

# The future of the

# American Jew

*American Jews are becoming increasingly uneasy about their status as Americans, and their own 'inferiority' as Jews, writes Earl Raab, Executive Director of the San Francisco Community Relations Council, in this paper which he delivered at the ninth*

*annual "America-Israel Dialogue" in Rehovot this week. But in the long run, he says, the developing sense of American-Jewish identity — "of authenticity not only as Jews in America" — is probably as important to Jewish survival in America as Jewish education.*

AN Israeli citizen, an emigre from the Soviet Union, recently suggested to a large American Jewish audience that it was ignorant, weak, incompetent and probably doomed. The members of the audience applauded wildly. The tone of the reaction was reminiscent of another recent scene: a black "militant" being enthusiastically spurred and applauded by an audience of white liberals as he told them that they were racist, insincere, worthless — and doomed.

Many American Jews may still commonly suffer from something called self-hatred, but these days they more commonly hate themselves not because they are Jews, but because they consider themselves inferior Jews. This is a relatively new phenomenon, post-Israel, and has developed during the same period that American Jews have become increasingly uneasy about their status as Americans. American Jews are becoming twice marginal: marginal to America and marginal to Israel. These are different burdens of marginality, but they are burdens nonetheless. Beneath the surface of unity engendered by a common concern with Israel, American Jews are in an uncommon state of disarray and confusion — or to put a better light on it, in an uncommon state of ferment. Among the ways in which this ferment is being expressed is an organized quest for "Jewish identity."

What the American Jew is and what he will become depends critically — not exclusively but critically — on what America is and will become: that is, on what kind of pluralistic or monistic society will develop in America. There are four kinds of basic scenarios usually envisioned:

1 — America becomes a politically and culturally monistic and repressive society, complete with organized anti-Semitism. The writers of this script simply call it: Fascism.

2 — America becomes a politically monistic society, based primarily on racial repression, with some ethnic permissiveness, and possibly without anti-Semitism. The script-writers could call this: Repression, American Style.

3 — America retains its character as a politically pluralistic and open society, culturally permissive, but with primary emphasis on individual fulfillment. This might be titled: The Old American Dream.

4 — America becomes structurally pluralistic; that is to say, racially and ethnically separatist, with emphasis on group fulfillment. This could be called: Ethnic America.

### Fascism unlikely

Fascism is the least likely of the models for an American scenario. It is not that organized anti-Semitism is an impossible occurrence in America. There is no virulent anti-Semitism running through the American population, and American institutions in general are much less set for anti-Jewish bias than European institutions ever were. But all examinations of American attitudes indicate that significantly large numbers of people would be quite prepared to accept political anti-Semitism if it were part of a platform which otherwise served their dearest needs. They would accept other bigotries under the same circumstances. Although in some cases it might entail more of a learning process. This is, of course, at the heart of what we've learned about political anti-Semitism in most Western countries: such

anti-Semitism does not require anti-Semites; but rather a prevalent lack of resistance to bigotry, and a combination of political conditions to which America is certainly susceptible.

However, in a broader sense, the monistic, totalitarian Western European model of fascism would not seem likely in any foreseeable future.

The anti-authoritarian, anti-elitist bias of America is still fierce, and is still refreshed by some of its original sources.

Repression American Style is a more likely scenario if America is to turn radically in that direction. This would be populist repression, with a kind of *ad hoc* political monism, and a limited cultural pluralism. This would entail a massive governmental crack-down on racial aspirations, criminal justice, freedom of expression and assembly. It is of course the picture of the Backlash, politically implemented. It is the direction suggested by the George Wallace movement, whose sentiments received the sympathy of as much as a quarter of the American population in attitudinal probes. Less than half of that number actually voted for him as a Presidential candidate, presumably because they felt that their serious bread-and-butter interests lay elsewhere. But that might not always be the case.

Conceivably, this could take place without an official programme of anti-Semitism — although, as noted above, political anti-Semitism would always be available if need be. On any objective measure, America has not been moving in a repressive direction in the last decade, but rather in the opposite direction, swiftly. At long shameful last — and however short of the mark —

the decade saw a significant Long Forward by the black population economic life and political participation. The rights of the individual accused of crime were elaborated by the courts in ways that had police gnashing their teeth all over the nation. And expression was never so free, even including the lifting of just about every bar from the publication of pornographic material.

Of course, a "counter conscience" has developed, with weighty spokesmen like Vice-President Agnew and Attorney-General Mitchell, and everyone is waiting for the pendulum swing. But, so far, it is still more threat than actuality; and in any case there is no reason to believe that the pendulum has to swing back as far as George Wallace. It is nonetheless a possibility.

The Old American Dream pictures a society which is politically pluralistic and open, but pseudo-pluralistic culturally. That is, the emphasis is on the freedom of the individual; and the bias is even towards freeing the individual from the tyranny of his cultural group. An extreme emphasis on the individual is tantamount to cultural nihilism. Contrasting with that is the newer scenario of Ethnic America: a politically open nation in which cultural groups exist side by side, separate but equal. That is a more fashionable scribble these days, but is highly illusory. For one thing, there is a great question as to whether such a society, in a modern industrial nation, can remain politically open; and, if not, whether it can then remain culturally permissive. "Separate but equal," we have found, is an illusion in itself. There is the matter of sharing power.

But aside from that, it is probable that the "revolution of cultural pluralism" in America is a fiction based on a temporary Black phenomenon. Negritude, black cultural nationalism in America has been more of a political and psychological tool than a bona fide cultural expression. In 1926, Langston Hughes said: "We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual *dar*' kinned selves without fear of shame. If white people are pleased, we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful." as positive as it sounds,

and as useful as it has been, the slogan, "black is beautiful," is mainly a defensive slogan. Even the "Yellow is beautiful," and "Brown is beautiful" pins worn by young Chinese-Americans and Mexican-Americans are not worn so much in the name of national culture, as in the name of the individual freedom and dignity which have been denied. And it has been in a kind of uneasy defensive mood that older national groups such as Italian-Americans have begun to make some ethnic noises. There may even be a course or two offered in Italian Studies. But where is it going to go? At the moment, ethnicity may be revived as part of the pattern of power politics. But it is not really a cultural or ethnic renaissance in other terms, or in lasting terms. The atomistic force of America will probably level it out, with the possible exception of a black and white pluralism which could persevere for some time to come.

### Options to Jews

Against the background of these patterns of pluralism and monism in America — and the possible variations thereof — there are four basic scenarios for American Jews that are usually envisioned:

- 1 — *Aliya*: Jews go to Israel.
- 2 — *Extension*: Jews live in America as a cultural and emotional extension of Israel.
- 3 — *Disappearance*: Jews gradually disappear as Jews in America.
- 4 — *Authenticity*: Jews live in America with a special identity and authenticity as *American Jews*.

There is, of course, the endlessly controversial question as to whether American Jews can, or indeed whether they should try to, establish a special authenticity as American Jews. But the point to be developed here is simply that unless they do establish such an authenticity, they could well disappear as Jews; and whether they do establish such an authenticity depends not only on internal developments

in the American community, but on the kind of society which now develops in America.

Obviously, if Fascism comes, the Jews flee to Israel if they can — but that's not a serious possibility. If qualitative American Repression develops — and even if organized anti-Semitism does not — even if their religious culture is respected — it will be an alien climate for Jews. Some will flee, some will be prominently engaged in the low-grade civil war which will ensue, but the organized Jewish community as such will probably hold up. Simon Dubnow once pointed out what he considered to be "the final lesson" of Jewish history: "that in the sunny days of mankind's history, in which reason, justice and philanthropic instinct had the upper hand, the Jews steadfastly made common cause with the other nations... But in the dark days, during the reign of rude force, prejudice and passion... the Jews retired from the world, withdrew into their shell to wait for better days."

But if Jews divorce themselves from America, under those circum-

stances, in this stage of American history, and with Israel present, then their existence in America will be pointless except in the most personal of terms. The American Jewish community will then exist only as an extension of Israel, and this may well not sustain it.

Yesha'Yahu Liebman recently reported on a survey of the attitudes of religious leaders in America towards Israel. He measured these attitudes on a scale of 1 to 6, on which 1 represented the strongest measure of agreement, and 6 the strongest measure of disagreement. The obvious was quantified when these leaders were asked whether Judaism required Jews to move to Israel. Strong disagreement with that proposition was registered by Reform rabbis, the Presidents of Reform synagogues and the Presidents of Conservative synagogues each of which groups had a mean score of well over 5. Conservative rabbis and orthodox synagogue presidents also tended to disagree sharply, with a mean score of more than 4. I asked whether the character of American Jewish life must be American Judaism not Israeli culture, there was strong agreement by Reform rabbis, Conservative rabbis, the Presidents of both Reform and Conservative synagogues, with mean scores ranging around 2 for each group. The mean score for Orthodox synagogue Presidents was around the middle of the scale. The local Presidents of a secular Jewish organization were also asked these questions and came out with scores similar to those of the Reform rabbis. Liebman's comment on his data was this:

"... with the exception of Orthodox rabbis, Israel does not really play a central role in the Jewish ideology of any group. Certainly, among a sample of leaders from secular and religious organizations, Israel does not play the kind of Jewish role which its spokesmen and friends

envisage for it. To this, we need only add the obvious: that the Jewish consciousness and the Jewish ideology in which Israel plays a small part is itself only a small part of the self-identity and total ideology of the American Jew."

Liebman's "obvious" is too casual a stereotype. Why do Jews who identify strongly enough to become rabbis and presidents of synagogues believe that American Jewish life is authentic, and that American Judaism is the center of that life? One standard ideological answer is that it is authentic to be a practicing Jew anywhere - and in America, because we happen to be here. But that was an easier formulation before the creation of modern Israel. Now there is an option. Now, the existence of an American Jewish community as a pale cultural extension of Israel doesn't make sufficient sense. More and more Jews feel self-deprecatory in the face of Israel; and more and more Jews feel uneasy in America. They would feel uneasy in a qualitatively Repressive America, even one that was ethnically permissive. But it is perhaps more startling that American Jews are feeling more uneasy about their status in the current open presumably pluralistic society of America. This is where the double crisis of confidence is really pinching. There is evidence that if the scenario of an Ethnic America were to develop, the Jews would find themselves dismal losers in the power game. This scenario would indeed probably turn out to be

just the First Act of a script called Repression American Style. But, in fact, there is probably no such Ethnic America in the wings; only the Old

American Dream, with a heavy infusion of racial politics.

It is in the midst of the Old American Dream, of all things, that the Jews are feeling more uncomfortable. There are a number of signals, which, put together, form some kind of disturbing message:

### United Funds

There is, as a case example, the matter of the United Funds. Most of the private charities and social service agencies in American communities have developed a single fund-raising device so that there would not be a multiplicity of appeals. At one time there was a great debate in the American Jewish community as to whether the Jewish social agencies should join in this single fund-raising device. It was an expression of faith in a certain kind of pluralistic society when American Jewry decided to do so. The Jewish community was providing services to Jews - through recreational centers, hospitals, family service agencies - which the general community would otherwise provide, in at least some limited form. But these are services, among others, which the Jewish community is committed to providing Jews as an extension of its nature as a community. It also provides some of these services to needy sections of the general community, to the extent possible. Why not, in these social service areas, join in a single fund-raising drive in the general community? Jews contribute in a distinguished fashion to these general United Funds, as well as to the Jewish Welfare Federation; and these funds have typically provided about a third of the support of these Jewish agencies.

But in the last few years, the United Funds have begun to think of themselves less as federations of existing groups and communities which provide services as extensions of their group and religious ideology. They have begun to think of themselves as central social planning agencies for the total community. Thus they have begun to evaluate the work of Jewish agencies - and allocate funds - not in terms of the imperatives of Jewish life - but in terms of the general needs of the community.

In one sense, this is another symptom of the atomization of American life. These services are no longer to be expressions of religious or ideological or cultural group impulses - but rather services pro-

vided by the total community through generalized agencies. Just the neutral government.

the Jewish agencies in particular, this may necessitate some withdrawal from United Fund participation — and perhaps some form

of appeal to Jewish citizens to provide more support for the Jewish Welfare Federations, even if it means less support for the United Funds. It marks a change in direction for the concept of pluralistic life in America. And for the Jewish community, it becomes a sign of environmental hostility to the specialized forms of Jewish life in America.

To take one more specific case example: In one city (this phenomenon has taken different forms in different cities), there was a budgetary decision by the School Board to fire a number of administrators. In order to protect the newly-hired, low-seniority "minorities" — defined as Blacks, Orientals, Filipinos, American Indians, and whites "of Spanish-speaking origin" — the School District announced the policy of firing only whites who were not of Spanish-speaking origin. (They did not mean Sephardic Jews). At the same time, the school district indicated that it would not hire any more teachers who did not fall into one of these "minority" categories, unless they reached a proportion in

the teacher corps corresponding to their proportion in the general population. This has become a standard problem in "working pluralism" in America today, with variations in different cities — the background, of course, is that the "minorities" referred to have long been kept out of the system. Throughout the country there have developed "affirmative action" programmes to hasten their integration in the system. Affirmative action means something beyond non-discrimination; it means compensatory action to make up for crippling effects of past discrimination. The school board action was an exercise in affirmative action.

But there is another piece of background. The history of America has been a history of emerging groups. In many large cities, the school system has been a particular instrument of occupational mobility. It has been one of the places where the newly educated children of

### immigrants could find a

professional, middle-class niche. In a couple of cities — including the one in question — the children of Irish immigrants had a heavy hold on positions in the school department. They were followed them. In the 1930s Jewish began to join the school systems in large numbers. They moved up as attrition took place. They are in the school systems in heavily disproportionate numbers — and are now in administrative positions in disproportionate numbers. They bear

the disproportionate brunt of such an affirmative action policy, partly because they were the last group to emerge in America.

### 'Minority' status

Without exploring all the ramifications of this case-problem, it raises some questions about pluralism and the Jews in modern America. For years American Jews have been developing the philosophy that they are not a "minority" in the public sphere — but simply Americans alongside other Americans, except in religious and cultural matters. However, in the current situation, many are raising the question as to "minority" status, and therefore whether we shouldn't publicly claim some consideration in the implementation of affirmative action programmes. At the very least, many are saying that the Jewish community should in this instance take corporate action on the political level. In smaller communities, Jewish teachers and administrators are bending together as Jews for the first time.

In brief, as in the case of the United Funds, there seems to be an impetus for the Jews to turn "inwards," reversing the flow of the recent past, because of an increasingly hostile environment. It is easy to say that this is part of the new pluralism of America, the movement towards the Ethnic America scenario. And if that is the case, it is already apparent that such an America would be essentially a difficult environment for Jews. However, it is still more likely that the movement to-

wards pluralism is exaggerated, and that the phenomenon we see is an extension of the Old American Dream, individualistic, atomistic America, with a current twist which is more political than ethnic.

For example, one of the chief architects of the particular affirmative action programme described above is a Jewish member of that Board of Education whose basic stance is that the Jews are not a minority group or a distinctive group in anything but the most personal aspects of their lives; they are just a number of individuals who happen to have the same religion and ancestral background. The "minorities" are so designated because they have a disadvantage in common, and when that is rectified by such programmes, they too will disappear into America as so many individuals.

### Atomization

There are many such signs in America today not of a new pluralism but of an accelerated atomization — which coincides with what might be called the definitive end of the Immigrant era and influence in America. For a period, that atomization seemed to suggest only one scenario for Jews: disappearance by cultural attrition and assimilation. But two things have happened: One:

the American Jews have proved to be more stubborn than that. Jewish consciousness is growing, not diminishing among the young Jews. Two: traditionally liberal America with its atomic thrust, has taken a hostile turn with respect to the existence of Jews as a group. The main effect may be the disappearance of some Jews — who counts? — and for the others, a new communalization. The question is: what will this new communalization, this new consciousness mean? Again, if it means that, in a somewhat hostile environment, American Jews live mainly as an extension of Israel, then it will probably be a vestigial community, without vitality or promise. And indeed it may mean the end of an American Jewish era.

### Special identity

What was the "promise" of that era? It may have been illusion, but, illusion or not, it had to do with yet another scenario. It had to do with the American Jew feeling that he has an authenticity as a Jew in America. Not just that he has an authenticity as a Jew wherever he is, and therefore as a Jew if he happens to be in America, especially in a free and pluralistic America. But, beyond that, a special authenticity in America. After all, is it enough, forever, for Jews to live as Jews? What are the "better days" for which Jews await? Bialik wrote of the possibility that after many years in Israel, Jews "will be emboldened to make another exodus which will lead to the spreading of our spirit over the world..." Without elaborating, American Jews have felt that they were part of a unique historical process in America, part of a uniquely open society — that is a society open to history — which had a special kinship with Jewish history, meaning, and mission.

Whatever the substance of that hypothesis, it has been the source of a special American-Jewish identity. And that special identity has been slipping away because of current developments in American and Jewish life. If it is to be retained, the scenario for the American society must be revised: a politically open, generally pluralistic society which is tender, not hostile towards group and cultural loyalties. As usual, the Jews are becoming a prime test of that tenderness or hostility. This is, in effect, the crisis of pluralism in liberal America. It requires the Jews to have a tough stance about themselves — and a self-conscious stance towards American society which is not just tied down to the particulars of the traditional liberal agenda.

But whether it is illusory... whether it is possible... whether it is desirable... that sense of American-Jewish identity — of authenticity not only as Jews but as Jews in America — is probably as important as Jewish education to the survival of the American Jewish community.