

May, 1985

Dear

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There is a serious danger to the survival of American Jews -- and perhaps to all Jews -- which is often overlooked.

There are two chief internal engines of destruction for Jewish life. One is assimilationism, the other is enclavism. Both forces should today be a matter of deep concern for anyone who has a sincere concern for the future of American Jewry, of Israeli Jewry, of Jewish institutions, whether Federations or synagogues.

But, while we know something about the nature of assimilationism, even if we don't do enough about it, we are not at all clear about the nature of enclavism, the other evil which endangers Jewish existence; and, as a consequence, we often compound it ourselves.

I don't mean to paint an abstract portrait. I can provide many concrete and picturesque details. I don't know what is happening in the San Francisco area, but I do know what's happening in my community, and in some others around the country.

However, I'd like to start with a working definition or, at least, description of the term as it applies to the Jews. An enclave is "a territorial or culturally distinct unit enclosed within foreign territory." The operative word is "enclosed" -- not relating to, but enclosed. "Enclavism" is the deliberate attempt by Jews to immure, to wall in other Jews so that they will be effectively enclosed away from the rest of the world. It is not primarily a physical process, although it has physical aspects, but is accomplished by a kind of religious, cultural and psychological monism, an immutable uniformity which is incompatible with the rest of the world. "Enclavists" are ideological enclavists. They believe in it.

Such enclavism is usually seen as the antidote to assimilationism. It has probably served that function for Jews at times in the past. But in the modern world, it will not work.

I want to make it clear that enclavism is not to be equated with Orthodox Judaism. Enclavists are usually Orthodox, although sometimes just mystically tribalist, but the Orthodox are not usually enclavist. Because of their living restraints, the Orthodox tend to have somewhat more separate life patterns, but they do not pursue comprehensive separatism for its own sake -- and, most important, they do not engage in the excommunication of other Jews.

But enclavists, you will say, are certainly a small number among American Jews. You know that I don't easily get into a panic, and I'm not now, but I am exercised about a real danger which is not getting attention. Why am I so exercised? There are several reasons.

In the first place, the enclavists are becoming more activist on our community scene. Now you know that there are few clear types in this matter, any more than in any other. Enclavism is a tendency, an impulse which people take on in various degrees. But reason one for my concern is that some of the most avid, organized and ideological enclavists are becoming increasingly and designedly active.

. In my town, one explicitly enclavist leader has been publicly quoted as saying some disparaging things about non-Jewish groups, often with an ethnic flavor. When asked about it, he said that he doesn't care what non-Jewish groups think about the Jews.

. That same leader has expressed anger about the Jewish community supporting public schools.

. The network of enclavists here have generally opposed the church-state positions of the organized Jewish community. They do not generally join in opposing spoken prayers in the public schools. (Let me extend the logic: It's all right with them if Christian children do their prayers in one room, while Jewish children do their prayers in another room. The divisiveness does not really bother the enclavists since they believe that Jewish children should not go to public schools anyway -- and such divided prayers would finally drive the Jewish children out.)

. In the same enclavist spirit, they do not join in opposing Christian religious symbols in City Halls. Rather, they encourage it by formally proposing Jewish religious symbols in such places.

. They publicly attack Jewish institutions as not being Jewish enough; and kosher Jewish institutions as not being kosher enough.

. Although they often specialize in attacking Orthodox rabbis, they join themselves with the ideology that Reform and Conservative rabbis do not perform legitimate conversions, so that their converts should not be eligible for Israeli citizenship, for example. This is not a matter of their saying that Reform and Conservative rabbis and congregations are not legitimate for them; but that they are not legitimate for anyone. It is a form of excommunication.

. They join themselves with Kahane when he comes here and with the Kahanist sentiment that American Jewish life is not only illegitimate, but in imminent danger of an American Holocaust.

. They attack American Jewry in general as illegitimate and beyond the pale, from Orthodox rabbis to Federations.

. They say that they are girding for a showdown with the rest of American Jewry, and are preparing for that war.

But, you will ask, this is such a small group of people; their activism may become disruptive, but why should it worry me? Beyond their growing activism, there is a second reason: the fellow-travellers, an often guilt-ridden circle outside the core of enclavist ideologues, for whom the enclavists are their surrogates for being really Jewish.

I was at dinner the other night with a leader in our Jewish community, a kind of prototypical "American Jewish type" (55-60). His father had come from "the old country," and had been traditionally observant. This man, however, had broken with such matters when he left home. He did some of the formal things when his children were young but, as he put it, he did not seriously raise his children as Jews -- and he himself is fairly illiterate in matters of Judaism, although he has never tried to duck his Jewish identity. (As a rich businessman, he is a member of our Federation board, etc.) I'm sure you will recognize the type; you must have plenty in San Francisco.

Now, because of the kind of Jewish renaissance which is pressing around him, his involvement with Holocaust education, and obviously because of his aging recollection of his father, he is feeling guilty as hell -- about the way he raised his children, about his religious illiteracy, etc. On the other hand, he is not prepared to subject himself at this time to a personal engagement with somewhat alien religious practices conducted in an alien language.

So he subscribes to the "saving-remnant" theory of surrogate religion. He satisfies his religious obligation by supporting the "deeply religious." He says: "They are the repository of age-old Jewish tradition. Who am I to say that anything short of their observance of the 613 commandments is sufficient? They are the hope of the future."

Well, I happen to believe that we have a special obligation to respect, support and help preserve the Orthodox and traditionally learned Jews among us. But the point is that this man has particularly centered on the enclavists in this town, because they say that they are the only legitimate and traditionally Orthodox among us.

My reaction is, first, that we cannot absolve our responsibility by lending ourselves to this kind of surrogate-religiosity.

It is, of course, important to recognize that Jewish life is fundamentally religious -- not sociological, ethnic or tribal -- in nature. But it would be healthier, by far, if, recognizing that, we would personally involve ourselves as deeply as possible, given the stage and conditions of our life, in religious experience -- while helping to support those with a deeper and more learned involvement. In fact, most Jews, in every era of Jewish life through the ages, have been in that position. But to say that, therefore, the only or even the most holy men are those

on the extreme pole of self-styled religiosity is itself a breakdown in logic and good sense.

And, in this case, such a breakdown serves the purposes of enclavism which, in the long run, is actually destructive of the Jewish continuity which the guilt-ridden want to somehow support through their surrogates.

Of course, not all the people in the circle of fellow-travellers around the enclavist core are the extreme prototypes such as my dinner companion. There are some who just don't feel that they are religious enough, even though many of them feel ethnic enough. Altogether, this circle of fellow-travelers is not very large either. But many of them are monied and influential people who, whether they know it or not, are giving great strength to an insidious enclavism.

There is one more reason for concern. This has to do with another and much larger circle of people, who are not religious enclavists at all. However, for a number of reasons which have been described elsewhere, they have tended to turn inwards and insulate their Jewish public affairs concerns, to become preoccupied with single parochial Jewish issues. This is just one more force in internal Jewish life which objectively lends itself to an overall Jewish enclavism.

You know the types -- again, there must be plenty in San Francisco, as there are in my town. There are those who, without necessarily being religious enclavists, say: "Only the Jews can save the Jews," or "The Jews should concern themselves only with the welfare of other Jews -- and with 'Jewish issues.'" And there are those who, out of the best of intentions, say, in effect: "Let us expend all our communal energies on supporting and saving Israel."

The inexorable irony, of course, is that this kind of enclavism, along with religious enclavism, can only make it much more difficult, if not impossible, to save the Jews or Israel.

In much of the ancient world and the medieval world, it was possible, even expected, for Jews, as a minority, to live in enclaves and to survive. Before the creation of the nation-state of the last several centuries, that was the way people lived, often in relatively autonomous enclaves. And governing authorities were more often than not incapable of imposing the kind of order which would permit them to simply extirpate all hated enclaves.

Take the image of the Visigoth kings of Spain who wanted to get rid of the Jews. In the year 636, Chintila at his coronation swore to eliminate all Jews. Two years later, the 6th Toledan Council noted with annoyance the continued presence of Jews in the realm, and launched a new program to totally outlaw them. Fifteen years later, at the 8th Council of Toledo, the reigning king made a somewhat hysterical speech admitting that "while Almighty God has eradicated all heresies in our

country, this blasphemous sect alone has not been eradicated." He promised to see to it that the Jews were either converted or "struck to the ground by the rod of vengeance." But at the 12th Toledan Council, yet another king, Erwig, rose "with tears in my eyes" and called for yet another total effort to "eradicate with its roots the Jewish pest which constantly comes to the fore in a new form of insanity." And on and on for another thousand years, through many long-forgotten kings and councils.

That is not a likely scenario in the efficient, technological, authoritarian modern world. In the modern world, nationalist and ordered, shtetls would not long survive against hostility. Even if we wanted to, we could not return to the 15th century, as some of the ideological enclavists would have us do.

But there's something to add to that -- and it has to do with the United States of America. First of all, it is necessary to recognize more clearly the radical difference -- so far -- between the basic American Jewish experience and the European Jewish experience. Herzl and the Zionists discovered early on that it would be impossible for Jewish enclaves to survive in the burgeoning ethnic nationalism of Europe. They were proved tragically right. And, of course, we have learned that Jewish enclaves cannot survive in ordered totalitarian states either. Lenin demonstrated that early, when he outlawed anti-semitism, and at the same time outlawed Jewish institutions.

America, to begin with, was never an ethnically nationalist country, and could not be. That was a radical difference between Europe and America, as far as the Jews were concerned. Ethnic and religious pluralism was not a flourish, but the very basis of American society. And for various reasons, not altogether unconnected, democracy (anti-totalitarianism, civil liberty) was the other basis of American political society.

Needless to say (but, alas, needing to be said because of pervasive political illiteracy), that does not mean that America was or is without serious flaw. Indeed, the definition of a democracy is not at all that it is without flaw, but that it has the purpose and means to continually correct flaw. The deepest flaw in America was in the institution of slavery, which the cotton industry regenerated, and the racism which was generated to support that institution. But, because of its ideological base in democratic pluralism, America is proceeding to mend that flaw; painfully, too slowly, but in a way unprecedented in history.

What's the point here? The point is that America's democratic pluralism is a crucial experiment in modern history, and, among other things, an experiment in

whether Jews can exist as a minority in the modern world ... at least one of the only two experiments in the world today which provide a likely scenario for Jewish survival.

The other experiment, of course, is Israel -- and that is another story which is not my primary business today. Israel is an enclave, of course -- in the middle of a hundred million hostiles. Israel has to be an enclave, a Jewish state. Aside from everything else, there is no democratic pluralism in the Middle East, and Jews would have difficulty surviving in a "democratic, secular, pluralist" state in the Middle East. Of course, there can be an ideology of excessive enclavism in Israel which holds that Israel can stand alone, "enclosed within foreign territory" without trying to establish a functional relationship with or taking into account other elements in the Middle East society. That is as suicidal a course as proposing that Israel should unilaterally give up Judea and Samaria or establish a "democratic, secular, pluralist state." Kahanism in Israel is that kind of self-destructive enclavism.

Connected to that is the Kahanist enclavist proposition that all American Jews should leave and go to Israel, in anticipation of an American Holocaust. If the purpose there is Jewish continuity and survival, it doesn't make much sense in the modern world. Israel exists in a hostile world, for the foreseeable future, only because of American support; if America became the kind of society where a Holocaust were to occur, then Israel would no longer be a safe place for Jews. This does not mean that Holocaust cannot conceivably take place in America, but only that if it does, there will be a twin Holocaust.

But there is something more. Some of us believe that the American experiment -- for Jews -- is a worthwhile experiment in itself. Some of us believe that American Jewish life can itself be authentic. Some of us believe, in any case, that the great bulk of American Jews will not leave, and we do not want to see them disappear. Simply, enclavism is inimical and antithetical to the survival of American Jewry -- and to the survival of Israel.

In the first place, enclavism would cut us off from political influence in America, in ways and with consequences that I have described to you before and don't have to repeat. In the second place, enclavism, if successful, would squeeze out of the Jewish community those Jews who cannot or do not want to live in enclave in America. We would lose more Jews. We would also lose the American Jewish experience, and perhaps one of the ways in which the Jews can survive in the modern world.

Assimilationism is also obviously inimical and antithetical to the survival of American Jews. And America does present risks of assimilationism. But the answer is not enclavism. In the modern world, assimilationism and enclavism are equally deadly to Jewish survival.

Well, what do we do, in a practical sense, to build a third alternative to assimilationism and enclavism? I think we have to become more sharply aware of both dangers, and aware of the growing threat that ideological enclavists present to Jewish continuity.

We must do a better and more deliberate job of educating our leadership about the nature of both dangers. We must do a more deliberate and systematic job of educating about the authenticity of American Jewish life (and, in the course, helping to create relationships and mutual understandings between American Jews and Israelis which derogate neither the central place of Israel nor the authenticity of American Jewish life). We must keep our leadership and youth aware of our stake in a multi-issue Jewish agenda in American public life.

And, as far as the ideological enclavists are concerned, we must provide an antidote by constructive means -- so that it becomes clear that they are not the only holy men in Jewish life; and that their enclavism is not at all holy. Aside from discussing it, the mainstream Jewish community must provide a deeper aura of Jewish education and scholarship -- especially in the arena of adult education. It must be, most needfully, religious education and religious scholarship. We must do that on a community level, not just congregation by congregation. And, in the church-state arena, we must place our church-state concerns in better perspective, by becoming more Jewishly expressive in the public sphere without involving the governmental sphere (e.g., Hannukiot prominently on Jewish buildings, rather than in City Hall). The rabbis, the synagogues, the Federations, the community relations bodies must all join together in this campaign.

The ideological enclavists define "assimilation" as anything which does not fall into their mold. They not only call anything else illegitimate, but promise the disappearance of the Jews if their way is not followed. An astute Russian observer, Peter Struve, once said that "every attempt to identify the content and the form of the national spirit with one constant principle is liable to stunt its growth, to petrify and to fix its content for all time ... the national spirit continues to develop in the workshop of national life."

But we must also be careful that we don't also say, for our part, that the Jews will disappear if they follow any other path than ours. On the other hand, without closing out or attempting to illegitimate the ways of others, we must try

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to follow those paths which seem to lead to the greatest possibility of Jewish survival and continuity in the modern world -- and those paths do not appear to be either assimilationism or enclavism.

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Best regards,

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