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Draft

THIRSTY IN REPHIDIM \*

The question is: Should we believe the polls? The general answer is clear enough: "Yes and no." But the underlying question is: Why do Jews tend to disbelieve the polls when they seem to bring good news- and are more likely to believe them if they bring bad news?

The Jews were only a couple of months out of Egyptian captivity, camped in Rephidim, when the people complained to Moses: "Wherefore is this that thou hast brought us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our cattle with thirst?"

That was one of the first expressions of Jewish uneasiness about future thirst and other disaster. You remember the story about the Jewish gentleman in the train, loudly and plaintively chanting "oy, am I thirsty, oy am I thirsty," until a fellow-passenger brought him water, after which he started to loudly and plaintively chant, "oy, am I going to be thirsty... "

That is what I have always called the Jewish Foreboding Complex. Many American Jews are actively filled with such foreboding today, about future anti-Semitism, and about a future American abandonment of Israel.

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The problem is that a constantly difficult distinction has to be made, as in the case of war, between justifiable and unjustifiable foreboding. Reasonable foreboding is an important survival attribute of the modern Jew; to be without it would be like being without adrenalin glands. There have been times when there was not enough foreboding. But an unreasonably high level of foreboding is also hazardous in that it distorts reality.

So the question in America today is not whether we should hold some foreboding, of course we should. The real question is: what kind and level of anxiety is it reasonable to hold at this time. Among other things, that will give us a realistic clue as to the remedies. People will always disagree about the exact boundaries between reasonable and unreasonable foreboding, but there are certain objective criteria around which we can work.

The polls are only one of those criteria. But one way to test the credibility of those polls, is to see whether the other criteria are compatible with the poll findings. In the matter of anti-Semitism, there are at least five other testing criteria, all of which show a level of anti-Semitism lower than it has ever been in modern times. Of course all those measures need to be ultimately qualified, but to begin with they are relatively low, and corroborative of the findings of the polls.

In those polls measuring public attitudes, the reference is mainly to the traditional anti-Semitic stereotypes. These are questions which have been asked over and over again for a half a century, in exactly the same language and in different time frames and world situations. This evidence suggests that the Jews have today reached a state of prejudice-parity with other white ethnic groups. Jews are seen by the American people to be just as honest, just as unobjectionable as neighbors or Presidents or political influentials as Italian-Americans.

In other terms, the measure of these anti-Semitic stereotypes has diminished steadily since 1946 and is at its all-time low point today. This is a largely generational phenomenon, by the way. Old anti-Semites don't change, they just pass away. Newer generations, even as they grow older, hold fewer animosities to Jews.

The first corroborating criterion has to do with overt episodes- vandalism, violence and so forth. The hard evidence is that anti-semitic episodes are declining - although some of the episodes may be more violent than in the recent past. To put it in other terms, there are no more hard-core anti-semites than before, although some of them may be more licentious than before.

Similarly, the law enforcement agencies and Jewish agencies report no increase in the low membership of organized groups with anti-Semitism high on their official agenda- although, again, some of those groups may be more licentious than they once were.

The third corroborating criterion is the state of public indifference to the anti-Semitic episodes and groups which do exist. But, by and large, there has been no diminution in general public and official outrage against these episodes, and against these organizations.

The next corroborating criterion is that economic and social discrimination against Jews has just continued to drop as a matter of objective reality.

The final criterion, that of anti-Semitism in the political arena is in some ways the most important. The bottom-line question: how many non-Jews will vote for avowed and identifiable Jews to represent them in high public office? That answer is clear enough. More and more such Jews have been elected to such public offices as Congress by constituencies which are overwhelmingly non-Jewish.

If these measures are so clear, why is it that so many Jews, when asked, express a concern about the present state of anti-Semitism in America? There are both reasonable and

unreasonable aspects to this concern which need to be sorted out.

For example, almost a third of the Jews in a Northern California region said that they did not think non-Jews would vote for a Jew as Congressmen. At the time they were saying this, the fact was that all three of their elected Congressmen in that area <sup>95% no. 1.</sup> were identified and avowed Jews. So what did the patently unreasonable answers of these Jews signify?

As for American commitment to Israel, I would suggest only one hard criterion to test the expressed attitudes of the American public.

Since 1967, the various survey organizations have asked the same question over and over again, with exactly the same language and in different time frames and world situations: with which cause do they sympathize, the Israeli or the Arab? On the average, in the last 20 years, about half of the American people have not had a definite opinion, 45 per cent have favored the Israelis and 8 per cent have favored the Arabs. If you were to isolate the hard-line Arab nations, the latter percentage would be much lower.

That is an overwhelming ratio of public opinion support for Israel. And that ratio has remained remarkably stable

throughout these years, sometimes dipping but always bouncing back quickly. Gallup issued a special commentary after Lebanon in which he noted the number of times that the American public has expressed some criticism of Israel on one matter or another, but still maintained Israel's favorability.

When the oil embargo was imposed by the Arab nations, and gas lines lengthened, many American Jews were sure that the American public would turn against Israel. They did not. Half of the American people did not like the Lebanese incursion, but they did not falter in their sympathy for Israel. Half of the American people thinks Israel treats the Palestinian Arabs badly, but they do not falter in their sympathy for Israel.

In all these cases, many American Jews have anticipated serious defections within Congress. But Congress has, if anything, become increasingly friendly, and has voted astonishing aid bills as well as other measures helpful to Israel. That is the hard criterion which substantiates the polls.

In terms of all objective criteria, the foreboding of American Jewry has dramatically outstripped reality. In Stephen M. Cohen's measurement of Jewish attitudes in 1986, he asked separate questions about the existence of present

anti-semitism, and the possibility of future anti-semitism. American Jews made astonishing little distinction between the two. About two out of ten American Jews do not believe anti-Semitism might become a serious problem in the future; and only about three out of ten do not believe anti-Semitism is a serious problem for American Jews today.

It is healthy for almost 7 out of 10 Jews to believe that anti-Semitism could become a serious problem in America's future- and for half the Jews to believe, as they do, that the U.S. might stop being a firm ally of Israel someday. But in the light of all the objective criteria, it seems paranoid for more than half the Jews to believe that anti-Semitism is a serious problem today- or that the U.S. would abandon Israel in any immediate crunch. The best construction is that many Jews respond more negatively about the present than they actually feel because they are afraid of or are superstitious about being too complacent about the future.

Now, that's not so crazy, as long as we don't altogether lose our sense of present reality in the process. There are qualifications to all of the objective criteria which have been cited. In general, our history has ordained that we should never abandon the understanding that attitudes towards Jews are negatively reversible. Perhaps the circumstances which would reverse those attitudes have just

not seriously risen yet. (Poll questions about how people might feel under hypothetical circumstances are not to be taken too seriously.)

We always think of deep economic crisis as the kind of circumstance which might trigger anti-Semitism. Let us hold that thought. Despite the polls, it would be hard for any of us to believe that, if a scapegoat were to be offered for economic collapse, the Italian-Americans would be as likely to serve as well as the Jews.

On the other hand, it is not happening among the industrially unemployed, or among the embattled Midwestern farmers, even though there were some efforts in that direction. The fact is that while there is a small percentage of hard-core anti-semites in America, most troubled Americans simply do not wake up in the morning with the Jews at the forefront of their consciousness. When Roper asked the American people in February of this year what they thought of when they thought of Ivan Boesky, more than half of them thought of personal greed, others mentioned other evil attributes, but only one per cent mentioned his Jewish background. Indeed, one per cent mentioned his Catholic background.

Sure that can change. But that's the way it is now- and the longer it is that way, the bigger the hedge it is against

future disaster. There are other hedges, including America's exceptional heterogeneity, which is growing. Furthermore, to bring the Jews back to the forefront of American consciousness in a traditionally negative way, through traditional political bigotry, while not an impossible task, is more rather than less difficult in modern America. To that extent, we can believe the polls on anti-Semitism.

On the matter of American support of Israel, however, I would suggest that the polls are somewhat softer, less credible, and that has its own more more sophisticated implication for diminishing the status of Jews in America.

To begin with, the kinds of circumstances which can reverse American favorability towards Israel are more volatile than those which can directly affect attitudes towards American Jews. The earlier polls showed an average ratio of only two to one, not six to one, with respect to sympathy for Israel over the Arabs. To put it succinctly, the sharp increase in American public favoritism towards Israel came only after 1967, after the foreign-policy elite in this country, in Congress and elsewhere, became convinced by events that Israel was America's most dependable answer to this country's need for a stable anchor in the Middle East.

By their actions and statements, this elite convinced the American public. That is why the "halo effect" noticed by Gallup and others has persisted: even when it doesn't like what Israel does in one case or another, the public remains convinced that Israel is good for America. If the objective circumstances and the opinions of the foreign-policy elite changed drastically, so could public opinion.

furthermore, that traditional question on comparative sympathy which has been used as a key throughout the years is notably soft. It measures animosity towards the Arabs as much as positive feelings about Israel. Asked whether Israel is a reliable ally, about the same half of the American population says yes, but more than a quarter of the population says no. Only 6 per cent of the population thinks that Syria is a reliable ally. That explains why the comparative sympathy question comes out the way it does, but it also emphasizes that the comparative sympathy question does not adequately measure intrinsic commitment to Israel.

By the same token, the surveys indicate that the American public is not anxious to back up its sympathy with any great sacrifice, as far as arms sales or military involvement is concerned. Cohen asked Jews whether they agreed with this statement: "When it comes to the crunch, few non-Jews will come to Israel's side in its struggle to survive." Half of the Jews agree with that statement, and they may be right.

Hypothetically speaking, that is not an unreasonable foreboding.

Furthermore, there are different publics to consider. There are not dramatic differences on the comparative sympathy index among different age, income, education, or occupation groups. But there is a significant difference between blacks and whites. The last Roper poll, for example, showed a 24 to 11 ratio of sympathy in favor of Israel for blacks, as compared to a 51 to 8 ratio for whites.

This calls for a quick flash-back to anti-Semitism. In those measurements, the mass of blacks tend to show a pattern which is pretty close to that of the whites. But there is one dramatic difference: among college-educated blacks, the level of anti-semitism does not drop off as significantly as it does for college-educated whites. One suggested explanation of this statistical difference is an edge of "third-world" consciousness" among college-educated blacks- and this leads us directly back to Israel.

There is a stronger edge of "third-world" consciousness among the black population which affects the pattern of responses to Israel and the Arabs. There is also, understandably, a statistically greater interest and investment in the domestic scene as compared to the international scene. We should take the latter as a kind of

laboratory test of how deteriorated economic circumstances might affect attitudes towards Israel in the general population.

In addition some specialized polls suggest that there is an elite public whose consciousness tends to run on a kind of parallel track to that of black "third-world" consciousness. These are certain academic, journalistic and political circles, for example, which are partly "third-world" in outlook, partly neo-isolationist in general, partly just anti-establishment. These are relatively small but influential circles because of their access to young people and to the media.

Traditional anti-Semitism would not be acceptable in those circles. Nor, for the most part, do their foreign policy and political attitudes stem from a hostility towards Israel. But these attitudes do often lead to a watering-down of firm American support of Israel. If certain objective events took place in conjunction with a spreading of those attitudes, overwhelming public support of Israel could diminish as swiftly as it emerged.

And, by the way, that is the most likely route by which anti-semitism could be resuscitated in America. American Jews would continue to push vehemently for American support, but this time against the grain. At least a quarter of all

Americans already think that American Jews are more loyal to Israel than to the United States, but most of them don't complain now because they are also supportive of Israel.

But there do not seem to be any events in sight which would alter the basic relationship between Israel and America. It will obviously take much, much more than a series of Pollard cases, or complicity in failed Iranian arms initiatives. It will take either a radical shift in Middle East/U.S./ USSR relationships which it is not easy now to envision- or, more likely, a radical transformation of American foreign policy in general, which would affect Israel in passing.

The unreasonable level of Jewish foreboding about the current state of American support of Israel, or of American anti-Semitism may seem like a harmless peccadilo in the light of our history. But such excessive foreboding might be hazardous to our health- emotional anxiety and wasted energy aside. It is strategic misdirection.

It is strategic misdirection because this kind of unreasonable foreboding tends to feed on a concept of Jew-hatred. There has been renewed among many Jews the sentiment that if you scratch a non-Jew you will find an anti-Semite. According to this view, anti-Semitism exists today among most non-Jews, waiting to burst forth, because most non-Jews naturally hate Jews. By the same token, according to this

view, most non-Jews really hate a Jewish state, and are just waiting for the opportunity to do Israel in on that account.

It is serious misdirection, because that kind of Jew-hatred will not be the origin of any rejuvenation of anti-Semitism in this country, and we had better address ourselves to the real possibilities of such a rejuvenation. It is a serious misdirection with respect to Israel because the major factors which have to do with a possible diminution of American support of Israel have nothing to do with Jew-hatred, or even Israel-hatred- and we had better address ourselves to those major factors.

Can the polls be believed? Let's start with a more limited formulation: the polls cannot be disbelieved. Properly executed, they present facts. But these facts do not provide us with instant meaning. We devise meaning by putting together the facts and overlaying our intelligence. That will, of course, bring different people to different places. But if we ignore the facts, if we do not use them as important clues to reality, we are bound to end up in the wrong place.

In this case, if we do not use the facts presented by the polls, we will miscalculate not just the state of current but the nature of future anti-semitism and anti-Israelism- and we will be less capable of combatting them. At Rephidim,

Moses needed a miracle, the provision of fresh water, to allay the anxiety of Jews. We don't want to eliminate anxiety, but only to help Jews draw a clearer boundary line between justifiable and unjustifiable anxiety---and sometimes it seems that would be a miraculous feat.