

9. The End of the American-Jewish Symbiosis?

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A Moment of Reckoning

Ultimately, the events of October 7th and their many aftermaths may prove more consequential for the Jews of North America than for the Jews of Israel. To be sure, the Hamas attacks on that accursed day were unparalleled in their scale, brutality, and effect on the Israeli population. The pictures and videos of other Israelis being massacred and raped; the deaths of soldiers, policemen, and ordinary civilians on the frontlines and in their homes; and the failure of Israel's security establishment – first to warn and then to protect the population – have all scarred the nation deeply. As many have already argued, Israel will not be the same.

At the same time, Israeli society has also shown remarkable resilience, a feat that is all the more extraordinary given the internal turmoil in the country in the year before the attacks. During that time period, Israel seemed to be standing at the brink of a civil war over the proposed government reforms to the judicial system. Journalists, historians, and other commentators began to openly contemplate the possibility of a national divorce between the pro- and anti-government factions. Indeed, it has been suggested – not without reason – that these internal divisions led the Hamas leadership to conclude that Israeli society was at a point of

unprecedented weakness. And yet after the attacks, Israeli society came together. Voices of division and dissent were quelled, and a spirit of national unity re-emerged; not at once, but within a few days, bitter rivalries were put aside and a sense of camaraderie resurfaced.

Such was not the case with North American Jewry, particularly in the United States. While Israeli Jews were rediscovering their sense of fellowship, the Jews of North America, particularly in the US, found themselves excluded from the community to which they felt they belonged. Perhaps for the first time since the end of World War II, Jews began in earnest to question whether they have lost their place in America.

In the first few weeks after the attacks, soul-searching was particularly strong among progressive Jews, and for seemingly understandable reasons. Jews in the US have traditionally – at least, say, since the 1960s if not earlier – identified with progressive causes. Although there was some realignment of American Jews over the last seven or eight years, most Jews still identify with the political left. Less than a year ago, the World Jewish Congress even put out a promotional video implying that there was something about Jews or Judaism that was essentially progressive. The implications of this video were clear: Jewish leadership in this country are completely committed to the progressive agenda. There was no other agenda being considered. As such, progressive Jews seem to have been somewhat surprised when they discovered that they have been abandoned by their former comrades in arms, their allies in the progressive movement.

Other events have also suggested that the relationships between the Jewish community and American society at large were beginning to fray. Noteworthy, I thought, was the reaction of hedge fund billionaire Bill Ackman and other Jewish philanthropists to the ongoing anti-Israel – and often anti-Semitic – riots at some of America's elite universities. Ackman was especially vocal in his criticism of Harvard and other universities for failing to protect Jewish students from the anti-Israel mobs as well as, at times, even giving tacit support to these mobs in the

name of “free expression.” Other donors, such as Lex and Abigail Wexner, have pulled funding away from Harvard, while Apollo Global Management CEO Marc Rowan called on alums of the University of Pennsylvania to withdraw funding as well. These actions were notable since this was not the first time anti-Israel demonstrations or rhetoric have shaken the world of academia in the US. But now that Jewish donors are reacting in a way they did not before suggests that something has changed in the dynamic between them and the institutions of this country.

There was perhaps one moment of reprieve – one moment when American Jews felt once again that the circles of the Venn Diagram were in alignment, and the two parts of their identity – the American and the Jewish – were in harmony: the March for Israel rally in Washington DC on November 14th. Some estimates state that up to 300,000 people showed up for the event, making this perhaps the largest gathering of Jews in the history of America. But what is the value of this single event on a timeline that suggests a slow but still unmistakable trajectory? Consider, for example, the fact that one of the main speakers at the event was Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer. On the face of it, there could be perhaps no greater confirmation of America’s embrace of its Jewish minority. But Schumer is 73 (born in 1950). And there is no younger Jewish cohort to take his place. In the Senate today there are only two serving members who are younger than sixty-five – Brian Schatz and Jon Ossoff – and they are a far cry from the archetype embodied by Schumer and his generation: proud of his Judaism and proud of being American. An era is passing in America, and with its passing there may also come an end to this phase of Jewish life.

American Jewry and the Postwar Liberal Order

In January 1939, a mere few months after finally leaving Germany and settling in Jerusalem, Martin Buber delivered a short speech entitled “The End of the German-Jewish Symbiosis.” In his speech,

Buber identified the era of German Judaism as the third historic era of cultural synthesis between Jews and other host nations, preceded by Greco-Judaism in Late Antiquity and Spanish-Judaism in the Middle Ages. In his view, however, the German-Jewish symbiosis was the most remarkable of these synthetic moments, in the extent of influence and interpenetration between Jews and Germans:

There is no area of German existence in this age in which Jewish people have not had a leading part in establishing values, setting things in order, interpreting, teaching, shaping. [...]. But even more deeply than by individual accomplishment the symbiosis is verified by a striking collaboration between the German and the Jewish spirit.

Buber's characterization of *Deutschjudentum* was by no means universally accepted. Most famously, Gershom Scholem – Buber's colleague at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and frequent interlocutor – dismissed the very idea of a “German-Jewish dialogue” as no more than a myth. According to Scholem, this “dialogue” should have been more accurately termed a “monologue,” since it only went in one direction. The Germans, in Scholem's view, were impervious to the Jewish message. While it was undoubtedly true that individual Jews had indeed made inroads into the heart of German industry, arts and letters, he argued, Jews as a whole – *as a nation* – were ignored. And that is why, he believed, the only Germans to really engage in meaningful dialogue with the Jews were the antisemites; for they, at least, recognized the Jews for what they are, a nation and an “other.”

And indeed, in retrospect, Buber's remarks may strike us as somewhat naïve, although not necessarily for the reasons Scholem pointed out. The impression of naivete, in our case, is born from the fact that we have lived to see what *true* symbiosis between Jews and a host nation could look like, in the fourth great moment of cultural synthesis, the age of the American-Jewish symbiosis. I would even venture to suggest that had Buber lived to see the

extraordinary achievements of American Jews over the last half century (he died in 1965), he would have modified his remarks, or at least qualified his enthusiasm for what seemed like striking collaboration. What, indeed, differentiates American Judaism from previous moments of cultural synthesis is that in this case, the Jews not only *integrated* themselves successfully into already existing social and cultural structures, but in many respects, *created*, or at least *co-created*, these structures.

The age of American-Jewish symbiosis was also the age in which the US rose to the level of planetary hegemony. This hegemony was expressed not necessarily through the force of arms – although one cannot deny that that was not lacking – but primarily through the realm of *culture*. American film, music, literature, industry, science – and even American English – all became the dominant standards, the *lingua franca* of a planetary civilization. And in all these domains, Jews played a disproportionately large role.

What enabled the Jewish entry into all these realms was a new vision of liberalism, which consisted not only of liberal values such as freedom of speech or religious tolerance, but also of the faith in the leadership of state institutions. As Fred Siegel observed in his book *The Revolt Against the Masses* (Encounter, 2015), liberalism in the US emerged as a reaction to “the newly emergent realities of mass production, mass politics, and mass culture.” The progenitors of the liberal revolution in the US – which Siegel identifies with post-World War I figures such as Herbert Croly, Randolph Bourne, H.G. Wells, Sinclair Lewis, and H. L. Mencken – sought to create a new aristocracy that would “serve as a corrective to the perceived debasements of modern commercial society shorn of traditional hierarchies.” Throughout the twentieth century, and especially after World War II, Jews benefited from the new liberal-institutional arrangement, and in many respects came to be seen as its leaders.

Perhaps no institution symbolized the Jews’ newfound place in American society than the university, particularly the *elite* university. Allan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind* (Simon & Schuster, 1987) – now considered a conservative critique of

academia's decline since the 1960's – is at the same time a panegyric to what the elite American university represented for young Jews of the postwar order. "When I was fifteen years old," he writes movingly, "I saw the University of Chicago for the first time and somehow sensed that I had discovered my life." One cannot help also noticing the religious overtones of his impressions. "In a nation founded on reason, the university was the temple of the regime, dedicated to the purest use of reason and evoking the kind of reverence appropriate to an association of free and equal human beings."

This is why perhaps no other facet of the recent anti-Jewish events in the US has struck the Jewish community as hard as the stories and videos emanating from university campuses across the country. Although perhaps lacking in terms of cinematic quality, it may not be much of an exaggeration to say that the meaning and effect of these campus events could be likened to the fire in the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris in 2019. At the time, even before the causes of the fire were determined, everyone was aware of its historical and theological implications. The gothic lacework of European civilization, already eulogized numerous times, was now coming to its veritable end. Much in the same way, the age of the Jewish-American symbiosis, which at the same time was the age of American supremacy, may now, similarly, be coming to the termination of its existence.

Israeli and US Jews in the Multipolar World Order

Given these premises, what then does the future hold for the relationship between North American and Israeli Jewry? It is no secret that before the events of October 7th, the two communities were on something of a slow but nonetheless indubitable collision course. As Daniel Gordis argued in *We Stand Divided* (Ecco/HarperCollins, 2019), since the early days of Zionism the two communities have essentially been divided in terms of their interpretation of the meaning of Jewish history and values, and

thus, ultimately, also dedicated to promoting different – not to say opposing – goals. In brief, Gordis argues that American Judaism is committed to the values of American universalism; the Americans interpretation of Judaism is such that they view Jewish particularity as one stream among many that pours into the great ocean of the universal and homogenous state. Israeli Judaism, by contrast, is wholly dedicated to Jewish particularity and the advancement of the Jews as a unique, ultimately unassimilable nation. The two communities, in other words, are divided by very different notions of democratic politics.

The two communities, moreover – and this could hardly be stated enough – are also divided *geopolitically*. In the last few years there emerged something of a consensus among scholars of international relations that the current and probable trajectory of the world order is towards a multipolar constellation, which would replace the contemporary unipolar constellation that has dominated since the end of the Cold War. The primary unit, as it were, of this new multipolar order will not be the nation state, as it was under the liberal international order of the twentieth century, but rather, the civilizational state, which stands for distinct civilizational values against any notions of Western universalism.

If such predictions are correct – and I will allow that they may not be – then we may see the two communities moving even further apart than they were before the events of October 7th. Israel, in many respects, is well positioned to move towards this new potential civilizational order. Although defenders of Israel frequently highlight its adherence to liberal values – the rule of law, protection of individual rights, parliamentary democracy, freedom of expression, and so forth – Israel, in truth, has always held a very fraught relationship with the postwar liberal international order. Even if we confine our analysis to the last twenty or so years, say, the period since the collapse of the Oslo Accords and the outbreak of the Second Intifada in the early 2000s, we see that Israel often found itself on the wrong side of liberal internationalism, frequently accused by vanguard institutions like the UN, the EU, the ICJ, of violating “international law” and “universal human rights.”

Internally, as well, Israel's unique fusion between religion and state already brings it much closer to the civilizational model than some of its liberal defenders will allow. As Dr. Shuki Friedman, vice president of the Jewish People's Policy Institute in Jerusalem, argues in a recent book, in Israel religion and state are interwoven in a way that defies the liberal view of the proper relationship between these two domains. From a demographic perspective, over half of Israeli Jews (~55%) define themselves as traditional, religious, or ultra-Orthodox, compared with 44.2% who define themselves as secular or irreligious, according to an Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics report from September 2023. Even the latter group, however, still adheres to the civilizational Jewish framework, mostly observing the Jewish calendar and other cultural aspects.

American Jewry, on the other hand, may rise and fall with the postwar liberal order. For how can it be otherwise? Postwar American liberalism was responsible for the greatness that Jewish Americans were able to achieve within the span of only a few generations. Liberalism is built into the very fabric of the American-Jewish essence, and it cannot be pulled apart without risking some terminal harm to the rest of the organism. Nonetheless, in the aftermath of October 7th, it is still possible to contemplate American Judaism mutating in some regards, becoming more "civilizational" in the process. Already North American and Israeli Judaism seem to have been brought closer once again by what we may call Jewish destiny. In addition, I surmise that in the near future there will probably be something of a wave of emigration from North America to Israel – and possibly also in the other direction, but will be much smaller – which will cement the personal and familial relations between the peoples. It is of course too soon to tell what these changes may portend. Possibly, nothing at all. But if American Judaism does embark on some kind of a civilizational shift, then perhaps it is too early to eulogize the American-Jewish symbiosis. If indeed American Judaism begins to morph, then it may still be the engine of dynamism and innovation that it has been historically. And I, for one, look forward to what the future may bring.