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SIEGE MENTALITY AMONG JEWS

Israel is not about to turn into a despotic state; but there are many and increasing numbers of Israelis disturbed by voices in the land they did not hear twenty years ago. Quote from a Jewish citizen: "I'm willing to kill as many Arabs as it takes, to deport, to expel, to burn, to see that they hate us."

Many Israelis are shocked by the evidence that increasing numbers of young Israelis are attuned to some form of such sentiments. An IDF officer complains: "Kids today are not afraid of making racist remarks." Many Israelis are shocked that about half of young Israelis say that Israeli Arabs are not entitled to the same human rights as Israeli Jews. This shock has led to a sudden acceleration of efforts to deepen education for democracy among Israeli youth: programs by the Ministry of Education and by dozens of other Israeli institutions. In some cases, they have asked for support from American Jews.

Some American Jews are also shocked by this evidence, but they are more likely to be actively dismayed by a sister phenomenon in Israel which seems to affect them more directly: efforts by some Jews to strip them, and most Israeli Jews, of their Jewish legitimacy and of their equal rights, on religious grounds. But the streams of both bigotries often coalesce -- as when a chief rabbi recently ruled that it is against religious law for Jews to sell, rent or lease land to Arabs or other gentiles. Or when another rabbi called the next week for all Arabs to be driven out of the Old City.

But if it serves Israel badly for American Jews to pretend that these things are not happening in Israel, it also serves Israel badly

for American Jews to simply cluck their tongues over their own superior political instincts. In the first place, there are some obviously different conditions which do not permit American remedies to be simply superimposed on Israel. Second, if you scratch to the bottom of this unhappy phenomenon in Israel, you will find a pathology which has a similar and growing counterpart among American Jews.

This is, to begin with, a problem in democratic pluralism, of which Edward Shils's definition is at least as good as any other: "a system of many centers of power, many areas of privacy, and a strong internal impulse towards the mutual adaptation of the spheres, rather than the dominance or the submission of any one to the other." This definition applies, in different ways, to both Jewish/Arab relations and relations among different religious or non-religious groups.

The constant key for democratic pluralism is, of course, a fundamental equality among the groups, but the "mutual adaptation" towards that end does not have only one form. Historical circumstances have often dictated a kind of "contiguous pluralism," wherein groups tend to live side by side, each with a good measure of official self-autonomy, but with some common areas of governance. In Israel, for example, circumstances and history have led to school systems and some other official institutions being separately and autonomously run by different groups, presumably with equal status and equal funding. In the U.S., our ideal of integrative pluralism is the historically atypical system, a result of our special circumstances, wherein all official life is ideally integrated, without interfering with the private institutional needs of the different groups.

In short, it is conceivable that certain societies can exist and must exist on the basis of some "separate but equal" principles, while the U.S. must not and cannot. There is no abstract way in which to score either integrative or contiguous pluralism as "better" than the other, as long as they fit the circumstances, and work -- that is, actually provide equality of status and treatment for the groups.

But it remains that whatever the system of "mutual adaptation," equal civil rights for the groups, and for the members of the different groups, are imperative. On grounds of practical necessity, on grounds of basic values, we can accept nothing less for a Jewish society, for any society.

So the central question is: What is the nature of the pathology which prevents and denies the operation of democratic pluralism? As the conditions of democratic pluralism can differ, so some of the conditions of its pathology can differ. But there are some common fundamentals. To start with, the active antagonists of democratic pluralism, the active advocates of group bigotry, tend to be threatened by a change in their way of life, to have a sense of growing isolation and of being surrounded by hostility and wrongmindedness. These are ordinary people whose ordinary way of life seems threatened; often in combination with people whose threatened way of life includes an explicit fundamentalist ideology or religion. There is one other crucial characteristic which fills out this universal pattern: a sense of diabolism at work. These threatened people do not primarily focus on the changing conditions or situations which threaten them; rather, they focus on the people who seem to be bearing these changes, and find them -- and all like them -- evil.

Their energies are directed towards those people, not towards the situations which created them.

This is what happened in Hitler's Germany; in this country when the second Ku Klux Klan and the American Protective Association were born in the face of an incoming flood of immigrants; whenever religious liberalism threatened the cultural security of the religious fundamentalists; when the farmers were threatened during Father Coughlin's time -- or in our time. These are the troops of political extremism -- this is the stuff of political extremism -- which has been the chief, most deadly external enemy of Jews in modern history. Now this pathology of political extremism afflicts the Jewish people themselves, corroding the Jews internally as it corroded the others.

But there is another way to understand the phenomenon even more deeply and it allows us to find the parallel in American Jewish life. At a recent conference in Israel, several Israelis kept referring to the "siege mentality" which they found spreading in Israel. And in some recent surveys of American Jewish attitudes, some of the respondents were characterized as having a "fortress mentality" because they are those American Jews who believe that nobody likes us; everyone is against us -- forever; scratch a non-Jew and you'll find an anti-semite; the Jews can only depend on themselves to help themselves and so forth.

The siege mentality in Israel resonates with the same sentiment. Quote from an Israeli: "The goyim are bound to be against us. It's their nature ... It's them or us." Or: "The gentiles' hatred of Israel is an eternal thing. There's never been peace between us and them, except when they beat us completely, or when we beat them completely."

In Israel, the siege mentality is directly associated with the desire to remove Arabs from Israel, and the belief that Arabs should not have equal rights in Israel. But there is also an equivalent mentality in Israel with respect to religious differences. Quote from an Israeli citizen: "Western culture is all alien to the spirit of Judaism." It is western culture which is the encroaching enemy -- and the Jewish bearers of that culture, as well as the goyim, who are the enemies. That is the context in which Teddy Kalleck is referred to by some Jews as a Nazi. Asked what mainly divides the Israelis, one Israeli says: "The major barricade is the one that divides the Jews from the Israelis."

The Israeli opponents of the siege mentality, the Israeli proponents of democratic pluralism, realize that they are in the majority and that, across a fairly broad political spectrum, the establishment is heavily set against some of the worst kinds of bigotries. There was the massively overwhelming Knesset vote against Kahane. Many of them also recognize that that youthful extremism is a common disease often cured by time. But even so, the nature and direction of a generation's extremism is significant. The concern within the establishment is as strong as it is because those concerned Israelis have never seen such generational extremism before; nor, in general, the tide of the siege mentality so high.

It does not take a particularly astute observer of history to recognize that there can be dire consequences for Israel and for the Jewish people if those trends persist and grow. Namely, the separation from reality in foreign affairs which could lead to Israel's destruction ... the further separation of Israeli from Israeli, of Jew

from Jew ... the deep corrosion within the body of Jewry itself. One of the Israeli institutions charged with implementing education for democracy in Israel's schools finds mainly resistance from the religious schools, but, significantly, two different cries for help from teachers in secular schools. From one set of secular schools, teachers come and say: "Help us, our students are passionate supporters of Kahane's ideas." From another set of secular schools, teachers come and say: "Help us, our students are passionate opponents of Kahane's ideas -- but see those Kahanist ideas as authentic Judaism to which they have therefore also become antagonistic."

A growing siege mentality among some American Jews has some of the same ultimate effects, if, in a different and less radical pattern, there has been a trend of Jewish withdrawal from involvement in the general American scene, affecting not just numbers of Jewish individuals but the American Jewish apparatus as well. And many of the Jews who are deeply involved in the general American scene feel more separated from the America Jewish apparatus as a result. Furthermore, there is also evident in American Jewish life a kind of attack on religious pluralism among Jews which distantly mirrors what is happening in Israel -- including a scarcely veiled impulse to delegitimize other Jews and to isolate the Jews on the American scene. The consequences of these trends would be a weakened position for Jews in America; a weakened position for American support for Israel; a more divided American Jewry; a general corrosion within the body of Jewry.

Now, using "siege mentality" in a pathological sense, as we are doing, does not mean that there are not legitimate sieges for the Jews

-- any more than the acknowledgement of paranoia means that there are no genuine conspiracies. The Israelis are under real siege. There are potent forces which would drive them into the sea. And there are assassins who kill them whenever and wherever they can find them. There are the frustrations of those young Israelis who are anxious to get on with their lives, but must wait for the next attack. There is the general understanding that peace is more likely to develop in the Middle East from an appearance of strength rather than weakness. So, if the Israelis are under siege, why shouldn't they have a siege awareness? They had better have. But "siege mentality," by definition, carries with it a further connotation: that sense of total isolation, of unrelieved hostility from everyone else in the world. Everyone is alien to us and hates us as a matter of course. The focus is shifted from the problem situations to the diabolic nature of those antagonists who comprise the rest of the world. A siege mentality, in short, is not equipped to deal either acceptably or effectively with a real siege against Jews in the modern world.

What are the remedies for the growth of siege mentality among Jews -- in Israel and in America? It is obviously too facile to say that one remedy is to eliminate the conflict situations which feed a siege mentality. Eliminating those conflict situations is a predominantly important goal in its own right. Finding some way of accomodating the urgent passions of the Palestinian Arabs in Judea and Samaria (perhaps in some version of contiguous pluralism) without compromising the security of Israel, is such an independent goal. It will not automatically bring peace to Israel. There are hostile and intransigent Arab forces which are not themselves particularly

interested in whether the Palestinian Arabs are accommodated or not. But such an accomplishment would certainly remove a major conflict situation which contributes to the siege mentality among Jews.

But by the same token, the less prevalent a pathological siege mentality, the more likely it is that some reduction in that major conflict situation can be found. And there are ways of directly attempting to minimize the growth of the pathological siege mentality among Jews.

One category of remedy has to do with reshaping the consciousness of Jews. This is not a matter of reciting abstract political values or even Jewish values. Such preachments, according to experience, have little effect. It is a matter of some re-education about the history of Jews to reduce the level of susceptibility to the pathological siege mentality. We many have been miseducating Jewish youth on that score, both in Israel and in America. We may, for example, have been miseducating about the meaning of the Holocaust. Many young Jews have been led to believe that the Holocaust was exclusively the result of hatred of the Jews, and if the Jews had only engaged in massive self-defense they could have saved themselves. There was a war against the Jews, but there was more than Jew-hatred involved in the creation of that war. If the Jews had been capable of saving themselves, it would have taken more than futile attempts at physical self-defense. The rest of the world was not just divided into some righteous gentiles and a lot of bad gentiles. It was the arena of certain objective conditions in the world to which the Jews could only have addressed themselves by involving themselves with and influencing the rest of the world.

These are lessons of Jewish history which we are failing to teach, sometimes deliberately and for institutional reasons. For the same reasons, we often encourage siege mentality perspectives on anti-semitism in the U.S. We are not surrounded by assassins in America, any more than we are in an eternally safe cocoon. It is a discouraging commentary on our educational efforts that American Jews have such a prevailing weak understanding of the nature of anti-semitism, of all things -- and of the ways in which we must defend against it.

In that connection, a group of Holocaust survivors and children of survivors in Israel recently commented: "Israel today faces an unprecedented rise in xenophobia and chauvinism. We feel that the lessons of the Holocaust have not yet been learned by all segments of Israeli society. Rather than fostering tolerance, Holocaust education all too often becomes a justification for xenophobia."

Of course -- to suggest a second category of remedial program -- education is not just a matter of formal education. It is also a matter of how we organize ourselves and behave as a Jewish community. In America today, for example, in the guise of involving ourselves in the general community on behalf of American support for Israel, we really have a tendency to draw our wagons in a circle. That is what we do when we say that we will influence American policy just by our sheer political strength, or just by the strength of our financial contributions to political candidates. Beneath the surface, this is the non-physical equivalent of just forming self-defense bands -- unless it is connected to broader movements of involvement. PACs, for example, standing by themselves, would really be manifestations of a kind of siege mentality. So would isolated lobbying activities in

Washington D.C. Connected to broader movements of involvement, they are not that, but are indispensable instrumentalities. However, in America today, our broader movements of involvement have been thinning out and need resuscitation.

A third category of remedial program has to do with programs of intergroup contact. We have learned that awkward, artificially induced contact has little positive effect. Status quo contact often merely deepens mutual hostility. Contact between those with some common status has effect. In America it was discovered that interracial contact in the workplace was healthful only after some equal employment status had been created. One version of that principle has to do with some contact for purposes of implementing some common goals. That, of course, is the basis of broader movements of involvement in America. In Israel, there have been instituted a number of efforts at meaningful intergroup contact.

However, this is another point at which a religious equivalent of siege mentality becomes obstructive. In Israel recently there has been some strong "religious" opposition to such intergroup contact, on grounds of contamination. And a high percentage of Israeli youth today do not believe that Christians in Israel should have the same civil rights as Jews. Again, we should acknowledge that, according to certain legitimate religious beliefs, there is a real siege going on. The western culture, with its tradition of democratic pluralism, does present the danger of contamination. But it is not the concern with contamination, as a valid religious concern, which constitutes siege mentality or a condition equivalent to siege mentality. That condition manifests itself with the belief that the only solution is to wall all

Jews off from the rest of the world, which is inferior, alien and hostile.

This leads to perhaps the central category of remedy -- that of leadership, particularly addressed to the American Jewish community. The public affairs, community relations leadership and apparatus of the American Jewish community has had three major items on its agenda in the last forty years: strengthening democratic pluralism in American society, supporting beleaguered Jewry abroad; and strengthening American support of Israel. In these tasks, it has addressed itself primarily to the general American community rather than to the internal character of the Jewish community. And it has scrupulously avoided "interfering" with the internal policies of Israel, reserving its attention mainly to the matter of American support.

But we have gradually entered a new stage of affairs, into whose imperatives it is time to plunge ourselves more deliberately. This new stage requires us to become more explicitly involved in the internal character of the American Jewish community, and with some aspects of the internal character of Israel. The appropriate focus of this new stage would be a comprehensive offensive against the further growth of a siege mentality in America and in Israel.

It is appropriate because democratic pluralism is our business and because a Jewish siege mentality cripples our ability to carry out our mandate on all fronts. This must be done cooperatively with the Jews of Israel. We are not in a position to be superior or patronizing. We must first accept the fact that Israel legitimately

has some different forms of democratic pluralism than we have in this country.

We must consider as an integral part of this offensive a systematic return to the kind of comprehensive involvement in American society which laid the groundwork for our current influence in American public affairs.

We must consensually and explicitly reject any Jewish spokesmen for bigotry or for a siege mentality. Each time Kahane appears in one of our communities, for example, we must make it clear to both the Jewish and general community that, not only is his message of bigotry unacceptable, but that he is totally unacceptable as a Jewish spokesman, because of that bigotry. But we must do something more. We must use the opportunity to expose and reject, especially in the Jewish community, the siege mentality which undergirds his bigotry.

We must more consensually and explicitly support those forces in Israel which are fighting bigotry and the siege mentality, both religious and secular. This is not unwarranted interference. We are not talking about foreign policy strategy. We are talking about the character of a Jewish society which directly affects us as American Jews and directly affects the job we must do here on behalf of Israel.

In that enterprise, we must be as forthcoming in our concern about religious monism as in our concern about ethnic monism, insofar as it constitutes siege mentality or undergirds siege mentality. An Israeli newspaper recently referred to "a countrywide drive by self-ghettoized ultra-Orthodox Jews ... forcibly imposing their religious life-style on their secular -- or merely not-so-religious -- neighbors, thus hopefully pushing them away."

One operative word in that quotation is, of course, "forcibly imposing." But there is another telltale phrase in that newspaper quotation which is unfortunate: the reference to "not-so-religious neighbors." There has been a perverse tendency among some defensive American Jews to consider that non-pluralistic, siege-mentality Judaism is the "most religious" manifestation of Judaism, and therefore deserves support from "not-so-religious neighbors" such as themselves. That tendency is, at the least, subversive of the pluralistic mentality of mainstream Orthodox movements in this country and, in general, an aid and comfort to siege mentality. We should try to make ourselves consensually clear on this subject.

On a bread and butter level, we should find means to pointedly support those action programs, those intergroup programs which are attempting to stem the growth of the siege mentality in Israel. At the same time we should find a way to join with the Israelis in reviewing a curriculum of Jewish history, from the Holocaust backwards and forwards, which will return perspective to the Jewish experience.

This has been, of course, a recital of illustrative scraps of program, some of which have already been the subject of tinkering. But we now need more than tinkering. We need a grand offensive into which these various pieces will consciously fit. We need all the paraphernalia of a grand offensive -- formal and dramatic ways in which communities can join with national agencies, public affairs entities with federations, American Jews with Israelis to see all of these and other pieces as part of a singular offensive.

But first of all, most of all, there must be the realization that there is a new major problem and task before us as a Jewish community

-- belonging on the top of our agenda, like the fight for democratic pluralism in general, or the political and financial support of Israel, or the fight to free Soviet Jews. That task might be more pleasantly called something else, like a new campaign for democratic pluralism among American and Israeli Jews -- but it is more exactly a campaign against the growth of that siege mentality, in all its forms, in both societies, which has begun to corrode, divide, weaken and endanger us.