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Are American Jews Turning Toward the Right?

The question persists. In both Jewish organizational and nonorganizational circles—left, right, and center, secularist and religious—there are tentative discussions, occasionally elated but mostly troubled: Has the traditional American Jewish commitment to liberalism been weakened in recent years? Are the Jews becoming more conservative as they grow more affluent? Or is it those Jews who are not affluent that become more conservative? And if such trends exist, what are we to make of them?

There has always been a small number of conservative Jewish intellectuals in America. A few write for the National Review; a few others, at the Jewish Theological Seminary, have been trying to work out a coherent conservative position. The influence of such people is small in general, smaller still within the Jewish world. Whatever conservatism there has been among American Jews has generally been indigenous and nonideological, rooted
in sentiments of religious orthodoxy, and seldom requiring the ministrations of secular intellectuals. Similarly, there has been a Republican vote among American Jews, in the early years of this century a national majority, after the 1930s a decided minority. Whatever its social meaning, this vote has not seemed to require much intellectual justification.

The overwhelming thrust of Jewish thought and writing in America these past several decades has been liberal, notably more so than in the population at large; and whatever radicalism we have had in America has found disproportionate support among Jews.

Now, some people say, all this is changing. But the evidence anyone can muster for (or against) this impression is very tentative. If a major change is indeed taking place, then we are in the midst of it—never a good vantage point for historical perspective. There are some signs of a rightward turn among Jewish intellectuals, but how extensive this is and, more important, to what extent it reflects widely based changes among American Jews is a matter for speculation.

One sign is the recent evolution of Commentary, which under the editorship of Norman Podhoretz, and with the help of Milton Himmelfarb, has been conducting a fierce campaign not only against the New Left (or its shattered remnants) but also against some of the ideas traditionally associated with socialism, social democracy, and even liberalism. Irritable and overreaching as this campaign has been, its thrust has thus far seemed not so much toward a conservative ideology as against recent versions of what Podhoretz takes to be vulgarizations of liberalism. What we have been witnessing here is a collective tightening-up of extradical Jewish intellectuals who wish to keep the liberal community within the “centrist” camp of such politicians as Hubert Humphrey and Scoop Jackson; who are impatient with proposals for social changes that go much beyond the present limits of the welfare state; who have become skeptical about the possibility or desirability of governmental social action; and who are inclined to see connections between the left-liberal New Politics and the authoritarian excesses of the New Left. All this may be symptomatic of, or contribute to, a burgeoning Jewish conservatism but certainly does not yet comprise it. To what
extent Commentary reflects growing sentiments within the Jewish community, or to what extent it runs counter to the dominant sentiments of that community, no one really seems to know.

The closest to a coherent effort at developing an ideology for a new Jewish conservatism is in the writings of Milton Himmelfarb—yet we are not quite certain that Himmelfarb himself would accept this designation, since one of the most curious aspects of his polemics is that, even while assaulting traditional liberal "fallacies," he fiercely "defends" American Jews against charges that they have become less liberal. He betrays a touching, sometimes delicious ambivalence on this matter: as if to say the liberals with their defense of quotas, their evasion of black anti-Semitism, their indifference to Jewish needs, are poison for the Jews, yet don't let me catch anyone suggesting that we aren't as good liberals as we used to be. Himmelfarb has recently brought his writings together in a book, The Jews of Modernity, which merits the attention of anyone interested in these matters.¹

Still, it would be exaggerating to say that even he offers a sustained statement of Jewish conservatism. Perhaps all that "Jewish conservatism" consists of right now is a growing disillusionment with liberalism. Perhaps it will take another decade before a distinctive Jewish rationale for conservatism emerges. Meanwhile, it may not be presumptuous to offer a few summary points of the thrust toward a Jewish conservatism, as these can be gleaned from Himmelfarb's book, in Commentary's pages, and elsewhere:

The notion that Jews are by centuries-long tradition a people of liberal inclination is a parochial error, the consequence of ignorance of Jewish history. Before the Enlightenment, Jewish attitudes toward politics were essentially static, detached, and conservative.

The argument that it is "good for the Jews" that they be on the side of social change is manifestly wrong or, at the least, much too simple. Anti-Semitism flourishes in most of the European Communist countries; it has been shown to be deeply entangled with radical ideologies; it took powerful hold of the New Left
here and abroad. On the contrary: Jewish survival is closely dependent on social stability, order, and moderation.

The “universalist” outlook of modern, secular, and progressivist Jews is a moral and practical disaster. It disarms the Jews as an ethnic group that must adjust itself to, and sometimes enter combat against, other ethnic groups. It is an outlook quick to offer sympathy to all other groups—blacks, chicanos, Puerto Ricans, homosexuals, radical students—all except the Jews themselves, who are asked, in the name of their “traditions,” to make unreasonable and masochistic “sacrifices.”

Now, it would be mere polemical excess to deny that in this cluster of propositions one can find some nuggets of truth. The Communist countries have shown themselves to be hospitable to, and sometimes actively employing, anti-Semitism. “The Jewish tradition,” as an alleged foundation of liberalism, is a delusion, since there are many and conflicting Jewish traditions, contemporary liberalism seems to have little genuine linkage with the “prophetic Judaism” it sometimes invokes, and most efforts to improvise such a linkage are mere frivolous conveniences. And there is good reason for dropping a certain kind of bleached universalism favored among “progressive” Jews in America. This much out of the way, let us now turn to an examination of some recent trends in American Jewish life that may prompt a drift toward conservatism.

II

That most American Jews are economically better off than heretofore in this century is a fact. Many of them have moved into the middle- and upper-middle class. The Jewish poor, “the Other Jews” whose visibility is even lower than that of “the Other America,” are still with us, and estimates of their number steadily grow as they are rediscovered. The very rich, the Jewish millionaires, who were but a sliver before are no doubt a larger sliver now. But since World War II, there is no longer a proletarian majority even among immigrant Jews, and the bulk of the Jews in America is clearly middle class, with a large propor-
tion of professionals and academics. Most likely, American Jews feel a little more secure and less “peculiar” than ever before.

With upward mobility and a high degree of cultural assimilation has come a remarkable redefinition: Jews who constitute a tiny numerical group are increasingly taken to be part of the majority. The very novelty of this transformation of status can unnerve those who are its beneficiaries, and sometimes serves to veil still-painful disabilities to which Jews are subject, e.g., subtle kinds of economic and social discrimination. With the vicissitudes of their long history, the Jews have been prepared for almost anything but to be taken as part of the dominant “majority.” Perhaps this is a blessing prematurely bestowed.

At the same time—and surely, to one or another extent, because of their sense that they remain a group incompletely absorbed, one that never *can* be fully absorbed, into American society—the American Jews have persisted in their overwhelming commitment to political liberalism. When one comes to think of it, this is a remarkable fact. The Jews seem to be the only ethnic community in the United States in which significant numbers of people, though they rise rapidly in socioeconomic condition, do not change—or at least until recently have not changed—their political views. A consistent, often intense alignment with liberalism characterizes the politics of American Jews since at least World War I, even, it should be stressed, when that alignment seems to threaten the immediate interests of some or many Jews. It is hardly a secret that the number of Jews active in liberal, protest, radical, and civil libertarian movements is highly disproportionate. Traditional sentiments play a stronger role here than social class, at least so far.

On what has this commitment to liberalism been based? On at least two factors: the powerful tradition of secular Jewish socialism, very strong in the earlier decades of the century, now fading but still felt and remembered, and sometimes affecting younger people who do not know the historical forces that are working upon them; and the premise, shared by many Jews for perhaps two centuries, that Jewish survival and interests are best served by an open society promoting social justice. The whole question of the supposed new conservatism among American Jews boils down to whether these factors, and others linked to them, still continue to operate.
But before turning to that question, we should note another basic fact about the life of American Jews, indeed, Jews in most parts of the world during the post-Holocaust years: it is a life inherently “schizoid.” At home, sharp improvements in condition, a leap forward socially, economically. Internationally, the greatest horror in human history, the extermination of six million Jews, with consequent feelings of guilt, fright, shame, and sentiments of apocalypse. How can these two elements of Jewish experience be reconciled? They cannot; and anyone who feels the slightest sense of Jewish identity must live with this double-ness as best he can. It is easy to sneer at affluent Jews who go to their expensive Community Center to hear lectures on the Holocaust; but it is cheap and foolish to sneer at them, for whatever may seem discordant in their behavior is also discordant in the behavior of everyone else. Nor should it be supposed that “ordinary Jews” who go about their daily life, running their business or working at their professions, have forgotten the Holocaust. Perhaps their children have, but they have not. What to do or say about the Holocaust they hardly know, any more than do the rest of us; but the stubborn if residual attachment they show to Jewish “identification,” their readiness to contribute large amounts of money to an astonishing variety of Jewish causes and agencies shows that they still retain a stabbing awareness of what the nature of this century has been. They remain “sensitive”—and why should they not?—to the faintest intimations of attack, and they feel that their security is always shadowed by the recurrent possibility of attack.

III

Several motifs can be isolated in the drift, insofar as there is one, toward Jewish conservatism:

(1) there is a growing feeling—but still, as we have suggested, qualified by historical memory—that Jewish life in America is reasonably secure, or at least as secure as Jewish life ever can be. Hence, it may be supposed, there follows or will in time follow a gradual decline in the felt urgency of American Jews to transcend narrow class interests and respond to universalist moral appeals. By now the Jewish middle and upper middle classes are
no longer a step away from immigrant parents and grandparents; they are two or three steps away. Rightly or wrongly, many Jews seem inclined to feel more and more “at home” in the United States; the messianic strand of Jewish sensibility (despite a remarkable outbreak in the New Left) keeps dimming within the mainstream of Jewish institutional life; the idea of *galut*, or exile, comes to be abstract, ideological, merely literary; and thereby the conclusion may be cultivated that Jews should start enjoying the luxury of responding to political events more and more “like ordinary Americans,” that is, in accord with their individual socioeconomic, or class, interests. At the time of the last presidential election, it was said that some of the Jews switching to Nixon who justified their stand—it had, be it noted, still to be *justified*—in the name of Israeli security were “really” alarmed by the possibility that McGovern, if elected, would raise their taxes. How can one test such a proposition? How can one know that appeals to Jewish interest are “merely” a veil for a drift into affluent conservatism? And, for that matter, why must one choose?—since it seems likely that both motives operated together, in an all but inextricable mixture of group solidarity and personal interest.

The trend we are discussing here is, at most, a long-range one, and before it could be established as a reality, there would have to be maintained in the coming few elections the moderate Jewish shift toward the Republicans, as well as evidence offered that this shift has been particularly strong among wealthy Jews. Those who stress the likelihood that such a trend is taking shape feel that the Jews will not long continue to be an ethnic group that responds more to moral-universalistic appeals than to perceptions of class or group interest. But at least one major complication should be noted: the disproportionate number of Jews concentrated in the professions, academic life, and the communications industries (influential in national life if not always within the Jewish community) tends to remain committed to liberal and universalistic values. ² They don’t, as a rule, see their “class interests” as being linked with the political Right; indeed, they like to think they are superior to considerations of “class interest.” And they don’t respond very much to appeals, whether authentic or spurious, for Jewish solidarity.
If, then, the drift toward becoming more "like the others" continues—and to an undeterminable extent, we believe there is such a drift—then the rise of an influential segment of Jewish professionals and academics may help retard it.

(2) Together with this drift toward becoming more "like the others," and surely to some extent for linked reasons, there has also taken place a slow but inexorable decline of the Jewish labor movement. The consequences for Jewish life in America, and also, by the way, for socialists in America, are enormous.

Once an inspiring force for radical and secularist sentiment, the Jewish unions have become more moderate, sometimes conservative, with the passage of the years. A good number of them remain Jewish only at the level of their top leadership: thin layers of social democratic veterans. Few, if any, of the Jewish unions still have a majority of Jewish members: it is estimated, for instance, that less than 20 percent of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers' membership remains Jewish. Within a decade or two, such unions as the ACW and the ILGWU will have to undergo extreme transformations in leadership and sociopolitical orientation. The Jewish working class is shrinking, aging, dying off, losing its élan. Some Jewish labor groups seem more responsive to injustices in the Soviet Union than injustices at home: on certain issues the American Jewish Committee, once the stronghold of conservative German Jews, now takes a more liberal position than the Jewish Labor Committee, which reflects the views of the leaders of the Jewish garment unions.

In short, the traditional Jewish social democracy is leaving the scene and, with it, the Yiddishist-secularist tradition. The loss will be, already is, enormous—for the Jewish world, for whatever remains of American socialism, perhaps for intellectual life. Young people who experience vague yearnings to discover a "Jewish identity" are now rarely inclined to turn toward Jewish socialism or Jewish unionism, both of which have lost a good part of their vitality; they turn elsewhere, to religious improvisations, communal experiments, quasi-Hasidic retreats, a renewed interest in East European Jewish life.

And because the Jewish social democracy keeps fading, both in numbers and intensity, there occurs within the Jewish com-
munity a growth in the relative strength of Jewish orthodoxy, for by contrast the religious minority (e.g., the Hasidim in Brooklyn) retains some coherence, some passion, some strength of conviction. Politically, this often leads toward a reinforcement of conservative tendencies within the Jewish world.

The previous two trends operate over an extended period of time, and if they have recently been felt more keenly in Jewish life, it is partly because of an accumulation of their effects and partly because more immediate causes of the conservative drift tend to bring these effects into play. For the last six or seven years a body of sentiment has been growing among many American Jews, especially those living in large cities such as New York and Philadelphia, that if, within the relative security of American life, there is indeed a threat to Jewish well-being, it comes mainly from below. Or, to be blunt about it, this threat comes from urban blacks who in the schools, a few industries, and some unions are pressing to undo Jewish positions and accomplishments—pressing, especially, to undermine the merit system that has made possible Jewish positions and accomplishments.

The possibility of black anti-Semitism has startled American Jews. If they know their past at all, they know about peasants, workers, and the lower orders being stirred up to commit pogroms. Cossacks, peasants in their rural idiocy, workers without consciousness, a mass of ignoramuses: these the higher-ups could manipulate to make the Jews into a scapegoat. That a similar process of manipulation, rage, and befuddlement could occur among American blacks did not seem, until recently, a conceivable course.

The American Negroes have served as a kind of buffer for American Jews. So long as deep-seated native resentments and hatreds were taken out primarily on blacks, they were less likely to be taken out on Jews. If Jews have been the great obsession of Christianity, blacks have been the great obsession of America. And as long as this condition obtained, both organized and spontaneous haters in America concentrated on blacks, and only secondarily on Jews.

Had Jews felt themselves to be part of “the white majority” and
had they followed a mere crude calculus of self-interest, they might have joined other whites in holding nonwhites down. A few Jews did, of course, but the majority set itself up as an ally of the blacks, at times just about the only stable ally they had. Jews whose collective imagery was filled with the time they were “slaves unto Pharaoh in Egypt” could sympathize with former slaves in the New World. Smarting under prejudice themselves, often committed to radical and universalist goals, feeling a kinship—if, sometimes, a rather abstract one—with oppressed blacks, the Jews shared in the fight for civil rights.

The civil rights movement, as it arose in the 1960s, had exceptionally variegated components. At its height, organized labor, Catholic and Protestant church leaders, idealistic youth, and a liberal Administration coalesced around the person of Martin Luther King and his principle of nonviolence. At this time the Negro-Jewish partnership was closest. Jews who had “made it” set out to help blacks who had not.

As Southern segregation crumbled, blacks poured into Northern ghettos where they soon ran up against a complex of thus far unsolved problems: the backlash of neighboring white ethnic groups, the social-cultural traumas of adjusting to urban life, the economic deprivations of ghetto life in the North; and, perhaps most of all, the shock of discovering that they remained, even after their recent victories, a group still discriminated against, still suffering internal disruption and pathology, still overwhelmed by a heritage of centuries of oppression.

King lived to hear himself hissed by his own comrades, derided as “de Lawd,” put down as an Uncle Tom. Black power, black separatism, black nationalism were growing before his assassination, but that event dramatized the end of integration as a common goal of American blacks. Thereupon the Negro-Jewish alliance approached collapse. The “Black Revolution,” stronger in subjective expressiveness than objective results, expelled whites from its ranks. Very often that meant Jews.

Brewton Berry, a sociologist who specializes in race relations, remarks that

On the one hand, the Jews are a notoriously [sic] liberal group, harboring less anti-Negro feeling than gentiles. . . .
Negroes, for their part, have often expressed a great admiration for the Jews, and frankly envy them their success in overcoming the obstacles which have been placed in their path.

On the other hand, continues Berry,

Anti-Semitism among Negroes has recently become a matter of some concern. It has been especially virulent in the cities of the North... Negroes have engaged in boycotts of Jewish establishments, have disseminated anti-Semitic propaganda, have published vicious sheets like Dynamite and Negro Youth... [—Brewton Berry, Race and Ethnic Relations—(Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965) p. 355.]

How widespread this anti-Semitism has been in the black community remains a question, indeed, a crucial question. No one seems to know with any exactitude, though some recent studies indicate it is less widespread among blacks than among white gentiles. But it is beyond question that anti-Semitism has appeared at least on the more "radical" fringes of some black movements, among the Black Panthers and groups dedicated to "Third World Solidarity." Even our Jerry Rubins and Abbie Hoffmans, who professed their allegiance to El Fatah, have been rejected as Zionists by the Panthers, though they, as Marie Syrkin has pointed out, earned that designation as little as did the Polish Jewish Communists who were expelled from the party.

Soon enough, a number of American Jews would begin to emulate the blacks. If black is beautiful, Jewish would be exquisite. The Pandora's box of ethnicity was opened wide, for good and/or bad. Lower-class Jews found allies in portions of the organizational Jewish intelligentsia, the rabbinate, and chauvinist ideologues—all together to proclaim an ethnic consciousness that fell easily enough into a resentment conducive to hostility or at least suspicion of other groups.

It is crucial to note that many American Jews still feel like losers, and being able to buy a private home, or send kids to college, or move into a suburb isn't quickly going to remove that feeling. Black antagonism—whether deep-rooted or, as seems
more probable, the verbal upchuck of an enraged fringe—is linked in their minds with global anti-Semitism and the enmity of Arabs toward Israel. Personal fright on the streets, poor public schools, a meritocracy in decline—all merge Psychically with the precariousness of Israel and the mortification of Soviet Jewry. Who can easily separate in such reactions the warranted concern from the “paranoid” excess?

With such fears there go urgent and painful, but completely real, problems of social friction between adjacent black and Jewish communities, the latter almost always composed of older and poorer Jews less inclined to articulate liberalism and more concerned with group survival and personal safety.

Consider, for just a moment, the problem of crime. Jews, as well as other whites, tend by now to see it as linked to the problem of blacks. That much of the crime among black youth is related to the pathology of drugs—and also, perhaps, to the rage that followed upon the discovery that the revolution of rising expectations would not be followed by a revolution of rising gratifications; that most of the victims of black crimes are themselves black; that, in some distorted way, even the ability to release this rage in antisocial acts indicates a gradual psychic freeing of blacks from earlier postures of submissiveness (though at great cost to both their immediate possibilities and their inner morale); that pathologies in the black community constitute a price for historical injustices such as no other group in America has ever had to pay—all this is true, important, urgent.

But it provides no immediate answer—perhaps none can be had—to the aging or retired Jewish garment worker or small shopkeeper in Crown Heights or the Bronx who is terribly frightened of being mugged, and often with good reason. One result is the rise of such demagogic types as Jerry Birbach, the redneck who inflamed every sensitive Jewish nerve in the Forest Hills struggle of 1972. Another result is a visible and distressing decline of sympathetic feeling among Jews toward the blacks—in some instances it almost seems as if the outbreak of marginal anti-Semitism among blacks serves as an occasion, or pretext, for the withdrawal of social generosity.

The painfulness of this problem is almost beyond imagining. Can we be indifferent to the agonies of blacks in this moment of
transition? Can we be indifferent to the fears of Jews side-swiped in the course of that transition? And can we suppose that even the most humane and judicious consideration of all the elements in this clash could possibly lead to a quick and easy solution? The one thing it seems crucial to say is that such problems cannot be solved by local measures, though they may be eased by them or aggravated (as they sometimes were by the Lindsay administration, in its occasional high-minded ineptitude). What brings blacks and poor Jews into conflict is a combination of social difficulties as these rub painfully against both groups: difficulties ranging from bitter competition over scarce housing to enraged confrontations in poor schools. And these social difficulties can be removed, or at least significantly diminished, only through the kinds of large-scale measures that presuppose federal action. Of that, we have no signs.

It therefore seems likely that those Jews still trapped in poor or semisub neighborhoods will react toward their fears by turning, especially in local elections, to figures like Abe Beame—not toward ideological conservatives but simply mediocre politicians who promise what they may not be able to deliver: a return to earlier conditions of festering calm.

(4) Disenchantment over Communist anti-Semitism both in Russia and the East European countries has, for a segment of the older, "progressive-minded" or fellow-traveling Jews, been traumatic. If this has not led directly to conservative ideas, it has certainly encouraged conservative moods. For many in the once-influential segment of Yiddish-speaking workers in or close to the Stalinist movement, the series of events that begins with the Moscow Trials, continues through the Hitler-Stalin pact, and ends with the harassment of Jews who wish to emigrate from the Soviet Union—this series of events has had a chilling impact comparable to the dismay and disorientation that beset East European Jews in the 18th century after the collapse of the false messianic movements of Sabbatai Zevi and Jacob Frank. Intensifying such responses has been the flirtation of a portion of the New Left with Arab terrorism: it takes no great powers of imagination to conjure up the feelings of Jews when they see Jewish students collecting funds for El Fatah! As for those Jews
who never were in or near the radical milieu, Soviet anti-Semitism often brings about a generalized revulsion against all forms of radicalism, even liberalism. The '60s were not a decade that encouraged the making of distinctions.

(5) AMERICAN JEWS, apart from minuscule fringe groups, feel a deep involvement with Israel: this holds true for conservatives and socialists, believers and secularists, assimilationists and Yiddishists. Israel, they feel, is the one glory salvaged from a century of horror. And even Jews critical of Israel on one or another count, as we are, strongly share this feeling—a feeling that the Yom Kippur War only made seem more urgent.

Yet the paradox that must be recognized is that insofar as Israel functions—must function—as a state dealing with other states, its impact upon American Jews is—perhaps must be—conservative. That the Israeli government is a Laborite government, and that its prime minister attends conferences of the Socialist International, does not significantly change things. What we are talking about is political necessity, at least necessity as the leaders of Israel make their calculations for survival: it has little or nothing to do with the sentiments of Golda Meir or anyone else.

The Israelis, concerned primarily with their survival—and who is to tell them they are wrong?—find it necessary, as a state, to take a "pragmatic" attitude toward international arrangements of power. They feel, in effect, that their survival depends on American help; they have received, thus far, significant help from the Nixon administration; they were ready to pay for this help with declarations supporting the American role in Vietnam, some merely pro forma but others arising out of a "tough-minded" Weltanschauung that some Israeli figures, both in and out of the government, have begun to adopt.

Some American Jews now ask not, "Is it good for the Jews?" but, "Is it good for Israel?" Such people worried about Nixon's abandonment of Taiwan, not because they admired Chiang Kai-shek but because they feared it might presage abandonment of Israel—perhaps as part of an overall retreat to "isolationism" or, what is more likely, an effort to strike a deal with the oil-producing Arab countries.
It is betraying no secrets to report that in 1972 intimations came from at least some Israeli officials: “Nixon is our friend and we want him to remain in office. Nothing matters more to us than military aid from the U.S. We ask you, as supporters of Israel, to subordinate any other concern.” How many Jews, either within or, more important, apart from the declining Zionist movement, responded to such intimations we cannot say; indeed, we have the impression that some Jews acted in accord with this position without needing to be told that it was held by influential Israelis. (To complicate matters, there were Israelis who winked approval of Jewish intellectuals supporting McGovern: perhaps out of genuine sympathy, perhaps out of embarrassment, perhaps to hedge their bets.)

When the Israeli ambassador in Washington made his political preferences a little too clear, he was admonished to stop by important American Jewish leaders. They feared his actions might be taken as gratuitous interference in domestic affairs. They may also have thought those actions would be counterproductive: Golda Meir’s sotto voce endorsement of Nixon (bestowed upon him in this surreal world together with those of Mao and Brezhnev) might hurt his chances of winning . . . or reinforce suspicions of “dual loyalty.”

In this complex of circumstances, American Jews could hardly avoid being torn by fierce tensions. Although only a tiny fraction belongs to the Zionist movement, Jews are, mostly, Zionists in some loose way. Except for a small minority of zealots, most American Jews who reflect upon such matters are quite prepared to recognize the possibility that serious conflicts may arise between their concern for Israel (which, if more than quixotic, must take into account its Realpolitik calculations) and their interests as Jews in America and American citizens. Indeed, some of the Zionist leaders themselves recognize the probability of an inherent clash between a state and the universalistic movement (Zionism) attached to yet distinct from it.

The obligation to defend Israel collides with an equal obligation to maintain a certain distance from Israeli policy, lest Jews, Zionist or not, look a little like those American Communists who never deviate from the Kremlin line. Zionism, to be sure, was
never close to being monolithic; its fractiousness is reflected
every day in the Knesset. Yet there remain the realities of state-
craft, and these evidently clash with the Labor Zionist ideology.

Speaking of this situation, Judah Shapiro, a leader of Ameri-
can Labor Zionism, has remarked that two major consequences
follow for American Zionism from its close identification with
the State of Israel:

1. pragmatism and consensus replaced ideology and polemic;

2. the instrumentality for raising funds also became the
arbiter for the allocation of funds; philosophies and pro-
grams became beneficiaries and pleaders; fund raisers and
large contributors became governors and leaders. [—Judah
Shapiro, “The Assignment Was the Future,” Jewish Frontier,
December, 1972.]

This is diplomatically put, but it makes the point. Within the
American Jewish world, the full-time fund-raiser and the
nouveau riche donor swing a lot of weight, maybe more than old
Labor Zionist comrades who did not go to Israel. . . . There
follows a certain depoliticization of organized Jewish life in
America, a weakening not only of Zionism or Labor Zionism but
of all movements and causes. (This process, be it noted in
passing, is of considerable duration, going back to a decision by
Ben Gurion to weaken the position of Zionists in the West vis à
vis those who were running the state of Israel.) And insofar as
this signals a banking of old fires, the atmosphere of American
Jewish life becomes a little more amenable, if not to ideological
conservatism then to moods, compromises, resignations that
serve as well.

The problem is galling. Some of us who are warm supporters
of Israel had to say in 1972: “We are going to vote for McGovern
because we think it would be best for the United States if he
defeated Nixon [there seems recently to have accumulated a
certain amount of evidence for this view] and because we also
think that a McGovern victory will not harm Israel.” On the first
of these propositions, Israelis might not care to argue; on the
second, the skepticism some had about our judgment was not simply to be dismissed. Politics is hard.

IV

It is only natural, in trying to estimate a Jewish drift toward conservatism, to turn to election results; but these prove to be uncertain and contradictory in character, perhaps because elections cannot be assumed to be precise registers of political sentiment and perhaps because Jewish political attitudes have become uncertain and contradictory.

Since 1966 is alleged to have been a turning point, let us go back to that year. What happened in 1966, “experts” keep saying, is that 55 percent of New York’s Jews voted in a referendum, initiated by the Policeman’s Benevolent Association, against Mayor Lindsay’s newly created Civilian Review Board. This conclusion is based on a competent study by three political scientists, David W. Abbot, Louis H. Gold, and Edward T. Rogowsky. It is not, however, a study of how New York Jews voted. It is a comparative study of how Brooklyn Jews and Catholics, excluding Puerto Ricans, voted. This report was effusively praised by Daniel P. Moynihan in a foreword in which he could not refrain from gloating over a major liberal setback.

To left-liberal or radical Jews, as to civil libertarians, reflection on that setback is bound to be depressing. Proponents of a civilian review board considered it a channel through which blacks and Puerto Ricans might register their complaints against police brutality:

The opponents of civilian review were organized in a coalition—Independent Citizens Committee Against Review Boards—dominated by the PBA. Its other constituents were the Conservative Party, American Legion Posts, parents’ and taxpayers’ groups, the Brooklyn Bar Association and the John Birch Society. Support for the board came from an impressive number of civic, labor, civil rights, and religious groups, organized into the Federated Associations for Impartial Review (FAIR), directed largely by the New York Civil Liberties Union and volunteers. [—Abbot, Gold

Then 63 percent, or 1,313,161, voted against the Board and 765,468 for it. In the Brooklyn sample of 374 whites who were interviewed, the religious breakdown was as follows: Protestant, 70.6; Catholic, 83.1; Jewish, 55.1.

Among Catholics, ethnic extraction, education, and occupation were weak indicators of CRB sentiment, whereas among Jews both education and occupation appeared to be equally potent. Highly educated Jewish professionals overwhelmingly supported CRB, while poorly educated lower-class Jewish workers strongly opposed it.

We have no reason to doubt the validity of these findings; they dovetail with other, softer data that have the look of reliability. Sam Yorty’s victory over Tom Bradley in Los Angeles (reversed in 1973, with Jewish districts now giving strong support to Bradley) and Carl Stenvig’s victory in Minneapolis in 1969 lend some credence to the idea of a conservative Jewish trend. So does the 1969 New York mayoral election where two right-wingers, Mario Procaccino and John Marchi, got three votes for every two given Lindsay. In 1971, tough and reactionary Frank Rizzo became mayor of Philadelphia. Here too we have a small-scale study, by Henry Cohen and Gary Sandrow, two investigators who did their best and admit it is inadequate:

The available data are limited in scope and accuracy. First, in some parts of the city no predominantly Jewish division could be found. Second, the most recent Jewish population survey is over three years old, and was never meant to be definitive or rigorously accurate. And finally, the U.S. Census Bureau has not yet released the 1970 figures on income and age.

All of which throws some light on the pitfalls of such research. Nevertheless, the Philadelphia story, insofar as Cohen and Sandrow can reconstruct it, is the Los Angeles and New York
story all over again. The Jewish vote split along class lines, with lower income groups going mainly for Rizzo and upper income groups for his liberal Republican opponent. The Jews did not elect Rizzo; whites in toto voted around two to one for him; whereas Jews divided about fifty-fifty between Rizzo and his opponent. Cohen and Sandrow conclude:

Jewish voters did not rush to Rizzo as did more than two out of every three non-Jewish white voters in Philadelphia; they voted for and against him in approximately even numbers. But that was not good enough for those who expected Jews—and Jews alone—to remain unaffected by the law and order issue [Emphasis added]. [—Henry Cohen and Gary Sandrow, Philadelphia Chooses a Mayor, 1971 (New York: American Jewish Committee), 1972, p. 9.]

On the other hand, Cohen and Sandrow quote a Jewish leader in the 63rd Ward who had rather different expectations. Confessing that, despite his efforts, 60 percent of the Jews in that ward voted against Rizzo, he remarked: “Thank God for the goyim. I’m thoroughly ashamed of our Jews.”

How American Jews voted in the last presidential election and in the congressional races is still an unassembled jigsaw puzzle. The polls did consistently show that neither presidential candidate was personally appealing to the voters, only 55 percent of them bothering to vote at all. American Jews ordinarily vote in greater numbers than do other citizens, but there is reason to believe that in 1972 larger numbers of them stayed away from the polls than in earlier years. By the best estimates, however, Jews remained second only to blacks in their support of McGovern. By the same estimates there was a drop in the Jewish Democratic vote of about 15 to 17 percent between 1968 to 1972. Why? McGovern’s alleged “isolationism” or his record on Israel; the signals from some Israelis; the appearance of a tiny but influential segment of very rich Jews in the Nixon camp; the defection of the labor movement from McGovern (though the Jewish garment unions, perhaps responding to their large black and Puerto Rican memberships, endorsed McGovern); the McGovern position on taxes; the kind of chic celebrities who supported McGovern and could be identified by middle- or
lower-class Jews as the kind who had supported Lindsay; the appearance of a group of Jewish intellectuals, mostly exradical, who supported Nixon on the bizarre ground that he was the more “prudent” of the two candidates—take your pick. All probably counted as contributing factors, but what no one knows is the relative weights to assign to them. It does seem clear, however, that the slippage in the Jewish Democratic vote was centered in the poorer, less-educated, and more religious urban segments. So there is at least a mini-trend.

At this point it would be well to acknowledge some anomalies, perhaps confusions. If it is true that in the main the wealthier, better-educated Jews are those who vote liberal most heavily, what then happens to the view suggested earlier in this essay, that the process of settling into American affluence may gradually undermine the traditional Jewish commitment to liberalism? And for that matter, if it is the wealthier and better-educated Jews who vote liberal, then, since Jews are by and large becoming both more affluent and better-educated, it ought to follow that the Jews as a whole are also becoming more liberal.

Perhaps one difficulty in such entanglements has to do with the phrase “more liberal.” Such a phrase has no single, precise meaning, only a cluster of imprecise and at times contradictory meanings. Perhaps, while the majority of Jews remains committed to liberalism, it is to a liberalism increasingly “moderate” and conservatized, the kind represented by Senator Jackson rather than by Senator McGovern. It may be that while the general commitment to liberalism persists, the intensity with which it is held or the readiness to expend energy and experience inconvenience in its behalf gradually declines. And it may also be that while the Jewish middle class together with Jewish professionals and academics still vote regularly for liberal candidates, a small but crucial fraction of these groups is breaking away and turning to the Right, perhaps as a portent of things to come. Impressionistically, all of these seem to us likelihoods and thereby possible ways of coping with the difficulties we have just noted.

V

Within the Jewish world narrowly conceived, that is, within the Jewish organizational world, the theme of a possible upsurge of
conservatism is often debated with regard to two problems: quotas and "parochialism." Let us glance, much too briefly, at each of these.

No issue or phrase is more likely to stir fears and anxieties among self-aware Jews than quotas: it rouses memories of exclusion from European cities and schools; it rouses memories of how hard it was for Jewish boys in America to enter medical schools. The rejection of quotas as a means of holding down minorities and the espousal of the merit principle according to which individuals are judged by their competence or potential, regardless of race or color—this is correct in principle, and we reaffirm it without qualification. But the application of correct principles can sometimes be very difficult, and men of good will can differ as to how it should be done. The difficulty at the moment is that quotas and "affirmative action" programs take on a new context: an effort to help minority groups, sometimes in disregard of the merit principle and sometimes, it is alleged, in order to realize the merit principle. The issue merits a full-scale examination, not possible here; we have no fixed or pat formula; we recommend an excellent article by Leonard Fein in Midstream, March 1973. Meanwhile, a few observations:

• In discussing quotas and "affirmative action," we must avoid the rhetoric of either/or. Simply to denounce quotas and say no more, is to disregard the claims and sensibilities of black spokesmen and black colleagues.

• Simply to attack quotas is to disregard, as well, the urgent and often justified feelings of minority groups that the entrenched systems of seniority in factories, and of recruitment of students and faculties in universities, are often discriminatory in practice, even though veiled by the claims of merit. So the issue is not merit vs. antimerit, but in actuality complex weighings of many factors.

• Merit is indeed a major principle, but it is not the only one. Justice, equity, recompense, minority rights: these also count. And let us remember that in a highly competitive society, like ours, it is the people on top who are most inclined to find the principle of merit a social convenience, for they are persuaded, of course, that their dominance is a consequence of merit. Tragedy occurs when two sets of standards, merit on the one hand, equity on the other, come into conflict.
There are many situations with regard to jobs, promotions, status, etc. in which merit may be close to irrelevant, since the distribution of goods takes place, properly enough, according to other criteria.

We have every reason to stress the differences between "affirmative action," which on the face of it merely requires universities to make special efforts to increase the number of black or female faculty members, and quotas, which set a fixed number for such an increase. To be sure, "affirmative action" can easily slide into quota, and thereby become objectionable; but sympathetic and sophisticated faculty people will take the "affirmative action" idea at face value and not simply dismiss it on the ground that it is "really" a quota.

To what extent has "affirmative action" seriously damaged Jewish (or non-Jewish white) faculty members? The evidence is spotty and inconclusive. Paradoxically enough, it seems likely that Jewish women have profited from "affirmative action," since they comprise a rather large proportion of those academic women who have suffered discrimination. Some of the evidence brought against "affirmative action" in Commentary consists of absurd literalisms put forward in its name, such as an announcement that a college is looking for a black scholar to teach Hebrew. These are either a result of stupidity or of a not-so-clever attempt to discredit the whole idea. Nevertheless, it seems likely that some younger Jewish scholars have been hurt, and others may continue to be hurt, by "affirmative action."

It is said in some quarters that black insistence on quotas or "affirmative action," when it occurs, constitutes a tacit admission that blacks cannot now compete in the universities or elsewhere on the basis of merit, or at least that not many or enough of them can. Perhaps; but to insist upon this point is to speak to black colleagues in the name of some pure realm of merit, whereas they see a decidedly impure reality in which merit has been far from dominant. And if, indeed, black spokesmen are making an admission of particularly acute difficulties, then that should prompt particularly acute kinds of help.

There is the further fact that a formal defense of equality of opportunity can perpetuate extreme inequalities of condition, if only because of the radically different points from which competing social and racial groups start out. A hierarchy of merit,
real or alleged, can end up being almost as offensive as a hierarchy of caste or status.

- Yet there is very serious ground for being disturbed by the slippage—in some instances, much worse—of academic standards in the universities which, while not caused by "affirmative action," is to some indeterminable extent encouraged by it. There is reason to be disturbed as Jews, as academics, as citizens. Black students obviously merit special consideration and need special help; but systematically to expect less of them than of white students, systematically to install a double standard of judgment is surely not to do them a service. The same holds for black faculty members. The question, then, becomes whether it is possible to compensate for an appalling history of outrage by giving blacks greater opportunities, more of the "breaks" (and in a way that is what "affirmative action" means or should mean) while at the same time holding in general to the value of merit. It would be fatuous to suppose that this is always possible, and in a given instance, it may be necessary to make painful choices. The situation is one that requires a complicated balancing of values that are sometimes in conflict.

- Leonard Fein, in the above-mentioned article, describes an historical incident in which Histadrut, the labor federation of Israel, used a quota system—it would appear, then, that the Jewish position on this matter has not been so inflexible after all, or more to the point, that there has been no single Jewish position. Word now comes to us from Israel that the ruling Labor party has recently put into effect a variety of quotas for its electoral candidates—25 percent women, 20 percent under 35, 33 percent Jews from Moslem countries. Speaking in behalf of the quota for women, Golda Meir said:

In a free egalitarian society, there should be no need for a legal defense of the woman's position. Her place should be achieved on merit only, irrespective of sex. But in view of the present reality, better be ashamed that we have to pass such rulings than not pass them. [Cited in John Herling's Newsletter, Sept. 4, 1973.]

That this version of the quota system is used in Israel does not, of course, necessarily make it right; but at the least it ought to
subdue the righteousness and soften the rhetoric of those in America who have made opposition to quotas into a symbol of “Jewish self-respect.”

The inward turn of at least a segment of the Jewish community, with the attendant slogan, “let’s take care of our own,” is paralleled by similar turns among both white and black ethnic groups; and except for apostles of abstract internationalism (Jews who often find it possible to praise the ethnicity of all groups but their own), few commentators would be foolish enough to celebrate or denounce such a turn without qualification. There is, among the Jews, the complex inward turn of a thinker like Ben Halpern and the simplistic inward turn of a demagogue like Meier Kahane. There are those who say that, while remaining faithful to the tradition of universalist justice, they feel it necessary to emphasize Jewish rights at a time when these are threatened at certain points and systematically scoffed at by young “progressivist” Jews; and there are those who say that all the talk about universalist justice is rubbish, and that the Jews have to fight for their own turf.

The trend toward particularism in the Jewish world has already encountered some powerful critics. Dr. Nahum Goldman, head of the World Jewish Congress,

warned that Jews, having become prosperous and influential in the world, are in danger of forgetting their timeless Jewish ideals . . . the tendencies [he said] which are developing, especially within American Jewry, which would have the Jewish people limit its problems and activities for its own benefit and which renounces the universal character of our national and religious ideals, are an indication of the dangers. . . . [—Jewish Telegraphic Agency, July 6, 1973.]

What Dr. Goldman says comes from on high, and within Israeli politics he leans toward the center-right; it takes more courage to say the same thing in Forest Hills, Jerry Birbach country. Rabbi Ben Zion Bokser, who heads the Forest Hills Jewish Center, has called for a revival of the “messianic vision” and has attacked ethnic isolationism, citing a lovely apothegm from the Hasidic Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav:
Each person suffers pain according to the condition of his soul and the level of his service to God. There is one who knows pain only because of his children, his parent, or his neighbor; another, of a higher state, suffers pain because of the whole city; but there is one of a very high state who suffers pain because of the troubles of the whole world. [—Ben Zion Bokser, "Jewish Universalism & Jewish Parochialism," Congress Bi-Weekly, Nov. 24, 1972.]

So the issues are joined: in symbolic shorthand, Bokser confronting Birbach, with a spectrum of uncertainty, confusion, and mixed feelings between them. That significant trends within American Jewish life bespeak a conservative turn seems indisputable. That these trends are as yet decisive, or even dominant, seems unlikely. Probably, we are witnessing a regrouping of forces and ideas within the Jewish world that will bring into existence a stronger conservative wing, which will in time enable the emergence of a conservative Jewish intelligentsia. If Milton Himmelfarb can be patient, he is likely to find a growing number of allies. Certainly, we are witnessing a regrouping of forces within the Jewish world, which will result in a conservatizing of its dominant liberalism.

Yet the liberal-left outlook remains strong among American Jews. (To provide another New York example: a majority of the voters for Herman Badillo in the 1973 Democratic primary was Jewish.) If those who adhere to the values and ideas of the liberal left show renewed energy, it may well be able to retain a powerful and perhaps dominant position in the Jewish community. There are factors in Jewish life—not merely sentiments and attachments—which encourage the liberal-left. Were the tradition of social activism to be abandoned or seriously weakened, one result would be a very severe identity crisis among non-religious yet “Jewish” Jews. For the Orthodox, nothing is finally crucial except an unbreakable tie with God: that defines them as Jews. But for many others, from Conservative rabbis to socialist intellectuals, being Jewish, though it cannot be reduced to social idealism, unavoidably means a crucial component of social idealism. Remove that component, and the problem of Jewish
distinctiveness for both individuals and institutions becomes critically acute. (It is fashionable, we know, in some advanced circles to look down on the “bourgeois liberalism” or “bleached substitutes for religion” by which many American Jews live, but thinking about how much more dismal American politics would be if those sentiments were removed is enough to make one a little less condescending.)

Moralizing is not enough. In their present moods, most American Jews are not likely to respond to it. What the coming years require are concrete social programs that will recreate links between Jews and their former allies in the liberal-labor alliance. Resisting cuts in the public financing of hospitals or school lunch programs or education is a moral good in its own right, but it is also a way of bringing together Jews, blacks, Puerto Ricans, white ethnics. If, as seems likely, there will be areas in which the interests of Jews and blacks clash, then at the very least we should avoid journalistic apocalypticism. Every effort should be made to contain such clashes, to keep them within appropriate limits. And for Jews, it might be appropriate to remember the crucial difference in America between our discomforts and their ordeals.

It is an inherently dubious notion that a measure of affluence—and that, after all, is the modest limit beyond which a great many American Jews have yet to move—necessarily signifies or requires a turn to conservatism. It assumes that middle-class people don’t share many interests with poorer people, interests ranging from tax reform to national health insurance, from good schools to urban renewal. It is a view of things that accepts a crudely Marxized vision of society in behalf of a Nixonite politics.

Moralizing may not be enough, it may even jar many nerves; but finally the moral argument is crucial. Those deep impulsions of value and care that have drawn many Jews toward the liberal-left, regardless of whether it seemed to be in their personal interest—those impulsions remain. The Messiah still has not come: not to New York, not to Chicago, not to Washington, not to Florida. The world still cries out with its torments. Ours is a time (when has it not been?) for compassion and commitment.