BICENTENNIAL SYMPOSIUM:
THE JEW IN AMERICA

During the period of the American Bicentennial celebration, many questions have been posed concerning the past, present and future of American culture. We are happy to present a symposium dealing with the Jewish experience in American culture and to offer our readers the views of four distinguished rabbis on important questions. The participants are: Rabbi Emanuel Feldman of Congregation Beth Jacob in Atlanta, Georgia; Rabbi David Glicksman, Congregation Etz Ahaim of Highland Park, New Jersey; Rabbi Shubert Spero of the Young Israel of Cleveland, Ohio; and Rabbi Israel Tabak of Shaarei Zion Congregation of Baltimore, Maryland. — M.D.A.

Jewish life has existed in America since 1654. One scholar has recently asserted that the “golden age” of American Jewry is yet to come. What is your reaction to this statement?

TABAK:
When we speak of Jewish life in America, we have to bear in mind that the figure of 300 years is but an historic landmark; in reality the Jewish community in this country, as a community, is comparatively young.

The twenty-three souls that came from Brazil to New Amsterdam when the Portuguese conquered their city of refuge, met with all sorts of discriminations, and because of religious restrictions and prejudices, their numbers remained rather sparse. For several generations, therefore, they had little impact upon America’s development. It took a considerable period of time before these pioneers, the founding fathers of the Spanish Portuguese Synagogue of New York, organized a congregation and were permitted to build a synagogue for public worship. For nearly 200 years, the Spanish-Portuguese Synagogue was the only substantial congregation of size and influence in the city of New York.

The German Jews that followed the Sephardic settlers did not come to America in sufficiently large numbers to constitute a community. Thus in speaking of American Jewry we must consider the Jewish immigrants that came to this country in large numbers from Eastern Europe by the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries.

These immigrants brought with them a rich cultural tradition which they transplanted on American soil with a certain measure of success. Viewed from this perspective, Jewish life in this country is barely one hundred years old. This is a comparatively short period of time in the long history of our people. How can we expect a “golden age” to grow and develop in such a limited period of time; and particularly
when we are dealing with a Jewish population of such diverse and heterogeneous background?

The “three pillars” upon which historic Jewish communities were founded, Torah, Avodah and Gemilut Hassadim, served as a pattern for the American Jewish community as well. Unlike other communities, however, the order of priorities was reversed here. Instead of Torah forming the foundation of the community structure, it happened to serve as a super-structure instead.

The Spanish-Portuguese Jews began to establish charitable societies because of their precarious circumstances. They organized committees for self help, such as free loan funds, sick relief groups, Hhevrah Kadishah societies that acquired their own cemeteries, and other similar forms of “Gemilut Hassadim.”

The German Jews, who formed a second wave of immigration, began by building synagogues and temples a short time after their arrival; it may be said that that was their major contribution to Jewish civilization in the United States.

Torah, the most vital of the “three pillars” of Judaism, did not come to this country until the East European Jews came. The concept of yeshivot and day schools were brought by Polish and Russian immigrants who came to America but two or three generations ago. Hence, the assertion that the “golden age” of American Jewry is yet to come has validity. We must remember, however, that we have only laid the foundation. To build the superstructures of a true Torah civilization in America will take another generation of persistent and dedicated effort on a larger scale and with much wider horizons. Only then may we hope to insure a “golden” future for American Israel.

Spero:

Speculations as to American Jewry’s “golden age” are based upon a cluster of unstated assumptions and, ultimately, upon a rather oversimplified philosophy of Jewish history. Those who view periods of Jewish history as “golden ages” see Jewish Diaspora history as a series of opportunities for the Jewish creative genius (mainly literary) to express itself and thus contribute to a growing and evolving Jewish literature. This is somehow considered the Jewish contribution to civilization. Thus Alexandrian Jewry gave us the Septuagint and Philo, Babylonian Jewry gave us the Talmud and Spanish Jewry gave us grammarians, philosophers and poets, etc. Given this overview and the numbers together with the generally favorable conditions of American Jewry one might indeed expect a “golden age” for American Jewry or even argue that it is long overdue.

The simple truth, however, is that culture, even Jewish culture, is rarely generated except when a people, organically living by its forms and values, experience some deeply felt inner need or feel impelled to respond to the challenge of some rival culture. These are the conditions which account for the “golden ages” we have had in the past. There may not be a “gold-
en age" at all in the absence of these conditions. It is doubtful that American Jewry can be prodded into a "golden age" by generously endowed foundations or even by offering prize money for every Ph.D. thesis written on a Jewish theme.

But perhaps we should consider a philosophy of history which would enable us to view American Jewry not as yet another Diaspora community laboring to bring forth a "golden age" nusach America, but as a ripe fruit of a Providential plan of a millennial duration. In the "fullness of time" even while the Lord was working to keep the Holy Land ready for Israel's return, He led His people through the "long march" from the Orient to the West; to the frontiers of science, technology and human freedom in America, where our experience in post-industrial society must be seen as one long hakhsharah for settlement in Israel. The American Jew must see himself as the community, divinely appointed to provide the best-trained, most human material for the restored Jewish state which is today a land in desperate search of another two million sons and daughters.

In terms of affluence, numbers and freedom, the American Jewish community in 1976 has certainly reached royal estate — "but who knows if we have not attained royal estate for a time such as this." In truth, there is only one "golden age" and in heeding the Messianic call for aliyah from a Zion restored, the American Jewish community may yet bring us all closer to it.

GLICKSMAN:

Is the "golden age" of American Judaism yet to come? This question is most difficult to answer. We are living at a time when changes occur at such rapid speed that accurate predictions are impossible. Who would have anticipated thirty years ago the existence of a flourishing American Orthodox community in 1976? Who could have foreseen the awakening of a generation of young Soviet Jews who, despite their isolation from Jewish life, yearn to identify themselves and live as Jews.

Indeed, the future American Jewish community will be unique in that it will consist of native Jews who will have forgotten the immigrant experience. While this is by and large the case today as well, we are still dominated by cultural and ethnic patterns that were brought to these shores by our immigrant parents or grandparents. Many of these patterns will be lost to future generations. While the Jewish community of tomorrow will inherit the institutions and communal structures that were established by previous generations, their survival as Jews will depend upon patterns which they will develop on their own.

American Jewry is beset by many problems which portend its doom. The low Jewish birthrate and high rate of assimilation do not present an optimistic picture of a future for American Jewry. Yet there are some bright spots such as the return of many of our youth, which give us hope for a positive future.

History has a way of playing
tricks on us. Despite the problems which we have, there is room for hope. As Jews who believe in and work towards *netsah Yisrael*, we cannot abandon this faith.

*In the early period of American history, national values in many ways corresponded to Jewish religious values. Today, a religious Jew often finds himself at odds with our society's values. What effect does this tension have on Jewish life, and how should we respond to the difficulties it creates?*

**FELDMAN:**

The spurious identification of Judaism with democracy, and by extension with American ideals, was never helpful to the vigor and integrity of Jewish life. If Judaism and American ideals are in fact synonymous, why be Jewish? One might as well become a full-fledged American and be done with it: the discomforts and inconveniences of being part of a separate and distinct way of life are only a burden when one can, in good conscience, join the majority. If the values and ideals of being a Jew and being an American are identical, why not be consistent and make the correspondence complete by dropping off all excess Jewish baggage at the next stop? This is precisely what has happened!

Nothing more salutary for the future of Jewry in America could have occurred than the slowly dawning realization of the past several years that America's values are not always at one with the Torah's.

This can only enhance Jewish life and enrich America as well. Whether American Jewry will achieve a "golden age," as posed earlier is doubtful, but that American Jewish life can grow and develop into more committed forms, and that the perceived divergence of American and Jewish ideals is part of this growth—this is, for me, without question. The fact is that the two were never in consonance. America has always operated under a different rhythm—the immediate, the now compared to Judaism's *sub specie aeternitatis*. There is a different view of time. America really has no past compared to Judaism's 4,000 year history, America is a frontier-oriented and pragmatic self-reliant compared to Judaism's reliance on other forces and its eye on Jewish eternity. The attempts to coopt American ideals for Judaism were without basis from the start; they never did, in my opinion, "correspond to Judaic values." (Now that the "right," for example, is more acceptable in American politics, liberalism, once the quintessence of Judaism, is seen by some Jewish apologists as being somehow un-Jewish, while conservatism is found to be more in the "spirit of Jewish values.")

It is in the recognition of the uniqueness of the way of Torah that the ultimate flowering of Jewry lies. This current recognition presents an opportunity to turn inward and to find out who we are, and to act upon it.

**SPERO:**

The response of the religious Jew living in America to the values of
his society has taken different forms over the years depending mainly upon his self-image as a Jew and his perception of America. The basic challenge of this country has consisted in its being an almost perfect realization of what Jacob Katz has called the “neutral society” in which the citizen’s ethnic and religious identity are irrelevant to his participation in the economic, cultural, and social life. The long-held popular concept of what America demanded for such equality was embodied in what Marshal Sklare has called the “American-Jewish social-contract,” i.e., that Jewishness was to be a “private matter.” Religious practices were to be limited to the narrowly conceived religious sphere; home, synagogue, religious school and “Jews would not routinely appear in public as Jews.” This erroneous assumption (“erroneous” in the sense that American society did not really require this) was matched by an even more mistaken perception that one’s Jewishness could be adequately nourished by such an arrangement. The ethnic-national component of Judaism on the one hand and the heavy demands of Jewish knowledge and training on the other, required that Jews take their Jewishness into the streets and marketplaces (for example, in seeking political support for Israel) and politely refuse the use of valuable American services (for example, the public schools in favor of a network of Jewish day schools).

The rise of a modern Orthodoxy in America with a more profound understanding of America, as a land of free option and of its own Jewish obligations, coincided with the World War II arrival of “refugees” who, as compared to the early “settlers” gave primacy to their Jewishness and with the emergence of second and third generation American Jews secure enough in their American identity to reject the “melting pot” theory.

In one fundamental respect, however, the modern Orthodox American Jew is at one with the earliest Jewish arrivals in Colonial days. Like them we seek to be an integrated community and not an isolated one as is the Amish community. Unlike our Hasidic groups in Williamsburgh and Crown Heights we wish to participate not only in the general economic sphere but in the cultural arena as well and even on the social level to a degree compatible with the norms of Halakhah. The degree of assimilation sought after by modern Orthodox American Jews (creative involvement in the university, theater, arts, in dress and living habits) is not a “compromise” we make in order to “make it” economically but is a well-formed decision based upon a considered judgment as to what is the Torah ideal.

American Orthodoxy has turned the corner; it has found a workable formula not only for creative survival but for eventual emergence as the most viable form of American Judaism.

Aliyah to Israel is often projected as a desirable goal for American Jews. Yet, aliyah may have detrimental effects on American Jewry, especially if our most idealistic peo-
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ple leave. As Jewish religious leaders in the United States, how are we to deal with this issue?

TABAK:
Most American Jewish leaders have come to the conclusion that Israel will influence Diaspora Jewry with increasing intensity as time goes on. It is, therefore, of vital interest to us here that Israel be strong spiritually and culturally as well as economically and militarily. For this reason, we have been encouraging aliyah to Israel without regard to its effects on the American Jewish community. It is no wonder then that the non-Orthodox movements in America have been working so feverishly to establish educational centers and spiritual beach-heads, as it were, in Israel.

The Talmud answered the question what will happen to American Jewry if our most idealistic people leave for Israel: “parnass lefidar,” every generation has the leaders it deserves. A community as large, as wealthy, and as powerful as the American Jewish community should be in a position to train enough qualified men and women to occupy positions of leadership here as well as in Israel. If we have to begrudge Israel the modest aliyah that it receives from America, there is something radically wrong with our community.

We live, moreover, in a world which is governed by priorities. Ever since the State of Israel was born, communities the world over have given priority to Israel over their own local needs; communities that have not done so have been remiss in their obligations to Klal Yisrael.

SPERO:
The possible detrimental effects of massive aliyah on American Jewry ought not to concern us even as it should not have concerned the leaders of Babylonian Jewry in responding to the calls of Ezra and Nehemia for aliyah.

During the past century and a half, various movements in Judaism have emerged in the United States. Orthodoxy now finds itself as a minority group within American Jewry. Is it possible for Orthodoxy to regain the allegiance of the majority of American Jews in the foreseeable future? What should we be doing to increase the number of observant Jews?

FELDMAN:
May I take issue with the phrasing of the question? I find it a bit tendentious, betraying an unbecoming allegiance to statistics. It is not the Orthodox who are a minority group within American Jewry; rather, it is Jews who are committed to the Torah way of life who are the minority. Thus it is not a question of Orthodoxy as a movement “regaining the allegiance of the majority of American Jews.” It is a question of gaining their allegiance for the Torah way, regardless of labels. The real question is the last one: What should we be doing to increase the number of observant Jews?

The truth is that the masses of Jews today do not have an anti-Torah bias. Observant Jewry — the
There are thousands of families who consider themselves Orthodox, even though they have no formal affiliation with Orthodox congregations. Their ties to the synagogue may be by way of sisterhood, brotherhood, yahrzeit observance, ownership of lots in Orthodox cemeteries, synagogue attendance on High Holy Days or similar forms of attachment to Orthodox organizations. When we include these families, the total would no doubt add up to a majority of the Jewish population.

If, on the other hand, we define Orthodoxy to include only shomerei Shabbat and those who are observant in other areas of yahadut, then we were always a minority group in America, and I am afraid we shall continue to enjoy that status for some time to come.

I prefer being part of a vibrant and vigorous minority which is dynamic and creative with a well-informed and cultured laity rather than being part of a majority of watered-down, uncommitted Jews who are candidates for assimilation and whose children can't see the difference between Judaism and other creeds on the campus.

It is the Orthodox Jewish minority who have established, in this country, an impressive list of movements and institutions such as Torah Umesorah, Yeshiva University, the Young Israel, the Orthodox Union with its youth movement and kashrut service, the Rabbinical Council, and the Hasidic movement with its colorful variety of folkways and philosophies.

Among the many suggestions as to how to increase the number of
observant Jews, I should like to add the following:

1. Let us make day school education available to larger groups of children by reducing tuition and offering scholarships;

2. Our synagogues should be Orthodox and not “modern” Orthodox in order to attract the younger element who prefer the historic synagogue to the so-called Americanized version of it;

3. We should plan innovative educational programs in the synagogue to answer the needs of our youth.

Glicksmann:

If what one means by “allegiance” is total observance of commandments on the part of the vast majority of American Jews, this may be a wonderful goal but beyond our reach. Yet Orthodoxy does have a message which can appeal to the majority of American Jews, namely that it is the voice of authenticity and stability in an age of phoniness and rootlessness. All sensitive people are upset by compromises and the corruption of values in our society. They yearn for simple virtues and truth. Many have feelings of alienation and rootlessness due to the mobility and rapid changes that are occurring in society. Orthodoxy can teach such individuals that there is one area in life where there is stability, order and discipline. There is one “island” in the vast sea of life where one may link himself with the past and with others in the Torah community who share the desires for stability and discipline. These links are not severed by time or geographical changes. These roots may be established in any place and at any time.

Even the non-observant Jew can relate to such a message and even to the practice of some mitzvot on increasing levels. The approach of Lubavitch and other movements which seek to bring the alienated Jewish masses closer to the sources of Judaism can be effective in bringing this message across.

The position of Jewish clergy in the United States has changed considerably over the centuries. In the early years, hazzanim were very much at the mercy of the lay leaders. Later, the rabbi emerged as a guiding force in the community. Do you think the rabbis of today are in fact “spiritual leaders”? Do you foresee or recommend any major changes in the style, responsibilities and goals of the Orthodox rabbinate?

Feldman:

The Orthodox rabbinate has by and large successfully resisted the attempts to Protestantize it. While the non-Orthodox rabbinate has in the past succumbed to priestly vestments and mitres, to solemnly intoned invocations and pontifical benedictions, the Orthodox rabbinate has displayed an instinctive revulsion to such ministerilization. And today it is no longer unusual to find non-Orthodox rabbis returning to the large woolen talit and discarding their cloths of clericalism.

In the coming years, the Orthodox rabbi must become less “rabbi”
and more rebbe, a student and teacher above all else. The rabbinate, despite the negative attitudes towards it in many very traditional and very secular circles, remains a powerful force in bringing Jews back to Torah. It can become even more so. Rabbis must realize their own strength, and not abdicate communal leadership and goal-choosing responsibilities — as they do now — to organizations and agencies which are predominantly secular and whose primary raison d'être is their (altogether creditable) raising of funds. Such groups are not equipped by background, training, or commitment to set priorities and establish the tone for a viable Jewish life. The rabbi must alter his resigned self-view as just another communal functionary who dispatches and matches, and become instead what he is in essence: the outreaching teacher and model for the community.

GLICKSMAN:

The role of the American Rabbi is conceived differently not only by different congregations but by individuals within a given congregation as well. Some look to him as a teacher or counselor. Others see him as an officiant at services. Still others regard him as a surrogate observer of religious practice. In short he is all things to all people and is judged by each individual according to the criteria governing the particular role which this individual may have in fact arbitrarily set up and which may differ from the criteria of others. The rabbi is always engaged in a struggle to rise above the existing role conflicts and to exercise spiritual leadership. Some rabbis succeed in doing so and make tremendous impacts not only within their own communities but upon the Jewish community at large. Others wishing not to “rock the boat” play their expected roles. Most rabbis do attempt to exercise their spiritual leadership to the best of their abilities but with varying success.

While the conflict of rabbinic roles is to be expected among non-Orthodox Jews whose conceptions of religion vary, there is also an ambivalent attitude towards the rabbi on the part of an increasingly sophisticated Orthodox laity. Some, being indoctrinated by the yeshivah world, look down upon the congregational rabbi. Others are influenced by their parents’ attitudes — which may have been positive or negative. Yet there are many who need to relate to a rabbi as a religious counselor and mentor not only to deal with particular questions but to deal with moral and religious conflicts.

Rabbis are needed who are competent to fill the roles expected of them; who are intellectually trained to deal with modern issues on a sophisticated level, and — most of all — who are yirai shamaim exhibiting Torah behavior in all their actions.