The 23 Jewish refugees who arrived in Nieuw Amsterdam 350 years ago were a sorry lot. Some were so obscure that historians cannot agree on identifying all of them. The captain of the Ste. Catherine, the ship that brought the Jews, sued them for failing to cover the cost of passage. Having fled the Portuguese inquisition in Recife, they had to be sustained by a relief fund provided by their coreligionists in Amsterdam, including a budding philosopher named Baruch de Spinoza. These two dozen Jews were neither unified nor even civil enough to eschew suing, slandering, and even fighting one another.

By landing in the Dutch colony in 1654, these boat people would inaugurate Jewish history in the future United States. But the first institution that they created hardly exhibited optimism—they built a cemetery. (A public house of worship was forbidden.) Only two years were needed for the first Jew to marry a Christian. The groom was Solomon Pietersen, an Amsterdam merchant who arrived just ahead of this gathering of fugitives from Brazil; his daughter was baptized.1 Whether North America would become home for a serious Jewish community could hardly have been prophesied, so inauspicious were its origins.

A century ago, in 1904, when Jewry celebrated a quarter of a millennium on American soil, the traits that Gentile observers emphasized were vibrancy and resilience. The Jews were adapting smoothly to the New World, and thriving. In 1899 Mark Twain had described the Jews as an imperishable people whose powers seemed to get replenished. Because of a tenacious will to prevail over adversity, the Jew, wrote Twain, was “exhibiting no decadence, no infirmities of age, no weakening of his parts, no slow-

ing of his energies, no dulling of his alert and aggressive mind.” In 1904, when Henry James returned to his native land after an absence of nearly three decades, 250 years of Jewish settlement had led to “the Hebrew conquest of New York,” he thought. The novelist’s hometown was utterly transformed. Having “burst all bounds,” the “swarming” Jews seemed symptomatic of “the multiplication of everything,” and exhibited “unsurpassed strength.”

Far more resentful was Henry Adams, whose autobiography records his sense of displacement, a conviction that he was unfit for a modern world. Privately printed in 1906, The Education of Henry Adams bitterly insists that he would have been no “more heavily handicapped in the races of the coming century” than “had he been born in Jerusalem . and circumcised in the Synagogue under the name of Israel Cohen.” The whole “Jew atmosphere” of the fin-de-siècle had put the kinsmen of “Israel Cohen” in the winners’ circle; Adams, the grandson and great-grandson of American presidents, felt marginalized and isolated.

Barrett Wendell, a Harvard literary historian, also had an impeccable Yankee pedigree, though he was less tormented by the precipitous decline of Anglo-Saxon authority. Wendell realized, as he wrote to a rabbi’s son, the philosopher Horace M. Kallen, in 1912: “My race—as oppressed today as yours ever was—has not the vitality to survive the test” of multiethnic competition.

The United States had come to harbor the largest, the most influential, and the wealthiest Jewish community in the annals of the Diaspora. Indeed, not since Abraham had left Ur of the Chaldees had any organized unit of Jews exerted the power or the dynamism that this New World community now exuded. And yet that 250th anniversary can also serve as a baseline by which to measure the survival anxieties that have gathered momentum to the present. Freedom has proved to be a mixed blessing. Can a minority group remain viable when religious duties and communal responsibilities can so easily be shirked? Such fears have been undercurrents run-

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ning beneath the gratitude and confidence with which Jews have individually and collectively operated in the United States, and an historical account of dispirited forecasts of communal fragility is the subject of this essay.

The lingo of American Jewry is often anxiously constituted in future tense, because evidence has continued to mount of the eclipse of ethnicity, and of a declining attachment to the idea of peoplehood. The forebodings about the future have been especially difficult to address because the very national ideals to which most Americans subscribe are not the remedy, but the problem. The liberating opportunities that this country has offered Jews came increasingly to be understood as what has put their cohesiveness at risk. Exactly that which has generated the security and wellbeing of the community is also what undermines its vitality and therefore its prospects.

Until very recently American Jews rarely felt a conflict between their religious birthright and their civic status. They have commonly believed in the seamless weave of their peoplehood and their citizenship. A patriotic pride inspired many of the immigrants, and their progeny maintained it.

In 1912, for example, Mary Antin’s account of her metamorphosis into an American became a publishing sensation. The distance from “the prison of the Pale” of Settlement in Russia to the hospitality of New England was primarily psychological, she noted in *The Promised Land*, as a new identity was formed: “All the processes of uprooting, transportation, replanting, acclimatization, and development took place in my own soul.” The meaning of migration was summed up: to be able to “roam at will in the land of freedom was a marvel that it did me good to realize.” And “that an outcast should become a privileged citizen” was “a romance more thrilling than poet ever sung.” The consequence was gratitude for civic inclusion, even though Professor Wendell would privately complain of Antin’s “irritating habit of describing herself and her people as Americans”—a term that he wished to reserve for folks like his wife, whose ancestors had landed three centuries earlier.4

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In *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917), Abraham Cahan's immigrant protagonist recalls an evening in a Catskills hotel, where the band plays before nouveaux riches like himself. The audience is dead until the conductor strikes up the National Anthem, and "the effect was overwhelming. The few hundred diners rose like one man, applauding. . . It was as if they were saying: 'We are not persecuted under this flag. At last we have found a home.' "

What Levinsky felt—"Love for America blazed up in my soul"—was not unique. Even echoes of exasperation among immigrants who cursed the consequences of 1492 ("a klog tsu Columbus") could not have prevented Uncle Sam from claiming that some of his best friends are Jews.

On September 8, 1945, exactly four months after the surrender of the Third Reich, Bess Myerson was crowned Miss America. On her way to Atlantic City, a woman with a tattoo on her arm told her, in Yiddish, that if the group of judges "chooses a Jewish girl to be Miss America, I will know that I've come to a safe country." Of course an earlier beauty contest that had elevated Esther into the Queen of Persia did not guarantee the wellbeing of its Jewry, and security was hardly the only virtue to be ascribed to the United States. In a valentine to America published in 2002, Norman Podhoretz argued that the democratic ethos of upward mobility guaranteed the openness of American institutions, which benefited "all who were lucky enough to live under them." His country was therefore entitled "to the love and gratitude of all whom a benevolent providence has deposited on the[se] shores." But could such blessings last? Were they consistent with the imperatives of Jewish survival? The editor-at-large of the American Jewish Committee's monthly *Commentary* did not address the challenge to Jewish identity that so benign an environment posed.

And yet the sense of a terminus, the fear of an end to Jewish history in America, has also been integral to the communal conversation. The discourse of despair could even be heard when the 250th anniversary of American Jewish history was being cele-

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brated. In 1904, Chicago's "chief rabbi" published *Nimmukei Rida- vaz*, a commentary on the Bible. David Willowski was perhaps the most learned of the immigrant Talmudic scholars of that era, and his introduction to that volume acknowledged how the Jews had prospered and attained honor in his adopted land. Yet its "ways and customs militate against the observance of the laws of the Torah and the Jewish way of life," Willowski warned, and those who strayed from observance would "mostly descend to the Gehenna." Already a century ago he was speculating that "if we do not bestir ourselves now, I am sore afraid that there will be no Jew left in the next generation." Six years later Samson Benderly and his "boys" would organize the Bureau of Jewish Education and thus professionalize the enterprise in New York City, then home to more than half of American Jewry. But Willowski's worries were hardly peculiar to him.

Indeed, the fears for a community going into remission were expressed even while William McKinley was occupying the White House. Weighing heavily in the indictment was the callow and vulgar repudiation of Judaic norms. Rabbis and other cultural custodians denounced the bar mitzvah ceremony for its profane ostentation, the Sabbath for being more honored in the breach and so poorly observed, and the elevation of Hanukkah to a demeaning facsimile of Christmas. At the dawn of the twentieth century, the marrow of Judaism seemed to be disintegrating. Even though the intermarriage rates were in the low single digits (and the phenomenon was rare enough to be newsworthy), warnings were issued that the primacy of romantic love was defeating the imperative of collective destiny. American Jews were "paying a high price for their liberty and equality—self-effacement," anthropologist Maurice Fishberg wrote in 1907. Four years later, the sociologist Arthur Ruppin included the U.S. when he lamented that "the structure of Judaism, once so solid, is crumbling away before our very eyes." He prophesied a "thinning [of] the ranks of Jews."
Even the most embattled champion of Jewish interests grew to wonder what sort of group life he had invested his energies in defending. "A terrifying percentage of our young people are absolutely without the slightest religious training," attorney Louis Marshall, president of the American Jewish Committee, realized in 1920. "They are growing up in total ignorance of the noble traditions of our faith and the Bible itself is to them a sealed book." Even though the standards of holiness a century ago might have been more severe than (or at least different from) those today, such laments should counteract the tendency of posterity to romanticize a past allegedly richer in Jewish commitment.

Nevertheless, when the tricentennial was celebrated in 1954, the auguries seemed less foreboding than before or, for that matter, since. This was the age of "the suburbanization of the Jews, the fashioning of a new communal order and the emergence of a collective self-confidence and sense of well-being." Nazism had been eliminated, the State of Israel created, and anti-Semitism marginalized. Jewish organizations were engaged in the creation of a liberal American society that would, it was expected, protect the civil liberties and civil rights of all.

An unmodulated sense of pride and confidence was given scholarly validation in Oscar Handlin's *Adventure in Freedom* (1954), a book that shows how the values that American Jews had inherited enabled them to meet the "successive crises" of the New World. Though anti-Semitism is given its due, the Harvard historian discovered little evidence of religious or cultural weakness, and discerned no demographic danger. (The plateau had already been reached in 1937, when the Jewish proportion of the general population was 3.7 percent; it has steadily fallen since.) The absence
of any tension in Handlin’s tricentennial survey might be con-
trasted with his own Pulitzer Prize-winning account of European
immigration to the U.S., *The Uprooted*, published only three years
earlier. That parable of alienation recorded the intense psychic
cost of transplantation to a strange New World. The presidency
of Dwight D. Eisenhower no doubt contributed to the sunny-side-
up atmosphere; and it was he who delivered the keynote address
at the National Tercentenary Dinner on October 20, 1954.15 The
liberator of concentration camps personified the promise that an
earlier general-turned-president—George Washington—had ut-
tered, in assuring the Jewish minority that republican government
would give “to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance.”

Yet even as unprecedented prosperity was enhancing the cele-
bration, even as suburbanization was emancipating the upwardly
mobile from the dusk of the “ghetto,” even as full citizenship in
the dominant power on earth was now within reach, undercurrents
could be detected.

“The threat of Jewish oblivion in America” was identified only
five years after the tricentennial, by one of the most popular nov-
elists in the nation’s history. The danger was assimilation, Herman
Wouk warned; and he summoned a metaphor: “Mr. Abramson left
his home in the morning after a hearty breakfast, apparently in the
best of health, and was not seen again.” In a best-selling primer
on Judaism from an Orthodox viewpoint, Wouk explained that “of
course Mr. Abramson will not die. When his amnesia clears, he will
be Mr. Adamson, and his wife and children will join him, and all
will be well. But the Jewish question will be over in the United
States.” It is not surprising that an observant Jew would exhibit the
most sensitive antennae to the perils of assimilation. But what
This is My God skirted, perhaps because of the author’s political
conservatism, was the tension between Judaism and the condi-
tions that imperiled it—the blank slate of freedom and opportu-
nity of the American dream. The virtues praised by patriotic writ-
ers were ripping into the very fiber of an ancient and demanding
faith. But so contradictory a prospect could not yet be unblink-
ingly faced, and therefore Wouk dared not imagine utter disap-

15David Bernstein, “American Jewish Tercentenary,” *American Jewish Year Book 1956*
pearance, even as “the tidal pressures of conformity slowly, con-
stantly erode our heritage.”

The Jewish yearning to assimilate began before Mr. Abramson
stepped into his station wagon for his joy ride. According to the
Book of Exodus, the Israelites' will to forge a new nation in the
wilderness was sapped by their nostalgia for the fleshpots of Egypt,
for the pleasures along the banks of the Nile; and those whom
Moses had led to Mount Sinai were worshiping the Golden Calf
even during the transmission of the Ten Commandments. Ever
since then, uncounted millions have sought to wriggle out of the
confining category of “Jew Jew Jew Jew Jew Jew Jew!,” as did
Alexander Portnoy, who insisted: “I happen also to be a human
being!” No one is only a human being, of course. But that has not
stopped universalistic impulses from animating the escape routes
from Judaism and making assimilation a constant of Jewish history.
Assimilationism—an explicit, deliberate program—has rarely
been spoken with an American accent, however. Those who have
regarded Jewishness as a birth defect have been eager to conceal it
rather than to ruminate on their fate or to propose strategies of col-
lective obliteration. Writing from England in the year of the tri-
centennial, Arthur Koestler provoked very little American reaction
to his argument that, since Zionism had achieved statehood, the
observant should ready themselves to return to the land for which
they prayed. But mostly for the sake of their progeny, the nonre-
ligious should feel no guilt in eradicating themselves as Jews. “The
Gentile world will welcome wholehearted Jewish assimilation,”
Koestler asserted. “With mixed marriages the Jewish problem will
gradually disappear to the benefit of all concerned.” The anom-
aly of galut, Jewish exile, should end, either with aliyah, relocation
to Israel, or with Jews merging “with the nation whose life and cul-
ture they share, without reservation or split loyalties.” Only when
Jews in the Diaspora disappear would Christendom cure itself of
the sickness of anti-Semitism.

Such direct appeals for complete absorption into the general

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16 Herman Wouk, This Is My God: The Jewish Way of Life (Boston, 1988), pp. 258, 268.
17 Ilana Pardes, The Biography of Ancient Israel: National Narratives in the Bible (Berke-
pp. 119–20, 140–41.
populace found few echoes in the United States. But in 1963 such a stance was adopted by two figures who were about to loom much larger in Jewish life. One was a waterfowl farmer in Maine who told readers of the Zionist monthly *Midstream* of the Judaism that he had abandoned in his teens, of his attachment to humanity instead of a tiny segment of it, of his reluctance to permit his children to bear a burden they had not freely assumed. Therefore, “to the great boons Jews have already conferred upon humanity, Jews in America might add this last and greatest one: of orienting themselves toward ceasing to be Jews.” The author was Henry Roth, whose obscure book *Call It Sleep* (1934) was on the cusp of rediscovery and acclaim as the finest novel ever written by an American Jew.

The other was the 33-year-old editor of *Commentary*, who, that same year, offered a solution to the deepening racial crisis: miscegenation. “The wholesale merger of the two races is the most desirable alternative [to bigotry] for everyone concerned,” Norman Podhoretz argued. “I am not claiming that this alternative can be pursued programmatically or that it is immediately feasible . . . [But in America] the Negro problem can be solved . . . in no other way.” “My Negro Problem—And Ours” did not exempt the Jews, the white ethnic group that had shown the greatest sympathy for the ideal of racial equality. Nor did Podhoretz recommend conversion to Judaism for black spouses. Indeed, he refused to flinch from the sneering question that racists were fond of posing: “Would you want your daughter to marry one?” Sorting out personal feelings from a moral commitment to equality, Podhoretz concluded that he would have “to give her my blessing.” Even the perpetuation of Jewish distinctiveness was up for consideration, especially after the Holocaust had exposed the lethal consequences of Jewish birth. In 1963 Podhoretz did not directly urge that Jewish life be terminated—nor did he expect it. But however delicately formulated, “My Negro Problem—And Ours” remains the closest that a public intellectual intimately linked to the Jewish community has come to an unabashedly assimilationist position.²⁰


The unpopularity of that stance was revealed when both authors decided to repudiate it. Both Roth and Podhoretz realized that they could not face the end of American Jewry with equanimity. In the aftermath of the Six-Day War, the suddenly canonical author of Call It Sleep reawakened to his own Jewishness and jettisoned his assimilationist credo. Becoming ardently pro-Israel, he proclaimed himself “a partisan of a country” and “a people in the making, in the process of becoming a people again from the shadows we were.” After four decades of silence (except for a short piece in the Fall 1954 issue of the Magazine of Ducks and Geese) Roth not only surmounted writer’s block but recorded his envy of Israeli writers, who could not “suffer the anguished dislocation, the discontinuity, of those of us in the Diaspora who once felt—and lost—a deep sense of belonging and the identity that stemmed from it.”21 The neoconservatism that animated Podhoretz as an editor and a political analyst, beginning in the late 1960s, was not only enlisted in behalf of Israel, but also, in his view, presented a far more viable framework than liberalism for the defense of Jewish interests at home. Henceforth, those who predicted the complete absorption of American Jewry into the wider national community did not, like the old Roth and Podhoretz, want such a process to occur, but dreaded it.

The first serious look into the abyss occurred in 1964, exactly a decade after the tricentennial, when Look, a weekly picture magazine, published an article ominously entitled “The Vanishing American Jew.” Thomas B. Morgan, its author, noted how the vital signs were flickering. The low birth rates, and especially the increasing rates of intermarriage, were not the way for a minority to guarantee its future. Drawing upon the research of two sociologists—Erich Rosenthal, who published his findings in the American Jewish Year Book, and Marshall Sklare, who served on the staff of the American Jewish Committee—Morgan asserted that “slowly, imperceptibly, the American Jew is vanishing.” The divine promise recorded in Genesis 22:17, which is chanted from the Torah every Rosh Hashanah, announces that the Hebrews will be as numerous as “the stars of the heavens” and “the sand on the sea-

shore." But mixed marriages and effective birth control were making that divine pledge difficult to honor. American Jewry was not only small; it was becoming smaller — and the combination augured badly for survival. 22 Morgan's demographic data anticipated the glum prognostications that scholars would later amplify. To be sure, his pessimistic prediction has not yet been verified, even after four decades. The Jewish community has hardly vanished — though Look itself did, which may only suggest how treacherous the craft of forecasting can be.

But the end of endogamy did emerge as the most striking evidence of an endangered community. Jay Gatsby once dismissed as "just personal" the love that Tom and Daisy Buchanan shared. But that criterion has usually determined marital choices in the United States; and as the immigrant origins of Jews receded over time, love between Jews and Gentiles became more plausible, and a concern for the perpetuation of a minority came to seem more eccentric. 23

The injunction in West Side Story that Anita issues to Maria, "Stick to your own kind," increasingly appeared to be narrow prejudice, an illiberal ethnocentrism. A more inclusive and open standard was adopted quite early in American history by the first American Jew to appear in American fiction, a wealthy, assimilated widow named Achsa Fielding, who marries the eponymous hero of Arthur Mervyn (published 1799–1800). Charles Brockden Brown's novel proposes no absolute impediment to interfaith nuptials. A century later the intermarriage rates — especially among the Eastern European immigrants and their children — were barely noticeable; and the advice columnist of the Yiddish daily, the Forverts, could afford to be a bit cavalier on the subject. In 1908, when asked about the propriety of marriage outside the faith, the "worthy editor" of the bintel brief (advice column) replied: "We can only say that some mixed marriages are happy, others unhappy. But then many marriages between Jew and Jew, Christian and Christian, are not successful either. It is true, however, that in some mixed marriages the differences between man and wife create unhappiness. Therefore we cannot take it upon ourselves to advise the

young man regarding this marriage. This he must decide for himself.” It’s a free country.

In a society that promotes personal choice, a coherent case for endogamy cannot easily gain traction. Senator Joseph I. Lieberman, an Orthodox Jew, was well aware of this when he ran for vice president in 2000; questioned by radio talk-show host Don Imus about the Judaic legal ban on intermarriage, Lieberman felt compelled to deny there was any such prohibition. Few Americans have declared their hostility to the pursuit of happiness, an inalienable right and a quest that the Declaration of Independence framed according to truths that are “self-evident” (the only truths that have counted in America). Saul Bellow’s character Augie March vowed to “go at things as I have taught myself, free-style, and will make the record in my own way”; and few compatriots have found such an approach uncongenial. Because the national ethos does not respect the limitations that ancestry might impose, the religious and psychological barriers to exogamy have continued to fall; and by the last third of the twentieth century, most Jews who were walking toward the altar were not linking up with other Jews. Even many of the Jews who chose to marry within the faith did so because their romantic motives did not conflict with an obligation to create a distinctively Jewish household. But in such instances the ethnic and religious factors were ancillary.

No wonder, then, that more children may be currently raised in households with one Jewish parent than in those with two Jewish parents. Attitudes had shifted in the direction of acceptance of mixed marriage—or, in the phrase of sociologist Egon Mayer, “from outrage to outreach.” A fundamental means by which communal cohesiveness had been assured over countless generations was being widely abandoned.


least one Jewish grandparent, perhaps two million practice a religion other than Judaism, or no religion at all; furthermore, only about a quarter of college freshmen in 1999 who were children of Jewish-Christian marriages identified as Jews.\textsuperscript{28}

Such evidence did not exhaust the data adumbrating doom. By the 1990s Jewish families were not reproducing at the replacement level of 2.1, but instead at 1.8. Ignoring divine instructions to “be fruitful and multiply,” nonobservant Jewish couples have only about 1.6 children. The average age of American Jews is higher than that of any other major ethnic group. As though befitting an ancient lineage, the median age of American Jews is quite old, 41. Nor can American Jewry count on further waves of immigration to replenish it.

Furthermore, whether the criterion is synagogue affiliation, or devotion to the welfare of Israel, or awareness of the terrible price that the Holocaust exacted, younger Jews have been pulled by the heartstrings of peoplehood much less than their parents or grandparents. In 1998 only 47 percent of American Jews acknowledged “a special responsibility to take care of Jews in need around the world,” though this minority group had been so often accused of “clannishness.” No wonder demographers and sociologists have contributed to a sense of pessimism about the Jewish predicament in America.\textsuperscript{29}

The gravity of the crisis was underscored when the United Jewish Communities (UJC) commissioned a National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) for 2000–01 to track the demographic effects of the decade since the previous NJPS suggested the community was growing older and smaller. Some findings of the new NJPS were released in late 2002, and reinforced the fears of those who had had been preparing to sit shivah. The 5.5 million Jews alive in 1990 were reduced to 5.2 million a decade later, and constituted only some 2 percent of the American population. Most Jewish women between the ages of 30 and 50 were childless (as compared to 27 percent in the general population).\textsuperscript{30} The sampling methods of the

\textsuperscript{28}Sarna, American Judaism, p. 360.


survey have been challenged, and the loss of some data has raised questions about the findings, but such caveats, which accompanied final publication of the NJPS in 2003, did not eliminate the overall impression of a community in decline (see below, p. 000).

Qualitative evidence has also been marshaled to project a dead end. After Sandy Koufax had set a World Series record of 15 strikeouts in one game against the New York Yankees, one of the latter, third baseman Clete Boyer, was heard to inquire: “Aren’t there any more Jewish holidays?” Few of Koufax’s fellow Jews have wished for further occasions for piety, however; and indeed the Los Angeles Dodgers’ pitcher was himself representative in the infrequency of his observance of the religious calendar. The last two centuries and more, marked by skepticism, secularism, and anticlericalism, seem to have affected Jews more deeply than others; and worship is less regular than it is among their Protestant or Catholic neighbors. The trajectory of Judaism was concisely formulated by a French Jew, Ben Levi, as early as 1840: “The grandfather prays in Hebrew; the father reads the prayer in French; and the son does not pray at all.” Only a minority of American Jews now belong to a synagogue.

Two historians who were also congregational rabbis took the long view, and found it to be grim. American Jews “are enjoying the powers with which their tradition has endowed them, but they are not renewing these powers,” according to Leon A. Jick, who occupied a pulpit in Mount Vernon, New York. “American Jewry is spending its capital,’ using up its resource without replacing it.” Jews have achieved success in America, added Arthur Hertzberg, a congregational rabbi in Tennessee and New Jersey. But Judaism itself has been “in trouble,” running on empty. What seemed to remain, Nathan Glazer observed in an overview of the Jewish encounter with America, was mere “survivalism”—a belief in the value of a collective destiny, “with no additional interest in what the content of Jewish life and religion should be.”


elusion is irresistible that without at least some sensitivity to the challenge of the sacred, a rationale or an incentive to remain Jewish is difficult to sustain.

Could doom be averted? Could the historical pressures, the demographic weakness, and the waning of religiosity that had put Jewry in harm's way be circumvented? By the 1970s two important assessments of the largest community in the Diaspora expressed the most serious doubts to date. Both authors were American-born Israelis from religiously traditional backgrounds; and both identified the problem as ideological, as stemming from the mental world of American Jewry.

In 1973 social scientist Charles S. Liebman asserted that "if the Jewish community is to survive, it must become more explicit and conscious about the incompatibility of integration and survival." He did not doubt that "some nominal form of Judaism will persist in the United States. However, the fact that some group, no matter how small, will continue to call itself Jewish ... offers me little consolation." Liebman therefore concluded that "if Judaism as I understand it is to perpetuate itself in America, it must, at least to some extent, reject the value of integration, which I see as sapping its very essence." Four years later, Hillel Halkin was even more certain that the classical Zionist argument had been correct, that "the Jews as a people had a future in the modern world only as an autonomous community living in a land of their own and organized, if possible, in the form of a nation-state." For the social forces that since Emancipation were imperiling the vitality of the Diaspora are irreversible, Halkin surmised; and even the most prosperous and populous of these communities outside of Israel is doomed.34

In that same year, critic Irving Howe announced that already American Jewish literature had "probably moved past its high point," having summoned "its voice and its passion at exactly the moment it approached disintegration." That sense of foreboding was shared by Halkin, himself a literary scholar as well as a political analyst. And he saw no reason to alter his sense of the future course of Jewish history when he reconsidered his "Zionist's

polemic” in 1997. As the century drew to a close, he continued to doubt that the American Jewish community would be able to muster a rationale for its distinctiveness and integrity strong enough to overcome the corrosive force of assimilation. A book criticized as “alarmist” had, alas, become even more true as the evidence of shrinking Jewish identity in America continued to accumulate. Only in Israel, Halkin insisted, could “the Jewish will to live honorably in our times” be achieved.\(^{35}\)

Today, there are probably more Jews living in Israel than in the United States. But when Israel was established in 1948, more Jews were living in one New York borough, the Bronx, than in the new Jewish state. The borough’s most famous beauty contestant, Bess Myerson, had gallantly refused to change her name (“Betty Merrick” was suggested);\(^{36}\) she is nevertheless only a footnote in American social history. Goldie Meyerson did change her name, for ideological motives, to Golda Meir, and helped shape Jewish political history.

A further loss of communal confidence was registered in 1992, which marked not only the quincentennial of Christopher Columbus’s first voyage to America but also the centenary of the American Jewish Historical Society, which commemorated the anniversary with the publication of a five-volume scholarly history, *The Jewish People in America*. But Edward S. Shapiro, the author of the final volume, was hardly in a festive mood; and he could not bring himself to conclude the saga on a note of triumphalism. “The price of a remarkable economic and social ascent had been the attenuation of Jewish identity,” Shapiro noted. What threatened this model minority was neither antagonism from without nor apostasy from within, but rather the “apathy” and disaffiliation of vast numbers of American Jews. High rates of exogamy, low birthrates, and the enfeeblement of the imperatives of peoplehood led Shapiro to an inexorable “pessimism about the American Jewish future,” which “did not seem bright.”\(^{37}\)


Shapiro's book, *A Time for Healing: American Jewry since World War II*, might well have been entitled "a time for reeling" from the mounting evidence of closure. Other scholars did not beg to differ, however, from this semiofficial stamp of the sense of an ending. Arthur Hertzberg also fingered his worry beads in a one-volume survey of American Jewish history that appeared in 1989; he considered "the momentum of Jewish experience in America" to be "essentially spent." Though "ethnicity will... last for several more generations," Hertzberg conjectured, "it is well on the way to becoming memory." (Given the velocity of historical change, "several" looks like an overestimate.) Such a community could not draw only upon "what it remembers; it will persist only because of what it affirms and believes." And its religious convictions and practices rarely impressed observers. A preface to a reprinted edition eight years later reinforced Hertzberg's criticism of the hollow "inner estate" of American Jewry. Samuel C. Heilman's sociological snapshot was no more upbeat. He described "Jewish cultural integrity" as "more precarious than ever before," and feared that even those committed to sustaining tradition might find the pressures "against the actively Jewish way of life in America too powerful to ignore." Glazer, who had been analyzing the ethnic experience for four decades, identified a growing cluster of "sociologists who have persistently feared for the American Jewish future"; and he seconded them: "They have been right to be fearful." When such scholars turned prophets, they became pessimists. They contributed to what the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss called "entropology"—the science of analyzing the decline of vitality and energy.\(^{38}\)

Not until 1997, however, was an entire book consecrated to the topic of the prospect of disappearance, envisioning an uncertain future for a certain people. It was entitled, ominously, *The Vanishing American Jew*. The author was Alan M. Dershowitz, one of the most prominent and incisive public intellectuals in the Jewish community. He too acknowledged how fully the descendants of refugees from religious bigotry and economic misery now enjoyed the blessings of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. But in-

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dividual success and prosperity were imperiling communal cohe-
siveness; mobility upward (into the higher brackets) and outward
(from teeming ethnic neighborhoods) had attenuated loyalties that
looked increasingly irrational. Because younger Jews do not ant-
icipate discrimination as an impediment in their lives, Dershowitz
argued, a self-image based on victimization would no longer work.
Nor could an appreciably larger number of American Jews be ex-
pected to move to Israel, which they have tended to see less as the
fulfillment of biblical promises of national redemption than as a
refuge from the kind of oppression that could not be foreseen in
the United States. Immigrant ghettos once constituted “a complete
world,” the sociologist Louis Wirth observed in 1928, when the rest
of America often seemed terra incognita. But the actuarial tables
register the receding distance of the Old World, as ethnicity has
thinned out into “symbolic ethnicity,” and then into little if any
ethnicity at all. Its days are numbered. As the sheer density and in-
tensity of communal experience inevitably fade, as other forms of
identification become more available, the answer one youngster
gave to a question that Dershowitz posed — are you Jewish? — will
become commonplace: “Only on my parents’ side.”

By the onset of the twenty-first century, whatever made it possi-
bile to be Jewish — and to operate within a Jewish culture — without
Judaism was fading rapidly. A century earlier, secularism had been
a viable form of Jewish identity. For example, a supernova in the
firmament of the Yiddish theater, Boris Thomashefsky, never
bothered to attend synagogue. Though he frequently visited Eu-
rope, Thomashefsky never managed to visit Palestine, but did not
thereby cease to be a culture hero, much less a Jew. The “non-
Jewish Jew” was also a familiar figure, especially among the intel-
ligentsia. He sought to emancipate humanity, yet sprang from a rec-
nognizable and particular minority. In 1930, Freud asked himself, in
agreeing to write the introduction to the Hebrew edition of Totem
and Taboo: “What is left to you that is Jewish?” And his answer was:
“The essence.” The discoverer of the talking cure noted that he
“could not now express that essence clearly in words,” however.

40 Dershowitz, Vanishing American Jew, p. 45.
41 Sigmund Freud, Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works, tr. and ed.
No wonder that later generations would be frustrated in trying to describe that essence; and a godless, postethnic version of Jewishness is likely to expire. The historic options available to the community are reduced because the ethnic foundation that once permitted its numerous "free-thinkers" to live without Judaism has collapsed.

If the lifeline to a secularist future is foreclosed, then only religion could form the inspirational core of a viable and meaningful Jewish culture. The fate of American Jews thus depends on faith, which is their most vulnerable attribute, the role for which this minority has historically shown the least aptitude. To situate Judaism as the irreducible core of an American Jewish future makes it pivot on perhaps its weakest element. If Jewry can survive only as a religious community, an awareness of the fragility of that model drove Arthur Hertzberg to "despair." 42 This, then, is the impasse that has shaken the confidence of some of the keenest observers of American Jewry in its future.

Nevertheless, the case for pessimism has its weaknesses; and four distinct lines of argument can be advanced to rebut it.

The first challenges the pessimists as to what makes something "Jewish." Define your terms, the philosophers insist; and Judaism has been categorized normatively by the scholars who have been most apprehensive about the prospects for survival. According to Liebman, for example, an essential Judaism can be located historically, and under modern conditions Orthodoxy has come closest to it. The practices of very observant Jews, he insisted, have been most likely to ensure communal continuity. By measuring the American Jewish experience against a normative standard, Liebman posited "a point where Judaism or Jewishness might so transform itself that it can no longer be called Judaism." The alternative to that standard was ironically proposed by David Singer of the American Jewish Committee: Jewry could conceivably not vanish, thanks to "the simple device of redefining Jewishness in such a way as to include all kinds of people whose bona fides would not previously have been acceptable." According to historian Jerold S. Auerbach, "normative Judaism" entails at a minimum an historical attachment to the law and the land—and a century of Amer-

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42 Hertzberg, A Jew in America, p. 441.
ican Jewish history can be recounted as largely a betrayal of that bedrock pair of beliefs, so that a community which is only nominally Jewish remains.43

Such scholars insist that Judaism is a set of claims and practices that can in principle be defined (though perhaps not agreed upon in practice), and that such a religion can be demarcated so that inauthenticity can also be recognized. Only by specifying those boundaries and upholding what is legitimate can resistance to assimilation be mounted. A viable community is thus imperiled when too little remains of a Judaism that satisfies a normative test, when the allure of integration remorselessly subjects what is truly Jewish to downward redefinition. Its history is therefore an account of declension, predicated on essentialism, according to narrators who are among the most reflective students of American Jewry.

Their position is unconvincing, however. The strongest objection is historical: Judaism has been so manifestly affected by varying conditions over millennia that no effort to describe its essence—to fix it in place—is satisfactory. In 1936 a German rabbi published The Essence of Judaism, and it was long regarded as a classic. Its author was not Orthodox, however, as might have been guessed from Liebman’s argument, but rather Leo Baeck, whose Reform Judaism could not be reconciled with other versions of what is “normative.” His views do not exactly mirror Basic Judaism, which Milton Steinberg published eleven years later. Steinberg was a leading Conservative rabbi, with strongly Reconstructionist sympathies. Arthur Hertzberg, another Conservative rabbi, once proclaimed: “The essence of Judaism is the affirmation that the Jews are the chosen people. All else is commentary.” Yet Steinberg would have sharply disagreed, having proposed that election was a claim which could be invoked—he winced—only “half-allegorically.”44


Of course Hertzberg's credo collided with Hillel's belief that the essence of Judaism was the Golden Rule, negatively stated; all else is commentary. When Maimonides compressed Judaism into thirteen principles, other sages were shocked, though they were presumably essentialists too.

Such conflicts can only be adjudicated by stipulating that the disputants are describing not an essence but rather a changing (though not infinitely malleable) phenomenon. All essentialists run into the same difficulty. They try to freeze in place the dynamic receptivity of the Jews to the varying stimuli that have bombarded this religion. Values, symbols, and ideas have circulated so freely that Judaism could never be static for long. It evolved. The festivals that punctuate the presumably unique Jewish calendar were mostly picked up from the Canaanites, or at least adapted from them. Moses and Aaron were once Egyptian names, and it is a scholarly commonplace that even God has a history—or at least a biography. The deity of Maimonides (or of many contemporary rabbis) bears little resemblance to the bewilderingly complex Godhead of the Kabbalists, or to the volatile YHWH of the Bible.\(^45\) One famous midrash has Moses himself at a loss in grasping the discourse of the rabbis who claimed to be relaying his teachings, and both he and they—it can be safely assumed—would be mystified by the rites of American Jews who nevertheless invoke both Moses and the rabbis as forebears.\(^46\)

No system of belief based on interpretations of texts that invite further interpretations can be stabilized. "Whatever was or was not Jewish," Jacob Neusner has claimed, "a great many things have become so." That may be why Gershom Scholem—the boldest of twentieth-century historians of Judaism—denied that it had an "essence." He could not regard the Jewish religion "as a closed historical phenomenon," nor consider it "defined by or with any authority." To equate Judaism with Halakhah (Jewish law), Scholem snorted, was "utter nonsense."\(^47\) Thus, at least indirectly, he vali-

\(^{45}\)James Kugel demonstrates this in *The God of Old: Inside the Lost World of the Bible* (New York, 2003).

\(^{46}\)The midrash is in the Babylonian Talmud, Menahot 29b.

dated Martin Buber's antinomianism; and since the theology of Franz Rosenzweig downplayed Zion, Jerold Auerbach's concise formulation—Law and Land as the sine qua non—would clash rather awkwardly with the views of the two most creative and influential Jewish thinkers of twentieth-century Germany. This kind of essentialism does not nullify the Jewish identity of Buber and Rosenzweig, but has the strange effect of disparaging their claim that what they believed in should be called Judaism. Precisely because religion is not the stable expression of a people endowed with an immutable set of attributes, Judaism is unlikely to disappear anytime soon—so long as it cultivates traits like inventiveness and adaptation as well as continuity. Such a religion is a living faith, the fluid expression of a historically contingent people that happens to fancy itself eternal. Some social scientists have argued that what might be taken to be symptoms of Jewish erosion in America are more usefully seen as "transformations" of traditional Jewish forms into new, but still Jewish, patterns.48

An appreciation of Judaism in its American context provides a second way to overcome pessimism. In the United States, Judaism has not been despised; and to choose to subscribe to it has not been harmful. It has not been treated as a junior partner in the work of salvation—especially in the last half-century—but has commonly been elevated to a plane of equality with Protestantism and Catholicism in the public sphere. Admired by the Puritans of New England as the ancient sponsor of Christianity, Judaism became in the twentieth century a legitimate alternative to it. The official repudiation of homogeneity in the political culture is bound to benefit the status of Judaism. More Muslims now live in the United States, for example, than Episcopalians, whose ancestors were so decisive in creating America; and the widespread exaltation of diversity has opened up space for all sorts of minority groups. Proponents of "Anglo-conformity" do not have a chokehold on the definition of the good life; this is a culture war that the nativists of


48Calvin Goldscheider Jewish Continuity and Change: Emerging Patterns in America (Bloomington, Ind., 1985); Goldscheider, Studying the Jewish Future (Seattle, 2004).
a century ago lost. Because of the primacy of race in American public discourse, the constricted definitions of multiculturalism have barely noticed the most ancient minority of all. But Jews are not in principle discouraged from making their distinctive religion integral to any serious version of American pluralism.

That is why Diaspora history may offer no precedent. In Wilhelmine and Weimar Germany, intermarriage rates also went north, as a famously acculturated, modernized and prosperous community seemed to have earned a secure status. But unlike the ethos of contemporary America, appreciation for cultural variety was very limited. Even a liberal theorist like Max Weber was hostile to pluralism, believing that the radical assimilation of this "pariah people" was not only possible but obligatory, either by conversion or by intermarriage. He could not conceive of German Jews belonging to the Volk without identifying fully with its common consciousness and its historical memory, and could not abide the particularity and "self-segregation" of those who wished to remain affirming Jews. The erasure of Jewish difference is neither demanded nor expected in the United States, where a Jewish subculture has served to enrich the larger society rather than provoke resentment.

A third objection to the anxiety of the entropologists might be considered a version of the mind-body problem. Yes, the tiny and diminishing numbers of American Jews impose serious limits on the vitality of the community. But demography is not an independent variable in the equation of continuity, and should not be considered decisive in hampering will and imagination. Within the constraints of bodies and of circumstances, a determination to survive and thrive may prove decisive. Entropology cannot be an exact science, nor has the future generally been kind to futurologists. Opacity is the most obvious fact about the future, but that has not deterred mortals—Jews included—from predicting what cannot be known. In 1903, a year before American Jews celebrated their 250th anniversary, one of their number became the first American

to win the Nobel Prize in Physics. Albert A. Michelson brought not only nachas; he bequeathed, four years earlier, an important lesson in humility by denying that further work remained to be done in mapping out the physical universe. Not only the natural world but also human history tends to torpedo the prescience of even the most acute minds, and the final returns are not yet posted on American Jewry.

The singularity of the Jewish experience has already defeated historical generalization, and defying the odds has become a habit that has lasted for millennia. Something “mysterious, miraculous, unique” pertains to the survival of his fellow Jews, even a rationalist like Sir Isaiah Berlin asserted, “not only as a religion, but as a community, a scattered nation, a race, held together by ties of kinship, language, common memories, habits and a sense of belonging.” Historical laws have not seemed quite applicable to a people believing that it has a covenant to honor and promises to keep. Deuteronomy 7:7 blithely defies the power of demography: “Not because you are more numerous than all the peoples has the Lord attached himself to you and chosen you, for you are the smallest of all peoples.” A balanced study of the Jewish experience demonstrates agency as well as weakness, initiative as well as victimization. Jews have made their own history and not merely submitted to the domination of others. Such renewal has also been a consoling, recurrent feature of the Diaspora. There has been sterility, but powers of regeneration can be discerned as well. The overwhelming tendency toward assimilation has also activated a struggle to maintain a distinctive identity.

What seems to be happening in the United States is the equivalent of the grisly justification that the Soviet commissar played by Greta Garbo in Ninotchka (1939) gives for the purges of the 1930s. Such decimation produced “fewer but better Russians.” Many American Jews who have chosen to remain within the community have become more pious or engaged with Jewish culture than were their parents, so that a reduced population may include many who are more dedicated and knowledgeable than was an earlier generation. The empowerment of half of the Jewish population—

women—is surely a harbinger of “better” Jews. When the community celebrated its tercentenary in 1954, who could have imagined that within half a century women rabbis, cantors, and professors of Jewish studies would be taken for granted, and that even within the precincts of Orthodoxy there would be women studying the same curriculum of Talmud that had been solely a male preserve for centuries?\textsuperscript{51}

The committed core that is observant attests to the tenacity of Orthodoxy, which was once believed to be an anachronism confined to immigrants. It was supposed to be, in modern America, a “sunset industry.” When the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary, the acorn from which the oak of Yeshiva University grew, needed to hire an English instructor, the pedagogical method he employed was to get the future rabbis to translate \textit{David Copperfield}, line by line, into Yiddish—a rather eccentric form of Americanization. Falling in love with a very observant young woman in 1906, a freethinker asked the advice of the \textit{Forverts}, which believed that such a marriage might be viable. Lest more die of heartbreak, however, patriarchy was invoked: “The fact that the girl is religious and the man is not can be overcome if he has enough influence on her.” It was piety itself that was assumed to be outmoded. A 1937 survey revealed that four out of five Orthodox rabbis had been born abroad, and their capacity to replenish tradition could not be taken for granted. Yet, other than feminism, no ferment has been more striking or decisive to American Judaism than the resilience and vigor of Orthodoxy.\textsuperscript{52}

A fourth and final way to deflate pessimism is to acknowledge its ancient lineage. Survival anxieties have been recurrent, and yet—so far—they have not been validated. They are neither novel nor indigenous to America. In ancient times the Prophet Elijah complained to the Lord that “the children of Israel have forsaken Thy covenant and I, even I only, am left” (1 Kings 19:14). He could tabulate only seven thousand who “had not knelt to Baal”

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\footnotetext{\textsuperscript{51}Sylvia Barack Fishman, \textit{A Breath of Life: Feminism in the American Jewish Community} (New York, 1993).}
\end{footnotes}
(1 Kings 19:18), which suggests that idolatry threatened Judaism well before it extended itself to the suburbs. Then, during the Babylonian exile, the death-rattle of this people could be heard; its national struggles were already old. As the lament was uttered, “Our bones are dried, and our hope is lost” (Ezekiel 37:11), the Bible itself was being written or arranged. One of the constants of Jewish history is the fear that surfaces in every generation that it may be the last, the final link in the chain that bound contemporaries to ancestors. So weakened were piety and knowledge, so frayed were the threads of community, so lapsed was fidelity to the Covenant that no more Jews could be imagined. Many a sage feared that he was *aharon ha-aharonim*, the last of the last, according to a famous essay by Simon Rawidowicz. After completing *The Guide to the Perplexed*, Maimonides told scholars in southern France that only they and their neighbors were truly devoted to the Torah and the Talmud, that the future depended upon them alone. Yet even then, as he worried that his generation of Jews might be terminal, new settlements were springing up across the Rhine.  

Of the seven young Jewish intellectuals who met in Berlin in 1819 to form the Verein für Kultur und Wissenschaft des Juden (Society for the Culture and Science of the Jews), demonstrating a commitment to devote their lives to the study of a culture to which they could no longer adhere, all but one became Christians. The lone scholar who resisted conversion was Leopold Zunz, but even he doubted the viability of Judaism. Late in his life, when he met Judah Leib Gordon, a poet who wrote in Hebrew, Zunz had to ask: “And when did you live?” Nor did Gordon realize that other gifted Hebrew poets were only then reaching maturity, and he wondered: “For whom do I labor? Who will tell me that I am not the last poet of Zion, and you my last readers?” Those questions were asked in 1880, as the first wave of East European emigrants to Palestine was about to arrive. The society that they founded would rank high in purchases per capita of volumes of poetry. Rawid-

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owicz’s own essay was first published—fittingly enough—in Hebrew, in 1948, precisely when a Jewish commonwealth was being reborn. The essay, which noted the recuperative powers of a scattered people, was published almost a century after the 1852 visit of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow to the Jewish cemetery in Newport, Rhode Island. There the American poet had mourned “these Hebrews in their graves” who had not realized that “what once had been shall be no more!/The groaning earth in travail and in pain/Brings forth its races, but does not restore,/And the dead nations never rise again.”

Barring a dramatic change in demographic trends, the Altneuland (old-new land) that Theodor Herzl envisioned—the State of Israel—will very soon be home to most of the world’s Jews, for the first time in two millennia, since the destruction of the Second Temple. But American Jews can also be considered an old-new people, the legatees of an ancient faith who have adapted as easily as any minority group to modernity. They are both venerable and sophisticated. Even 350 years does not encompass the span of Jewish experience in North America. In 1585, well before the destitute group of refugees landed in Nieuw Amsterdam, Joachim Gaunse served as a mining engineer on Roanoke Island, an English colony that vanished. Gaunse himself returned to England in 1586 (and was soon charged with blasphemy). Another engineer is perhaps the paradigmatic figure of the Digital Age. While no single life is rich enough to symbolize American Jewry in all its variety, there is something symptomatic about Time magazine’s 1997 “Man of the Year.”

Born András Gróf in Budapest in 1936, he grew up in a two-room apartment. His father was a dairyman (as was Sholem Aleichem’s Tevye). When András was 5, his father disappeared; he had been conscripted into a work brigade. When András was 8, the Germans occupied the Hungarian capital. “My mother took me away,” he recalled. “She explained to me what it meant that I would have a different name, that I cannot make a mistake, that I had to

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forget my name" and pretend to be Christian. By living with a Gentile family, he survived the Nazi occupation, as did his father, who returned after the war to resume his small business under communism. Until 1945 András Gróf had been endangered as a Jew; after 1945, he was stigmatized as a member of the petty-bourgeois capitalist class. So he avoided "a profession in which a totally subjective evaluation, easily colored by political considerations, could decide the merits of my work." That is how he got into science. When the Soviets invaded Hungary in 1956, he risked his life by trying to escape into Austria—and succeeded. He reached the United States by the age of 20, and Americanized his name to Andrew Grove. So weak was his English that at the City College of New York the difference between the words "horizontal" and "vertical" eluded him. But Grove was a quick study, and by graduating first in the class of engineering students in 1960, he made the New York Times. Grove became the president and then CEO of one of the world's most influential and indispensable companies—Intel, which produces and sells 90 percent of the world's PC microprocessors. As an entrepreneur he achieved staggering wealth—and generated it too, making Intel into the seventh most profitable company on the planet. In the fiercely competitive business atmosphere of Silicon Valley, Grove coined a slogan for Intel. But the deepest personal resonance might be inferred as well: "Only the paranoid survive."

That credo can be contextualized more broadly, for Rawidowicz himself argued that the fear of finality helped the Jews master the crises that beset them, "as if Israel's incessant preparation for the end made this very end . . . impossible." In warding off the inevitable, at least for another generation, this psychological mechanism may have facilitated the triumph over time. His conclusion offers reassurance: "A nation dying for thousands of years means a living nation. Our incessant dying means uninterrupted living, rising, standing up, beginning anew." Thus the predictions of doom have been forestalled if not falsified.

Whether American Jewry would sustain that pattern was made


especially problematic because the very tolerance and amiability that have come to be so characteristic of the nation have lowered—though not eliminated—the defense mechanisms that once fortified the instincts of survival. Because the sense of exile has largely evaporated in the United States, where Jews no longer feel on probation, a sensibility once permeated with uncertainty and wariness is no longer conspicuous. As one discriminatory barrier after another was shattered, as one pinnacle after another was scaled, Jewry could find its faith in America vindicated—and yet the power to resist assimilation therefore seemed to shrivel.

The virtues that the community has celebrated may well be handicaps in its effort to endure, and the conditions that have enabled it to achieve so much imperil it now. The very litany of blessings for which the community could be thankful can be blamed for clouding its future. For the pressures that may well justify pessimism are not external, and the prognosis in the Passover Haggadah that enemies arise in every generation who seek to destroy us has not applied to the United States. Jews have somehow managed to surmount “hostility,” Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver once remarked. But he worried that they had “not yet learned how to resist prosperity . [and] keep our soul intact under freedom and opulence.” That warning flare was sent up eight decades ago; it continues to cast an inescapable light on the American Jewish condition.