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Introduction: The Ironies of American Jewish History

Robert M. Seltzer

Jewish history is singular, not least because of its incongruities. The migrations, invasions, defeats, and myriad other crises of the ancient Israelites, a small people that was among the least of the kingdoms, became the matrix of the cosmic historiography that came to dominate Europe, North Africa, and western Asia after late antiquity. Not exceptionally distinguished in art, technology, or warfare, the Jewish impact flowed from a handful of surviving oracles, hymns, legal codes, and tales of ancestors and from an abiding drive to metabolize the symbolic forms of nearby cultures according to an obsession that only the God of Israel was truly divine. Few in number relative to the populations alongside whom they lived, the Jews generated a collective image that loomed preternaturally large throughout the medieval and early modern centuries in the minds of Christendom and Islam and, of course, in the Jewish conception of the significance of their group existence. Modern Jewry has sought in various ways to reduce that incongruous image to manageable proportions—to normalize and humanize it—with limited success and considerable failure. Because of the powerful valence of the image of the Jews, modern Jewish history, far from being one more chapter appended to a chronicle of many centuries, has become an intellectual world in itself, a complex series of encounters and adjustments in which, ironically, the Jews are both a paradigm for many other small groups and a special case.

Jewry's record of reactions, initiatives, and restructurings in the last two centuries is often said to be prototypical of vulnerable religious, ethnic, and social minorities responding to accelerating and sometimes cataclysmic change. Yet it is a story like no other. In the mid-eighteenth century, the preponderance of a marginalized but proud Jewish people, defined by loyalty to the Torah and its God, lived in a diaspora stretching from Alsace and the western German and northern Italian states to the eastern reaches of Poland-Lithuania and, in a second swath, from Morocco across North Africa and the southern Balkans to the Middle East, Iran, and beyond. Farther out, harbingers of immense shifts about to be set in motion were the newest Jewish communities on the Atlantic—Amsterdam, London, Hamburg, Bordeaux, Curacao, Charleston, Philadelphia, New York, Newport. Less than two and one-half centuries later, the Jewish people had become transformed into an incomparably more complex social grouping living in a handful of economically advanced countries, marked by an ideological and behavioral diversity virtually unparalleled in Jewish history such that “who is a Jew” became a question that concerned even the Jews themselves.

Yet another way Jews found themselves to be prototypical and exceptional is that they underwent, before many other minority groups, the possibilities and metamorphoses summoned by the rampant urbanization, mobility, and secularization that accompanied modern education, economic change, and political upheaval. On the one hand, sectors of the Jewish people confronted early what wider elements of the population experienced later, making Jews pioneers in the self-transformations forced on minorities in the last ten or fifteen decades of modernity. On the other hand, the desire to avoid total rupture with the past and to maintain continuity evoked a series of creative responses by Jewish elites. Bound together in new arrangements and modes of self-awareness, modern Jewry's exertions to maintain order and cohesion constitute a many-sided drama not usually given its due in comparative history. Efforts to achieve conclusive liberation led to the prolonged struggle for Jewish emancipation in the European diaspora, to a preoccupation with revolutionary politics in some countries, and to movements for Jewish self-emancipation and return to the ancient home-

land. Catching up to a European Enlightenment that was embarked in new humanistic and universalistic directions led to a new continuum of Jewish denominations and theologies and eventually to the inclusion in it of secular ideologies of Jewishness. The *Haskalah*, *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, Neo-Orthodox Judaism, Classical Reform, Positive-Historical Judaism, Bundism, Diaspora Nationalism, Political Zionism, Spiritual Zionism, Labor Zionism, Revisionist Zionism, and other programs of thought and act were all symptoms of the power over Jews of calls for justice, equality, fraternity, and hope. Yet none of the programs of re-formation ended up as their initiators intended. They and the other ideologies of Jewish regeneration turned out to have critical limits, leaving the Jews just as vulnerable as they had always been to the deracinating lures of integration and assimilation on the one hand and to campaigns of vilification and extermination on the other hand. Whatever modernity may turn out to be, it has never stood still.

Locating this kaleidoscope of reactions and counterreactions in its proper context calls for a special academic field: the comparative study of modern Jewish diasporas. Jews in most lands have found themselves on the edge of social and intellectual change but confronting different givens. As a result of the economic and political development (and revolutions) of the nation-states in which Jews live, each Jewry had to respond to its own set of challenges in its own way.

Four especially creative Jewries have contributed most to the remaking of the Jewish people: those of Germany, Russia and Poland, Israel, and America. From German Jewry came a tripartite denominational structure that has marked modernized Judaism since the mid-nineteenth century, as well as most of the fecund schools of modern Jewish philosophy, from the Enlightenment of Moses Mendelssohn to the existentialism of Franz Rosenzweig. Russia and Poland constituted a greenhouse of secular Judaism—literary, nationalist, and socialist—and became the home of vibrant forms of traditional religious Judaism, especially the yeshivah world and later Hasidism. The Yishuv and the State of Israel has been the exemplary setting for social experimentation and redemptive ingathering, as well as the means for Jews to take a new stance as a nation and find a voice in the international arena.

It is more difficult, however, to delineate what American Jewry has accomplished in relation to its special environment.

Although the Jewish population of the United States has numbered in the millions since about World War I, the Jewish encounter here with modernity is actually one of the longest: in the year 2004 it will have lasted three and one-half centuries. (Jews have lived as long in North America as they have in postmedieval Britain and France and only sixty years less than in Amsterdam—and English, French, and Dutch Jewries are usually considered the principal harbingers of modern Jewry.) The tale most often told is that of immigrants arriving in America to escape the disabilities and misfortunes of the Old World: how they, their children, and their grandchildren sunk roots in a land that seemed to promise an end to the degradations of poverty and exile. Another well-established story is that of the creation by American Jewry of a host of new organizations, institutions, and agencies to cope with the religious and political milieu of the United States. But there is much more. In the last four decades American Jewish studies has become a full-fledged branch of American ethnic and social history, exploring such themes as the presence of Jews in far-flung parts of the continent and disparate sectors of the economy, the migration of Jews from region to region of North America, their impact on the polity and popular culture of the United States, the growth of Jewish educational institutions, and the politics of American Zionism. The resulting picture indicates how an Americanized Jewry emerged from a melting pot of Old World Jewish subcultures and became internally divided along new fault lines, producing its own dialectic of vectors and forces pointing . . . where? We will return to that question later.

This book is a selection of recent work by some of the most accomplished scholars and researchers in a burgeoning field. The committee that invited these essays was interested in the interplay between Jews and the ideal of America, that is, between dreams and realities: between the Jewish dreams of America and what happened to the Jews as they became part of the mainstream to a degree that did not occur elsewhere. For Jews, America was a land of immense opportunities and, for Judaism, immense dangers. It offered Jews as

individuals the opportunity to live free of the restrictions that often persisted in the Old World and Jews as a group the opportunity to find a safe home. But America threatened personal disorientation and collective disintegration, corrosion of family ties and the demise of a distinctive Jewish culture, with a rapidity much greater than almost anywhere else in the world. Rumors of the promise and risk of America arrived on the other side of the Atlantic not long after the initial groups of Sephardic Jews landed here. By the late eighteenth century, America as a brave new land of freedom and equality became a key constituent of the ideal of a place where Jews could live with complete dignity and new self-respect. Hopes and perceptions are, after all, autonomous forces in the calculus of intentions and acts. First-generation German-speaking Jewish immigrants from Central Europe and first-generation Yiddish-speaking Jews from Eastern Europe were lured by a *novus ordo seclorum* where revolutionary developments were creating a new nation. Not a few of the younger immigrants took advantage of the plasticity afforded by immigration to throw off the shackles of tradition and recreate themselves as deJudaized Americans. Others saw the amorphousness of America as summoning them to lay the foundations for forms of Jewish association and identity that, though modified in the Depression and the war years, persisted in the golden age of American Jewry that lasted to the midsixties.

The essays in this book illustrate the paradoxical effect of the Americanization of the Jews: America undermined and energized Jewish commitment. Much was discarded and much was saved. Acculturation (in the sociological use of the term presupposed in these papers) did not always lead to assimilation: sometimes the most acculturated were among the most conscious of their Jewish identity and the most preoccupied with Jewish affairs. Despite rapid and severe acculturation, Jewishness was honed as an independent variable in the motivations of more than a few of its American adherents—and has remained so, even though Jewish institutions, ideologies, and even Jewish values have been reshaped by America to such a degree that many Jews of the past might not recognize as Jewish some of what constitutes American Jewishness.

How the American environment differed has been repeatedly analyzed by the historians of American Jewry. Jewish immigrants

came to an America populated largely by Europeans who had created a society with only traces of medievalism. Negative stereotypes of the Jews were offset by a Puritan identification with the history of biblical Israel so that, in American Christianity, disdain for a long-superseded Judaism was countered by esteem for the living descendants of the people of the Old Testament. From the beginning, the Jewish situation was more propitious even than in England (and the legal status of the Jews there was more benign than for Jews in most of the lands of continental Europe). In colonial British America there were no restrictions on Jewish economic activity and religious life so that, in the era of the American Revolution, there were no ghettos to be razed, no limits on how many Jews could be married, no Jewish taxes to be abolished, no Pale of Settlement to be demolished; likewise, there were no autonomous *batei din*, no venerable *yeshivot*, no government-recognized *gemeinde* or *landesrabbiner* to sustain an established community. Restrictions on the election of Jews to public office were rapidly abolished by most states; in some localities Jews were not particularly welcome (New England until the mid-nineteenth century), but there were no explicit limits on the freedom of Jews to live where they chose, to engage in any business or profession, and to consider themselves citizens of a country that, for all its bursts of nativism and decades of rejection of nonwhites and non-Nordics, was still more hospitable to immigrants than any other.

History, of course, offers instances of other frontiers where Jews have been welcomed because of their mobility and entrepreneurial skills. In industrializing nineteenth-century America, Jewish immigrants came to be not only peddlers and shopkeepers but also workers in expanding industries, such as clothing manufacture, that other Jews had largely created. The growing economy of the new nation lured Jews as it did other immigrants, but the image of America as the land of freedom was compelling: the United States promised liberty and justice, the chance to be people of worth and dignity, the opportunity to start life anew and rise to respectability and even prominence.

Arguably, the most remarkable feature of the America polity from the Jewish perspective is the Enlightenment ethos of its foundational documents. The universalist rationalism in the Declara-

tion of Independence appealed to the rights of human beings as such, so that this charter of the American social contract was rooted in a notion of natural reason that by implication included non-Christians without caveat. The constitutional prohibition of an established church provided for a sweeping separation of religion and state that made the United States the political order most neutral to competing or friendly denominations. Although as a religion and an ethnic group Jews were legally invisible on the federal level, Clermont-Tonnerre's 1789 dictum that "the Jews should be denied everything as a nation, but granted everything as individuals" was realized earlier in America than in revolutionary France, where it was enunciated. Yet in America the Jewish religion was able eventually to attain a greater degree of informal legitimation as one of a plurality of publicly recognized faiths than Judaism achieved in any other diaspora; given the relative paucity of Jews involved, it is all the more remarkable that the Jewish tradition managed finally to gain equal status in the trinity of Protestantism-Catholicism-Judaism that has given a special tone to recent American life.

In the first phase of American Jewish history there was an overarching Jewish communal structure in each place where Jews settled in sufficient numbers. After the American Revolution it became clear that Jewry was free, within certain parameters, to reorganize itself the way it wanted. By the middle of the nineteenth century, American Judaism was structured according to the model of denominational Protestantism: larger communities had an increasing number of independent congregations, each conducting its affairs according to its own bylaws, relying solely on dues and contributions of its members, and selecting its officers and spiritual leader according to its own standards and desires. Membership in the Jewish community was stripped of any legal sanctions in America earlier than elsewhere and became even more a matter of personal choice as each new generation matured and as American Jewry increased in number and geographical distribution. American individualism has been commented on extensively from Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* to Robert N. Bellah's *Habits of the Heart*: the radical individualism of America meant that Jews could choose as they wished among the Jewish options that ap-

peared in the nineteenth century, that they could decide whether they would be Jewish in a strong way, or even be Jewish at all.

Nineteenth-century American Jewry gradually created a broad range of new intercommunal institutions to supplement the multiple congregations that had come into being on a local level: fraternal and charitable organizations, federations of philanthropies and synagogues, rabbinical schools, newspapers in German, Yiddish, and English, settlement houses, labor unions, *landsmanshaften*. By the early twentieth century most of the present Jewish defense agencies had emerged, each imbued by an ideal of America and dedicated to protecting the Jews at home and abroad. The formation of new national organizations confirmed the fragmentation of the community, as well as the minority status within American Jewry of traditional Old World Judaism. Only in America did the vast majority of Jews identify themselves with the various forms of liberal, non-Orthodox Judaism. Never had a Jewish community been to such an extent voluntary and so divided.

Meanwhile, by the end of the nineteenth century a restrictive definition of America was beginning to crystallize in the antisemitism of the Gilded Age that eventuated in the social exclusions, educational quotas, immigration allotments, and public expressions of aversion to Jews that became more conspicuous in the twenties and thirties. This exclusivism was emphatically not the Jewish image of America, and Jewish leaders, organizations, and voters gave their support to those positions that represented an America that embraced all its constituent races, religions, ethnic groups, and social classes. According to some historians, the overlapping, competing, and fractious Jewish organizational network may have contributed to the difficulties American Jewry encountered in forging a coherent policy to deal with the upsurge of American antisemitism in the thirties and with the blatant threat of Nazi Germany. The same voluntaristic pluralism, however, may have amplified the vitality of American Jewry after World War II on a series of fronts. In a postwar era of renewed social mobility, revival of respect for religion, and eclipse of anti-Jewish prejudice, Jews moved in large numbers to the suburbs, where many joined synagogues and reacquired at least a minimum of Jewish practice. All American Jewish religious organizations were energized in some

fashion, and Jews were increasingly united by a surge of support for Israel as a symbol of determination to survive after the Holocaust, as a necessary means of achieving Jewish autonomy independent of a hostile majority, and as a self-chosen Jewish way of life. While American culture became fascinated with the complex ethnic roots of its heterogeneous population, a concomitant interest in Jewish roots arose. A Jewish community had probably never enjoyed such a positive image as that of American Jewry in the fifties and sixties, nor felt more accepted.

In light of post-World War II developments, it has become possible to perceive yet another way in which America stood out in the course of Jewish history: as Jews have become Americanized, they had contributed much to the liberal ideal of Americanism itself. American culture was remarkably absorbent of certain of the ethnic features of the groups that constituted the American populace: in popular culture (foods, humor, music, slang) and in politics and intellectual life (the American labor movement, New Deal and Fair Deal liberalism, racial desegregation, civil liberties, avant-garde arts, new directions in literary criticism), Jews were quite conspicuous. Just as Jews had remade themselves and their religion in light of their ideal of America, so they projected into the American dream Jewish values and yearnings. If American cultural forms were reshaping Jewishness, Jews helped shape America's conception of itself.

In the late sixties, however, there began to appear signals that called into question whether or not Jewish continuity and integration in America had been truly stabilized. Muting of antisemitism and enthusiasm for Israel were countered by fascination with Israel's purported failings and by disparagements that, to sensitive ears (perhaps hypersensitive, perhaps prescient), seemed close to antisemitism in new dress. Of broader impact on the Jewish situation were the changes becoming increasingly apparent as a result of Jewish acceptance, changes that were rapidly and dramatically remaking most of American Jewry in the absence of a continued stream of immigrants from traditional Old World Jewish backgrounds and upbringings. The decline of social barriers went hand in hand with a weakening of inhibitions against marriage outside the faith. The Jewish birthrate declined and the divorce rate soared.

Conversion to Judaism increased, as did disaffiliation. Was American Jewry headed for drastic shrinkage in numbers, if not outright extinction? The established denominational pattern seemed about to fragment. Feminism challenged age-old Jewish assumptions about gender and family. Changing sexual mores and yearnings for personal fulfillment threatened to disrupt the indirect, already tenuous connections of much of American Jewry to venerable values. The impact of a cohort of children raised part-Jewish and part-Christian posed dilemmas of principle and tactics for Jewish institutions. Was the Jewishness of many American Jews on the way to becoming a secondary or even a tertiary loyalty—a “postassimilation” Jewishness that faded in and out of the individual’s consciousness along with involvements in other categories now considered cultural identities of their own? Was cyclical Jewishness the next stage in a new reality in the making? One group of Jewish sociologists has been labeled the “transformationists” because they emphasize not the cumulative attenuation of Jewishness from one generation to another but the protean nature of American Jewishness as unexpected forms of Jewish self-expression appear. Another group, often called the “assimilationists,” dismisses the transformationalists as misguided Pollyannas.

American Jewish studies as seen from the nineties, therefore, is faced with questions different from those that predominated in the fifties, when American Jewish history came into its own as a distinct area of scholarly research and academic analysis. Is America still to be held exceptional to generalizations derived from all of Jewish history? Do recent developments indicate that broader diaspora-wide processes governing acculturation, marginalization, and decline are beginning to take hold, so that nineteenth-century Old World fears of America as corrosive to the integrity of Judaism are proving to be valid? Is the Jewish image of America as a uniquely benevolent home of an emancipated, normalized Judaism fated to be drastically modified or even abandoned, or will American Jewry be shown capable of generating its own self-perpetuation in yet another era of Jewish history?

Perhaps it is most helpful to pursue American Jewish dreams and

realities as they relate to different glimpses of transformations in process. That is what we have tried to do in this book.

The first group of articles deals with the Jewish imagination. The essays of Steven M. Lowenstein and Jacob Kabakoff examine German and East European images of America in Jewish literature, including the literature produced by the Hebrew renaissance of the turn of the century. European anticipations of the challenges that America would pose for Jewish immigrants were not so inaccurate as one might think; the New World was extolled as a land of liberty and equality but the travails of departure and arrival were widely recognized. American Jewish literature frequently conveys the experience of uprooting and settling, but what does the depiction of the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of those New Americans by American Jewish writers show of the character and incongruities of American Jewish life? Ruth R. Wisse points out that Jews have been grateful for the benefits of America—the material well-being and the freedom possible here—and that America has become the test case for modern Jewish resistance to dissolution (just as Judaism has been a test case for American tolerance). But American Jewish writers have often found the “hunted” (the European refugees) far more interesting than fully acculturated Jews. Is postimmigration American Jewish life so bland as to offer nothing of interest to creative Jews who shape American intellectual and cultural history? Stephen J. Whitfield suggests that, as America has overcome its negativity about the Jewish people, a point has been reached where the Jews can barely be distinguished from the non-Jews. American movies captured dramatically the old nervousness of American Jews with their Jewishness during the Depression and war years just as they chronicle the decline in the power of anti-Jewish images to intimidate the filmmaker since the fifties. If the old stereotypes are no longer potent, does this herald the obliteration of Jewish specialness? Indeed, the fate of American Jewry may be an ultimate test of the compatibility of acculturation with the preservation of meaningful historical distinctiveness in the diaspora.

The second group of articles concerns Jews and American politics in the twentieth century. According to Henry L. Feingold, the con-

sistency with which American Jews (especially of East European origin) support liberal causes is exceptional, but it may obscure the changing components of that allegiance since the New Deal. David G. Dalin presents the intellectual biography of Will Herberg, who moved from radical politics to Neo-Orthodox crisis theology after World War II, as a case history in the evolution of Jewish ideological commitment. Nathan Glazer and Jerold S. Auerbach both examine the possibility that passage to an era where support of the State of Israel is no longer unquestionably part of the liberal agenda may mark another crossroads in American Jewish political sentiments—or it may not.

The propensity of twentieth-century American Jews to universalistic liberalism is so exceptional as to be a Jewish particularism. Conversely, growing American Jewish support for Zionist particularism took the form of an almost exaggerated universalism. Melvin I. Urofsky, Arthur A. Goren, and David Ellenson note that American Zionists defended their cause overwhelmingly in religious terms. Goren concludes that the political assumptions of classical Zionism—that a Jewish homeland was urgently needed as a refuge and shelter—applied to all Jewish diasporas except the American; Zionism's function for American Jews was to be a bulwark against assimilation and a cultural inspiration for this diaspora threatened with loss of its soul. Ellenson shows that during a crucial decade (the forties), Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform rabbis all defined Zionism as thoroughly compatible with the symbols and values of Protestantism and Americanism. Urofsky observes that the success of Zionism in winning support in America was directly related to the successful Americanization of Zionism itself.

The next part of this book deals with the adaptation of Jewish religious life to the American environment. The history of the American synagogue is the story of the by-and-large successful transformation of this key Jewish institution according to American religious patterns. Jonathan D. Sarna analyzes the evolution of synagogue life as it changed from century to century. Jeffrey S. Gurock describes a failed attempt to create a model synagogue for the children of turn-of-the-century Lower East Side immigrants; his case history reveals the deep-seated rivalry between Reform and the other branches of American Judaism, just as Ellenson's study of

rabbinical defenders of Zionism indicates the commonalities shared by the branches three decades later. Jenna Weissman Joselit describes the process by which the Jewish food practices were Americanized: even something as seemingly particularistic and intractable to the American ethos as *kashrut* became a fountain of New World Jewish sentiment and an expression of an emerging American Jewish middle-class aesthetic.

The three essays on the women's movement in American Jewry hearken back to the impact of liberalism on Judaism (inasmuch as feminism is a manifestation at present of liberal egalitarianism) and to the changes that America has stimulated in the workings of the synagogue. Ellen M. Umansky traces growing sensitivity to equal status of women in Reform Judaism; Paula E. Hyman chronicles a key group in the 1970s that put feminist issues high on the Jewish agenda; Judith Hauptman analyzes Conservative feminism as it has led this branch of Judaism to confront the problematics of Jewish continuity in new ways.

Feminism seeks to spur the development of new forms of Jewish spirituality in the non-Orthodox denominations. Orthodoxy has its own forms of modern spirituality, and the various traditionalist movements often called "fundamentalist" constitute an assertive reaction to what are perceived as dangerous accommodations to modernity. Samuel C. Heilman uses the concept of "contra-acculturation" and the method of ethnographic narration to illustrate the rejection of secular American culture among traditionalist Jews who have learned to exploit mass media techniques to heighten their self-awareness and morale. In recent decades attempts have been made, especially through the formation of intimate groups for worship, study, and Jewish celebration (*havurot*), to counteract the banalization of faith and community. Mel Scult shows that Mordecai M. Kaplan grappled early in his career with the weakening of communal bonds. Kaplan admired Americanism as a civic ideology, yet he viewed the Roman Catholic Church (*not* American Protestantism) as a model of group discipline and social cohesion for Jews. Edward K. Kaplan describes Abraham Heschel's quite different way of presenting twentieth-century European Jewish spirituality and of invigorating it with the American social conscience. Kaplan and Heschel are antipodes of American Jewish theology in

the mid-twentieth century. Kaplan's ideology of Reconstructionism, noted for its didactic lucidity, scientism, and sociology, has been called the informal content of much of American Judaism and, on an overt level, has garnered an enthusiastic if circumscribed following. Heschel's poetical, rhetorical, and suggestive style has been an influential model among the Jewish religious leadership in the post-Holocaust age for regaining a sense of the sacred. America admires science but is susceptible to nostalgia, the evocative, and the prophetic.

Where then is American Jewry headed? The last group of essays offers contrasting commentaries on the Jewish future by four sociologists and a historian of American Judaism. According to Paul Ritterband, the scattering of the Jews and other hard factors may make massive assimilation inevitable. Yet, Steven M. Cohen points out, there is a consensus that results in continued affiliation among the moderately affiliated. Egon Mayer examines options available to an American Jewish leadership willing to revise its agenda in light of the changed composition of the community. Despite various recent departures, American Jewry just might be pushed back into a direction more recognizably Jewish, according to Charles S. Liebman, and Arnold Eisen points to new religious tendencies that constitute signals of hope for the future.

These studies show that the adaptation of Jewry to America represents a more nuanced phenomenon than was thought to be the case a generation ago. One of the most quickly Americanized of immigrant groups, American Jewry has grown deep roots in America and has cultivated a wider range of forms than any other diaspora, so that an objective evaluation of its achievements and of its probable future is difficult.

In recent years the dominant attitude, especially in the American Jewish leadership, is a compound of pride and disquietude. This paradoxical mix of self-confidence and anxiety may reflect a working out of what Reinhold Niebuhr called the "irony of history." "Irony consists of apparently fortuitous incongruities in life which are discovered, upon closer examination, to be not merely fortuitous" (Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* [New York: Scribner's, 1962], viii). Historical ironies flow from hidden

limitations or defects at the heart of significant achievements that are rightful objects of pride. Exposure of illusions lurking in these successes can result in cynical fatalism but also, perhaps, to a better-focused sense of responsibility and, therefore, a more realistic idealism.

It is ironical that the Jewish accomplishments in America have contributed to a malaise about the future because success is often evaluated according to standards that obscure what has actually been attained. The American Jewish experience has indeed been different from any other. In America being a Jew is respected, and American Jews have been remarkably free to decide what of their heritage to conserve, reform, and reconstruct. For some, Judaism has elicited depths of personal and social involvement and a degree of commitment that is all the more intense for being freely chosen. Although continuing to measure itself by the burden of the past, religious and ethnic, American Jewry has responded to the openness of its options in a series of unparalleled achievements and by assuming a leadership in world Jewry the burden of which it seldom fully acknowledges to itself.

The era when Jewish survival could be galvanized by ideological certitude is over: most Jews only take seriously an idealism that does not promise panaceas and a messianic age here and now. Innocent optimism that centuries-old tensions (Jewish exile and alienhood in the Diaspora) have reached a final resolution runs up against the endless process of adapting to an America always in a state of flux. Communal self-isolation is surely not an option for the overwhelming majority of American Jews; they are firmly enthralled by American individualism and secularity. America may become more sharply subdivided into ethnic and linguistic entities if the ideology and reality of cultural diversity makes headway, but most Jews possess only symbolic remnants of Jewish ethnicity, meaningful as these may be. There is evidence in American Jewish history, however, of being able to cope quite well by drawing on resources and abilities honed by the diaspora environment.

In the absence of a seamless ideology of modern Jewishness, American Jews will have to become more comfortable with their particular dualities (duality of one kind or another being inherent in every pluralistic situation). There will always be immensely

more Christians in America than Muslims, Buddhists, or Jews; Jews will have to find new ways to define themselves in juxtaposition to immersion in a consumer society on the one hand and to the non-Jewish faiths on the other hand. Whether being Jewish will continue to be of the highest priority may depend not on only one form of American Judaism but on the vitality of the religious continuum as a whole to demonstrate in everyday reality the historic, cosmic, and intimate significance of Judaism and in so doing to offer guidance to world Jewry.

The forces working to sustain American Jewry are all the stronger for the voluntarism and pluralism of American religion and the unique American combination of particularism and universalism. Of course, voluntarism can lead to assimilation or trivialization, and pluralism to fragmentation and internecine rivalry. But American Jewry has not just been acted upon; it has also acted in this milieu, at times quite effectively. Judaism has redefined itself according to the ideals of America and has helped shape those ideals in ways that have benefited itself and other groups. Could it be that the forthcoming test of American Jewry to confront its predicament can further demonstrate that the Jewish situation is paradigmatic of human beings as appropriators of identities that, because they transcend modernity, may prove to be its essence?