

TWO VIEWS

Let us compare two statements on the public condition of the Jews. One was made by William Howard Taft, former President of the United States, over 60 years ago. The other was made by a religious leader in Israel several weeks ago. They demonstrate two extremely opposite poles in perception.

William Howard Taft wrote a long article, "The Progressive World Struggle of the Jews for Civil Equality," in the National Geographic Magazine of July, 1919. It was a scholarly article, a worthy short history, but it reflected the innocence of the times.

In general, Taft praised the Jews and excoriated anti-semitism, which he blamed on religious prejudice and "constant Christian persecution of the Jews." He was appalled by the continuing persecutions in Rumania and Russia -- but he was otherwise pleased by the progress that he saw from his vantage point in July, 1919.

He indicated that the first "complete emancipation" of the Jews, in terms of legal equality under the law, came about with the establishment of a constitutional American republic. He then traced the further development of "emancipation" in Europe, starting with the French Revolution.

Taft noted that Germany presented special problems in modern Western Europe. He wrote: "The truth is that Protestant Germany has never been liberal in this regard." But he felt that even that had been overcome by modernity: "The popular movements all over Europe in 1948, however, on the Continent brought not only equality of opportunity and religious freedom to the Jews, but brought into the various parliaments a number of the leading Jews, and from that time on they have had little real trouble with the law in Austria, Germany, France, Holland and England.

Taft went on to say that while "we cannot tear out that distressing page in the history of Christian civilization containing the record of seventeen centuries of persecution ... we may rejoice that more than half the members of this great race have won their long progressive struggle for merely an equal chance with other men." He urged Russia to follow the example of Western Europe.

Fifteen years later Hitler had mounted Western Europe. Taft could not foresee -- few people did -- that one of the aspects of European modernity would be totalitarianism; and, with it, a more efficient anti-semitic persecution than he could imagine in 1919. Indeed, it was no longer religious intolerance that was at the heart of the matter, but a new political savagery. Russia's modernity demonstrated that: its official anti-semitism outstrips that of the czars, although it is not motivated by religionism.

Taft's piece illustrates the innocence that still existed in America in 1919. On the other hand, a senior member of the Agudat Israel Council of Sages, Rabbi Eliezer Shach, made a statement at the end of 1981 which illustrates a sentiment trapped in a much older era than that of William Howard Taft. Rabbi Shach attacked Begin for his Golan Heights action, on the grounds that such action angered the "goyim." The Rabbi maintained that the Jews must continue to "dance before the wicked, vicious goy like the beautiful yid of old, while never forgetting that the goy is nothing but a vicious, mad murderer."

In short, Taft believed that progress had been irreversibly made; Shach believes that no progress can ever be made. Experience has proved both men wrong. Both points of view would be suicidal for the Jews. The experience in Europe may

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have existentially convinced many Jews that all non-Jews are "vicious mad murderers." But the American experience, at the least, has taught us otherwise. While we cannot trust that any progress is irreversible, even in America, we know that we don't have to "dance" before the non-Jew in order to survive. If the political society is shaped right and its laws strong, we can stand up for our rights and fight -- and win. That, not the medieval dance, is our only road to survival.

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