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## THE KENITES OF AMERICA

### *The Jewish Position in American Society*

#### *The Opening of The Post-Modern Era*

The American Jewish community of today stands at the threshold of the post-modern era. World War II brought an end to the modern era begun some 300 years earlier. In creating the world of today, the events of that era, born out of 17th century revolution in science, technology, politics, and religion, brought radical changes for world Jewry. First and foremost, the Jewish community was transformed from a semi-autonomous ghettoized corporation, a "nation within a nation," possessing substantial powers over its own members, into a voluntaristic association of emancipated Jews who were granted full citizenship as individuals in the larger societies of which they were a part.

The modern era also brought a crisis for Judaism, a crisis brought on by the general de-emphasis of the religious aspect of life in the Western world as a whole and an elevation of secular science and politics into the forefront of human concern. With the break-down of the corporate structure of Jewish life, which had sustained Jewish law for over 2,000 years, and the concomitant destruction of the foundations of religious faith which had made the corporate structure reasonable, most Jews ceased to observe the Law, study it, or try to understand its meaning as a vehicle for human fulfillment.

During all of this, the Jews as individuals inherited the wider opportunities of the modern world and, utilizing skills developed during centuries of struggle for sheer survival, rapidly rose to pre-eminent positions in secular society. Subsequently, however, European society rejected the Jews, turning the welcome of

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emancipation into anti-Semitism and destruction. In turn, the twentieth century has been characterized by our people's virtual abandonment of Europe. In the final two generations of the modern era, we have seen our people establish the State of Israel, create a great new Jewish community in the New World, and, in the process, make an effort to make peace with their Jewish heritage.

The modern era lasted as long as epochs of human history do. It was brought to an end by the events of the first half of the 20th century in the thunder and fire of war and holocaust and through the creation of a radically new technology. Today we have a new set of problems before us, problems which have their roots in the era just ended, but which reflect the needs and concerns of a new generation that has grown up in a society radically different from that which produced previous generations, even previous generations of modern Jews.

This change of eras is just becoming apparent to American Jewry. In the past few years, we have become disturbed by a number of trends on the American Jewish scene which have brought clouds to an ostensibly clear horizon. Though many of our leaders keep reassuring us that Jewish life in America was never stronger and its future never brighter, their assurances are based on assumptions that the new generation of American Jews is simply a continuation of the previous generations which had adjusted, albeit imperfectly, to the modern world. I would contend that this is not the case, that we are faced with new phenomena, that the Jewish community of tomorrow will succeed only insofar as it comes to grips with these new phenomena.

## *The Problems of the Post-Modern Era*

What are some of these new phenomena? In the first place, the struggle for Jewish self-acceptance common during the modern era is no longer with us to a significant degree. Most American Jews of the generation that has emerged since 1950 accept their Jewish birth as a matter of course. They accept their Jewish position but do not care about their Jewishness. No longer negative towards Judaism, their reaction is best characterized as

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apathetic.

In this respect, most of the new Jews are as secularist as the most secular elements in American society. They are not like the secularists of a generation or two ago who were militant in their opposition to organized religion. Indeed, many of today's Jews are nominally affiliated with the synagogue, but like their American counterparts, among the urban, upper middle-class college graduates in the professions or the big organizations, the religious dimension is tangential to their lives, relatively insignificant as an influence in the bulk of their concerns.

The new generation is as assimilated into American society as possible. The rise of the new religious pluralism in which Jews identifying with the Jewish faith achieve the same status as Catholics identifying with Catholicism or Protestants identifying with recognized Protestant denominations has made it possible for our people to assimilate even into the social patterns of American society. Thus, even when Jews segregate themselves among their own kind, the standards they embrace are not significantly different from the standards of non-Jews of the same socio-economic class.

American Jews reflect their class background in another way. The Jewish reproduction rate is very low, as is customary in an upper income group. At the same time, the increased propinquity of Jews and non-Jews at marrying ages has led to a rising intermarriage rate. This combination of factors has caused the leveling off of the Jewish population at slightly above five and a half million. Though we are not decreasing in absolute numbers, our virtually static population is decreasing as a percentage of the total American population. Just 15 years ago, we stood at slightly over 3% of the population of the U.S.: 5.3 million in a total population of 140,000,000. Today we represent 2.9% of a burgeoning America of 200,000,000 people.

On a different plane, Jewish ignorance of Judaism is at a new high in Jewish history. Public school educators are telling America that people who have less than five years of education should be considered functionally illiterate. Very few young American Jews have more than 5 years of Jewish education. Thus, our young people, even those who boast of having gone to Hebrew

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school for several years, are, in effect, functionally illiterate as Jews, no longer satisfied with maintaining ethnic ties that appear meaningless, yet unable to see the values of Judaism for lack of Jewish knowledge.

Partly because of this widespread functional illiteracy, recruitment of Jewish leadership has become very difficult. Consequently, even where Jews have joined synagogues or have attempted to acquire a Jewish education, they are faced with the problem of securing the assistance of high quality personnel trained to render these services and professionally committed to doing so. In a secularized society, vocations that smack of the religious life do not possess high status and in any society, low status positions are not easily filled.

## *Facing the Facts of Jewish Life*

Assuming our continued interest in the creative survival of the Jewish people, what steps must American Jewry take to mobilize our surviving remnant, mount an assault on the minds of our apathetic millions and hopefully create a Jewish community that will be something more than a cult, useful primarily in providing a point of religious identification for people born of Jewish ancestry?

In the first place, we must become aware that we are a minority in the U.S. It is very comforting to recognize that Judaism is accorded a place of equality alongside Catholicism and Protestantism. Indeed we would not wish otherwise. But it is dangerous for us to delude ourselves into believing that equality of status means equality of situation. Though we are rapidly becoming like "all the nations" and are losing many of the qualities that differentiate us from the non-Jewish community, we cannot afford such a luxury. Regardless of the moral considerations involved — which are of greatest importance — our sheer physical survival requires us to consider ourselves as being different. Sixty-five million Protestants and forty-six million Catholics can afford heavy losses in their respective populations through apathy, indifference, or inter-marriage. Five and a half million Jews cannot. Recognizing this, we must shape for

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ourselves a position in the American society that is not only consonant with our equality of status but equally consonant with our position as a very small minority indeed.

This step is possible only now that we have crystallized our position in American society as a whole. Only with the attainment of reasonable equality are we able to develop a system whereby we may remain reasonably different and make some unique contribution of value to the larger society. To that end, we must become aware of our internal deficiencies as a Jewish community and as individual Jews. We cannot tolerate a Polyanish attitude on the part of our leaders or on our own part toward our situation. We must recognize where our difficulties lie and quite honestly undertake a general re-appraisal of Jewish life in this country, even at the risk of alienating those offended by its results.

Finally, we must develop appropriate methods to deal with our internal deficiencies. In some cases, in order to come to grips with post-modern life, we must be willing to be bold in interpreting Jewish law and tradition. But we must be prepared to reaffirm an ancient truth about Jewish tradition: that while eras come and eras go, the tradition as a dynamic whole remains valid, useful, and highly desirable as a means of coping with the human condition. It is not our obligation to weigh Jewish tradition on the one side and the demands of the world around us on the other, and then adjust the former to the latter. Rather, we must recognize that our tradition is frequently valid exactly where modernism is in error.

So long as we claim to accept the insights of Jewish tradition we must accept the fact that the tradition also commits us to be rebels against contemporary idolatries and accept the burden of rebellion willingly. Fortunately, Jewish tradition itself, which has helped the Jewish people survive so many changes of era over the past 3,500 years, can be our guide in this case, as in so many others. Since we are old hands at surviving transitions which have destroyed most of the other nations of the world it would be quite surprising if we had not developed a range of techniques for surviving them.

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### *The Kenite Example*

Our tradition provides us with a means to redefine our position as a small minority in American society without turning to out-moded concepts of ghettoization. When the Israelites left Egypt and resettled themselves in the Promised Land, a small tribe known as the Kenites accompanied them. We know little about the Kenites. It is believed that they were a tribe of wandering iron-smiths who joined with the Israelites, helped them in the conquest of Canaan, and then "settled" in their nomadic way in the Negev where they preserved a separate identity for at least 700 years. The Israelites accepted the Kenites as partners because the Kenites accepted the essential values of Israelite civilization. They accepted the monotheism of Moses, the ethical values of the prophets, and the political concerns of the Israelites as a whole. At the same time, the Kenites felt that their way of life offered them a better way to translate those values into reality within the large context of Israelite society, and therefore, unlike other tribes who accompanied the Israelites to Canaan, refused to assimilate among their hosts but held fast to their own way of life. And, indeed, it appears that they were substantially correct in their evaluation. When the Israelites succumbed to idol worship, the Kenites seem to have remained steadfast in their belief in the Lord. The prophet Elijah found them to be valuable allies in his war against the *Be'alim*. Still later, the prophet Jeremiah discovered that the Kenite observance of very strict rituals designed to reinforce the common values they shared with the Israelites kept them on the straight path while his brethren had deviated substantially.

Ultimately, it seems that the Kenites did merge with the Israelites, but only after the Babylonian exile had ended the possibility for their separate survival. By that time, they had done much to convert the Israelites to their notions of rigid maintenance of tradition through observance in order to maintain the values which the tradition fostered.

*We must become the Kenites of America.* One of the reasons we are so at home in this country is that there is relatively little difference between the bed-rock moral values of the American

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tradition and those of the Jewish tradition. Many of the former, indeed, were taken nearly whole from the same Biblical sources which provide the foundations of Jewish civilization. Therefore, when we call for the maintenance of Jewish life in America, we do not ask for separation as a rejection of the real moral values of our country, but separation to better fulfill the demands of those common values which today are under terrible assault. Thus, we may say to the best elements in American society as the Kenites said to Israelite society, "We are with you in spirit but we will make our shared values more effective by maintaining our own tradition as well as those we share with you and by implementing those values through that tradition." Since I believe that our tradition offers the most practical way to implement those values, I believe that ultimately we may even hope to have an influence on the larger American society by maintaining it.

### *The Chavurah Technique*

Becoming the Kenites of America demands not only a decision to be different on our part, but internal reform of Jewish life to make "being different" meaningful. The task of internal reform will undoubtedly be difficult but once again, Jewish tradition provides us with some guidelines as to how to go about it. When Judaism was threatened by the pressures of Hellenism, a great and attractive civilization that flourished 2,000 years ago and drew many Jews into its orbit and away from the Jewish way of life, the leaders of our people organized a revolution to restore Jewish life from within the Jewish People itself. Those among the Jewish People of that day who were concerned with creative survival of the Jewish People, separated themselves sufficiently from the crowd to constitute themselves in separate cells within the Jewish body politic. These cells or fellowships — *chavurot* — were composed of people who undertook to observe a more rigorous code of discipline than their fellows, as the Kenites had maintained a more rigorous tradition several hundred years earlier. By observing the more rigorous laws of the oral tradition and demonstrating its value, they set higher

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standards for the community as a whole. These *chavurot*, led by the Pharisees (whose very Hebrew name — *P'rushim* — refers to those who separate themselves from the run-of-the-mill life of the community) ultimately restored the frame-work of Jewish law, revolutionized its content, and restored the Jewish community. Now these *chavurot*, these Pharisees, did not separate themselves to go into isolation — to reject the world and its problems — but did so only in order to regroup their forces and find new strength, so as to return to the community and to seize control of it. To put it differently, they removed themselves from the active life of the city in order to rebuild the city from within the city's walls. Jacob Neusner has discussed the impact of these *chavurot* elsewhere, particularly in his book, *Fellowship in Judaism*.

As Neusner has suggested, today we, too, must create such *chavurot* as a pre-requisite to the reconstruction of contemporary Jewish life. Those of us who are seriously committed to maintaining a meaningful and viable Jewish life, who believe that the Jewish way of translating the enduring values of our two civilizations into reality is the best way for us to do so, must constitute ourselves into *chavurot* which will commit us to a higher level of Jewish observance, to a searching for improvement in Jewish patterns, and to an obligation to render service to the larger Jewish community as well. Every synagogue, every Jewish organization must develop such *chavurot* within it, whose members will constantly be working to strengthen their Jewish lives and the Jewish life of the entire synagogue, the whole organization, the entire community — to once again rebuild the city from within.

## *The Home as Foundation*

These *chavurot* cannot be built simply through organizations. Members of such *chavurot* will be found only among those people who have come from meaningful Jewish environments or who have created such environments for themselves. The center of any meaningful Jewish environment must be the Jewish home. In recent years, there has been considerable discussion as to



where the center of Jewish life lies. The Zionists claim that Israel lies at the center of Jewish life, the fund-raisers believe that their institutions deserve centrality, partisans of the synagogue claim that the synagogue occupies the central position. The indispensability of Israel, the fund-raising institutions and the synagogues need not be argued. All three represent vital pillars of Jewish life. But the center of Jewish life must be, and has always been, the Jewish home where traditional Jewish practices are maintained within a generally Jewish atmosphere. Organizations do not create committed people so much as committed people create organizations, and such people are shaped and molded, first and foremost, in their homes.

While acknowledging this perennial truth, we must also acknowledge our current problem. In the past, the Jewish home was protected by surrounding layers of an intensely Jewish environment, not exposed to the full pressures of the Open Society as is the Jewish home today. Its ability to transmit a Jewish way of life was no doubt greatly enhanced by the protective framework of the larger Jewish community. Still, even with that kind of community, the survival of the Jew was made possible because they were able to create little homelands within the sanctity of hearth and fireside as the Kenites did in their tents.

Though today the environment surrounding the Jewish home is not protective, the necessary role of the home has not changed. The Open Society only makes the task of the Jewish home more difficult. It also makes it more vital. Our age does not give the Jewish home the right to delegate its tasks to other institutions no matter how important they may be; on the contrary, we must find ways to use those other institutions in such a way as to provide as much protection as possible for the home.

The development of *chavurot* and their location within a community that has opted to be different may possibly provide some additional protection for authentic Jewish home life. Existing experience with *chavurot*, limited as it is, does indicate that the Jewish home life of *chavurot* members is strengthened. Acceptance of the validity of Jewish difference will undoubtedly contribute to the ability of such existing institutions as the synagogue, the school, the center, and the communal organization

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to provide more protection than they can now, when their "constituents" demand that they be more like their non-Jewish counterparts rather than different.

Becoming the Kenites of America will not be an easy task. It is an unprecedented one that will involve pioneering on the part of those few of us who care both about this country and our people. Combining these two concerns is our problem and our hope.