

JEWISH POLITICAL CHANGE AND THE ORGANIZED COMMUNITY

The organized Jewish community is strongly affected by and publicly reflective of political mood changes among American Jews. From the time, say, two decades ago, when that organized Jewish community was seen as a liberal vanguard in the country -- spearheading the passage of civil rights laws, prominent in the formulation and support of anti-poverty measures, and so forth -- this formal Jewish world has been perceived as shifting directions rightwards -- and the prevailing wisdom is that this rightward movement is the result of the Jews having finally made it financially, and therefore having turned sour -- that is, conservative.

For years there were observers who used to note how remarkable the Jews were because they seemed statistically to be the only religious or ethnic group which did not behave politically in strict accordance with their self-interest. That is to say, for example, that they did not turn Republican statistically in some proportion to their improved pocketbook condition, as did Catholics, or Italians.

In that observation, there was always a serious under-estimation of the felt importance to the Jews of another kind of self-interest. It was never that the Jews were immune to the political implications of their own economic self-interest -- but that their other primary arena of self-interest: political freedom in general, and freedom from aggressive hostility in particular -- had just as important political implications for them.

And this "security self-interest" has become a more severe area of concern for American Jews in the last 15 years. It is not that Jews really feel that Hitler is under the bed in America. But there is in operation among American Jews, a kind of Foreboding Syndrome, which has been accentuated in these recent 15 years.

A large random sample of Jews in northern California were recently asked whether they thought that the neo-Nazi movement in America is today a major threat to the Jews of this country. About 6 out of 10 Jews thought so. But only one out of ten who thought so gave as their prime reason that the neo-Nazis or any Nazi-like group was actually growing in this country. Rather, most of them indicated that what they *really* meant was that they were afraid of the *possibility* that under *certain* circumstances an organized anti-semitic movement *could* grow.

There were other indications that Jews have a tendency to *translate* questions that have to do with anti-semitism. Four out of 10 of these Jews agreed strongly that neo-Nazism is a present major danger in America today -- but only 1 out of these 10 agreed strongly that Americans were feeling increasingly negative towards Jews. And only a few agreed strongly that the anti-semitic acts taking place in the country were being committed by organized groups. These kinds of answers don't jibe, unless you translate that question about neo-Nazis so that it asks about the *potential* rather than the present *actuality* of the danger. The tendency of contemporary American Jews to translate the actual in terms of the potential; and the concomitant tendency to interpret that potential in *pessimistic* terms -- is of such striking prevalence that it might fairly be called a Foreboding Syndrome.

There's an old Jewish joke which, with a little alteration, can demonstrate the nature of the foreboding syndrome. You've heard it: "the little old man on a train who keeps sighing deeply and moaning "Oy, am I thirsty." After about the tenth time that he sighs deeply and moans "Oy, am I thirsty," a young lady in the train can't stand it any longer. She gets him several cups of water, which he drains gratefully, until he quenches his thirst, and she returns to her book. A few minutes later she hears him sigh deeply and moan "Oy, will I be thirsty." *That's* a foreboding syndrome.

Any evaluation of this Jewish sense of foreboding depends partly on an evaluation of the degree to which that characteristically *pessimistic* assessment of the potential for future anti-semitism is realistic. There are two sharply different streams of thought about the nature of that anti-semitic potential.

One group's foreboding is based on the expectation that if society breaks down -- most of them put it in terms of an economic breakdown -- then political anti-semitism may well emerge. The other group's foreboding is based on the expectation that under any social situation it would only take some active propaganda to rouse the innate anti-semitism resident in most non-Jews.

~~that neo-Nazism is~~  
 These are two radically different views of the nature of anti-semitism. The situational approach emphasizes the belief that a critical mass of people who are not even latent anti-semites, but who are indifferent to its usage one way or another, could be galvanized into supporting a politically anti-semitic movement under certain circumstances related to a social breakdown. That thesis features anti-semitism as an *instrument* used for other purposes. The second thesis emphasizes that anti-semitism has such an innate value in itself for so many people that they will easily embrace it for its own sake.

The first foreboding thesis, the situational, related to the breakdown of society and the rise of anti-semitism as an instrument -- is well-documented in our modern history. It is a foreboding well worth holding onto. The critical majority of the people who make a mass anti-semitic movement successful are not hard-core anti-semites, for whom anti-semitism is of prime importance. They are largely made up of the indifferent, the *amoral*, if you will, who don't join a movement because of its anti-semitism --but who are willing to embrace it as part of a party platform.

On the other hand the foundation of the second foreboding thesis, related to the "innate" character of anti-semitism, is not so well documented. To the contrary. The evidence is that anti-semitism has been at the forefront of the consciousness of *fewer* and *fewer* Americans in each of the succeeding generations, in the past 40 years or so, as measured not only by the diminution of negative attitudes towards Jews, and the increasing expression of favorable attitudes, but the *lessening* of economic and social discrimination.

There would be no comfort in either case -- but as the basis for Jewish action against anti-semitism, there are significant differences between these two different Jewish frames of mind. The second one, based on innate anti-semitism, engenders a Jewish Fortress approach: everyone is out to get us; we have to pull up the bridges over the moat, and defend ourselves against the world from the parapets. That is a frame of mind which is not only flawed in its perceptions, but self-destructive. At times, it gives the illusion of putting us on the offensive -- but in fact it puts us on the defensive, and takes our chief offensive weapons away from us.

At this point, it would be useful to consider that the foreboding syndrome operates also with respect to Israeli/American relations -- and has some of the same divisions. For example, of that same large random sample of Jews, about 6 out of 10 agreed that anti-Israel feeling is growing in America but only 3 out of 10 agreed that American newspapers are more biased against Israel, only about 6 per cent agreeing strongly. Again, the evidence is not that American Jews believe that American public opinion on Israel is rapidly deteriorating in fact -- which indeed, it is not, according to the surveys -- but rather that the American Jews are again saying, "Oy, will I be thirsty."

In both versions, this foreboding syndrome began to be activated in the middle and late 1960s. There was, of course, the general appearance of the breakdown of order, the onset of disruption and extremism, in the American society, guaranteed to fatten foreboding among Jews. And specifically there seemed to be a movement to change the rules of society from an individual basis to a group basis -- which is how much of the political quota and social quota schemes were perceived.

The foreboding impulse among Jews -- in both categories -- economic considerations to the side -- began to move the Jewish community towards the right in the American political spectrum -- at least away from the liberal establishment to which it had been attached.

As a corroborating note: this foreboding complex emerges more strongly among the lower educational/economic strata of the Jews -- and a number of precinct studies in New York of the Nixon/McGovern voting pattern among Jews, indicated that the greatest defection from the Democratic Party to the Republican Party was among the lower socio-economic levels of the Jewish community.

Then, at about the same time, Israel burst on the consciousness of American Jews -- in the same context -- since American Jews are not, by and large, philosophical Zionists -- but they are, if the term can be used at all, "security Zionists." The overwhelming importance of American support to the security of Israel became clearly crucial. In the most recent years, this aspect of the foreboding complex has indeed sometimes tipped over into paranoia. But again, the attack on the American Jewish self-interest seemed to come from the left rather than from the right -- see the national council of churches, the general Third World complex as exhibited in the United Nations, etc.

This tendency of the Jewish community towards political conservatism -- on the international scene and on certain domestic issues -- as measured on the conventional political spectrum -- out of their security self-interest, has tended to push the Jewish population into *other* conservative directions -- into a total conservative configuration -- undoubtedly buttressed by, but *not* wholly impelled by their economic condition.

On civil rights kinds of matters, outside the specific quota question, because the Jews still perceive civil rights in general as a matter of their own security self-interest -- the Jews are still predominantly liberal, far beyond ~~any other white population group.~~ Three-quarters of these high-foreboding Jews believe that their Jewish agencies and organizations should be involved in fighting employment discrimination against blacks. The recent voting-rights extension in Congress received the heavy support of the organized Jewish community, with the backing of its constituency.

The linking with the total conservative configuration shows on economic issues, however. These Jews were just about split on the question of whether welfare payments should be increased automatically to meet every cost of living increase -- and they are opposed by almost 2-1 to the increase of public service jobs with federal funds. On such questions, they still rank more conventionally "liberal" than population groups with their statistical economic standing -- but not spectacularly so, as they once did.

This creates a problem for Jewish organizational and institutional life. It is the case in Jewish organizational life that the "establishment," the organizational elite, are still more conventionally liberal across the board than their rank-and-file constituency. They still have more roots back in the older days -- and their foreboding syndrome is not as strong.