. You may note that I occasionally use the word "black" instead of Negro. Yet I do not like the word especially, for it implies a polarization of America, into black and white, which I find both uncomfortable and inaccurate. The fact of the matter is that Jews, however much we have accumulated the trappings of American success, are not white. We are not white symbolically, and we are not white literally. We should not permit ourselves to be lumped together with white America, for that is not where we belong. We are too much an oppressed people, still, and too much a rejected people, even in this country, to accept the designation "white." And to count ourselves as white, moreover, is to deny our brotherhood with the Yemenites and Kurdistanis in Israel, with the B'nai Yisrael from India and the Black Jews of New York. We are not white symbolically, we are not white literally, we are not, for the most part, white in the eyes of much of Christian America.

That is not to say we are black. We are Jews. And because we are Jews, and not white, and not black, we must see to it, as a community, that we do not come to act as whites. Not only because it is forbidden us, not only because we of all people ought to know better, but

because we shall cut ourselves off from our own future if we do. And because we are Jews, is it too much to insist that there ought, indeed, be a special relationship between us and Negroes, a relationship based not upon a common enemy, not upon a common history, but based instead upon a common purpose, the purpose of teaching America at long last what community and pluralism are all about; the purpose of asserting that America cannot and will not be described as black or white alone, but must insist on more various and subtle categories?

I conclude these comments by returning to their starting point.

This is a day that none of us had wished, and it cannot but add to the mounting sense of impotence that all of us who are committed to civility already feel so keenly. The rituals of mourning that have engrossed us all can only assuage, they cannot remove, our fury and our frustration. Tomorrow, once again, we shall have to try to make sense out of our precious and piteous world, and we shall have less to hold onto than before.

The comfort we may take this June, such as it is, is also, in its way, a lesson from last June. For those who now falter in the face of this latest in our growing litanies of tragedy, the undoubted miracle of Israel ought be lesson enough that history is not always controlled by the odds-makers. In 1948, Senator Robert Kennedy, then a correspondent covering Israel's war of independence, cabled to his newspaper that the Israelis "fight with unparalleled courage. This is their greatest and last chance; there will be no turning back."

And when even courage is not enough, there are words to haunt and sustain us: the words which Robert Kennedy spoke, from the back of a truck in an Indianapolis slum on the terrible night when Martin Luther King was killed. Quoting

Aeschylus, he said "Even in our sleep, pain which cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart until in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God." The words which Auden wrote of John Kennedy, "Remembering his death, how we

choose to live will decide its meaning." And finally our own words, from the Ethics of our Fathers: "Ours is not to complete the task, neither are we free to desist from it."

As this be our consolation, so be it also our faith.