

NEEDED: "TOUCH"

"Are American conditions beginning to resemble the German conditions which led to Nazism a half century ago?" That question was asked by an Israeli student in San Francisco, on the same day last week that the Examiner headline read: "Jobless rate: 6 year high."

The answer is a firm and unequivocal "maybe." The Israeli student was asking about one of the three factors which, together, can create mass anti-semitic political movements of a Hitlerian kind. He was asking about the precipitating or trigger factor: the kind of economic and social unraveling of a society which leads to the divisiveness and bitterness.

There are two other factors which are needed in order to create a mass anti-semitic movement. One is the vulnerability factor: are the Jews a likely target? That answer always has to be "possible," even though anti-semitic attitudes are at a low ebb in America today. Studies show that the American public is no more hostile towards Jews than it is towards Italian Americans. And one basic difference between Germany and America is that this country is made up of many different major ethnic and religious slices. However, a rise in anti-semitic attitudes can be swiftly stimulated under the right circumstances. Historically and numerically, the Jews are always more vulnerable than, say, the Italian-Americans.

There is a third factor, too, a control factor: even if people don't like Jews, how much protection is there in this society against the civil violation of the rights of Jews? On that score, there's a world of difference between America today and the Germany of the 1930s. Democratic and constitutional controls in Weimar Germany were new, flawed, and weak at best.

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Ours are still strong. However, we must assume that if the trigger factor gets strong enough, if life gets desperate enough, the commitment to our democratic control institutions can finally become brittle.

So, we get back to that trigger factor: Unemployment is on the rise, inflation is still with us, social welfare programs are being cut. Is the American economy coming apart? What can we do about it?

It is rather clear that America cannot handle its grieving economy, ^{in the same way} as it did in the 1930s. Helping the poor, raising incomes, was the key to reviving the conventional economy in the 1930s. Helping the poor is still a moral and political imperative, but it is no longer enough - it is not the key to reviving our economy in the 1980s. We don't have the same kind of economy. We have problems of worn-out industries, low productivity, high interest rates none of which will be solved just by helping the poor or raising incomes. Indeed, if we don't solve those "system" problems we will have more and more poor.

It is also rather clear that no one quite knows what the solutions are to these new problems. Given the uncertainty about causes and remedies, the chances are that no single economic ideology will do the trick. Indeed, rigid ideologies may get in the way. With certain goals in mind, we have to fiddle and adjust until things start coming out right.

We do have to keep certain goals in mind as we fiddle. We do have to keep government expense and government income in some reasonable relationship. We do have to provide some incentive for new technology and refurbished industries. And we certainly have to help the financially desperate from becoming more desperate.

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Some of these seem like conflicting goals. What we need now is what the football fans describe as "touch" in a passing quarterback. The surgical knife rather than the meat-ax. Social programs have to be cut without leaving the destitute bereft of food or health care. Taxes have to be cut without leaving the country destitute. Business needs to be stimulated - most people want jobs rather than services - without giving automatic and unnecessary benefits to business.

The Jewish community is not going to come up with "positions" on the various specific economic issues that are involved. Nor are "positions" needed. But as "spectacular citizens" - which we have been called - Jews should be active in each case, in urging the politicians and parties to find the "touch" which will be necessary to pull us out of this period. We have a special stake in their doing so.

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