

“Buddha Is Not As Bad”: The Floundering of American Jewry

“Do not go gently into that good night . . . Rage, rage, against the dying of the light” —Dylan Thomas

Non-Orthodox American Jewry—the numerical majority of America’s Jews, as we are tirelessly reminded—takes itself very seriously. Toting their impressive membership numbers, they make regular pilgrimages to Israel to rail about *mi hu Yehudi* or to mount demonstrative prayer protests at the Wall. They promote the accepted buzzwords of the moment—pluralism, egalitarianism, feminism, inclusiveness. They behave as if they were vital and dynamic. “If only Israelis would look at the prospering American Jewish community,” say the non-Orthodox, “if only they would adopt our ideas of tolerance and diversity, all would be well.”

The sub-surface facts point in a different direction. Ravaged by defections and intermarriage, they face, tragically, a very unhappy prognosis. Even wholesale conversions and recognition of patrilineal descent have failed to stem the internal hemorrhaging.

Worse, they are going gently into that good night. Instead of raging about the dying of their own light, they rage only against others. The frustrations about their non-acceptance in Israel have resulted in charges of clerical domination, politics, and obscurantism, and in America their rabbis rarely miss a pulpit opportunity to excoriate the Orthodox. They become particularly vexed at those who dare suggest that they have no future unless they prescribe for their people serious and massive doses of Torah and halakha.

• • •

Here and there, however, there are hints of fresh breezes. Certain Conservative and Reform rabbis, aware of the realities, are heroically trying to introduce reforms into their communities—reforms that include *mitsvot* and classic textual study. Even more significantly, several frank self-assessments, written by prominent non-Orthodox Jews, have recently appeared in widely read national journals. Perhaps this is the vanguard of a new trend: an honest, unvarnished look at the American Jewish condition.

Writing in *Commentary* of July 1997, Jack Wertheimer, provost and professor of history at the Jewish Theological Seminary, suggests that “far from flourishing, the American Jewish community is in crisis.” American Jewry faces a number of serious problems: the huge numbers of contemporary American Jews who have abandoned all Jewish identity; the several hundred thousand who have converted to other faiths; the astonishing rate of intermarriage; the wholesale neglect of Jewish education. In addition, the acceptance by Reform of patrilineal descent poses grave consequences. Wertheimer writes that “we are rapidly approaching the time when there will be rabbis who are themselves offspring of interfaith families, and who will not be recognized by their colleagues *as Jews*.”

Despite the vaunted pluralism of American Jewry, says Wertheimer, its religious movements do not accept each other's definitions of who is a Jew, nor do they accept each other's converts. Moreover, within American Jewry there is virtually no agreement on what Jews should minimally practice or believe. Anything goes. Native American rites, Eastern religions, actual idolatry—all can fall under the rubric of America's loosely identified Judaism. The only thing all Jews agree on is what they do *not* accept: they do not accept Jesus as the Messiah. Not a few Jews have been known to experiment with Buddhism (which, according to many halakhic authorities, is out-and-out *avoda zara*), but in the eyes of masses of wavering American Jews, Buddha somehow seems not as bad as Jesus.

To further complicate matters, mantras like “inclusiveness” are invoked to welcome even non-Jews into policy-making councils of American synagogues and Jewish communal agencies. A Reform temple in Wisconsin boasts of a religious school in which a large part of the faculty, including the chairman of the school, is gentile.

The boundaries between Judaism and other religions have become fuzzy, but according to some influential American Jews, such as Alan Dershowitz, this is a good thing. “Instead of working to clarify what Judaism requires,” writes Wertheimer, “they counsel religious dilution. Instead of setting clear lines, they enjoin Jews to lower the barriers between Jewish and non-Jewish religion still further.” Concludes Wertheimer: “This way lies not pluralism, but anarchy and self extinction.”

• • •

Another remarkable article is in the May 19 *National Review*, in which Elliot Abrams, Undersecretary of State in the Reagan administration, also sees a community in decline, facing “a demographic disaster. Jews, who once made up 3.7 % of the U.S. population, have fallen to about 2 per cent. . . .” Judaism *per se* is not being observed by most American Jews, and “the substitute faiths, which were devised in an effort to stay Jewish, are failing.” And as the mortal danger to Israel seems to recede, even the State of Israel is failing as a substitute faith. Abrams declares that the only place one can find Jews who are committed to Israel these days is in a synagogue on *Shabbat*. “The faith of religious Jews, of whatever denomination, holds them in permanent covenant with God and with the land of Israel and its people. Their commitment will not weaken if the Israeli government pursues unpopular policies” Before very long, “what will be left is the covenant with God that created the Jewish people and ties them to the land of Israel—or nothing.”

Similarly, the banner of so-called “prophetic Judaism,” which was translated as support for American liberalism and a rejection of halakha and Jewish practice, has also reached a dead end. The same is true of that other substitute for faith, the Holocaust. “Commemorating the Holocaust is for many Jews quite convenient It is neither a significant commitment of time nor a life-changing passion.” The Holocaust revival has taken place “precisely during the years when intermarriage has spread, and ritual observance and synagogue affiliation have declined.” Awareness of the Holocaust, important as it is, has not had much effect on the actual behavior of American Jews.

Abrams notes that “Jewish life that is not centered on Judaism is disappearing in America, while traditional Judaism—above all, Orthodoxy, which we expected to disappear—is stubbornly holding on.” In a peroration worthy of a journal like *Tradition*, he concludes: “Jews are a people by virtue only of their Torah. They will decline if they are driven by fear of their neighbors, fear of their own traditions, and fear of the distinct identity that their covenant imposes upon them. They will survive if they cling to their Torah. It, and it alone, is for the Jews . . . a tree of life.”

• • •

All of which raises an interesting question: with such palpable internal weaknesses, why are America's non-Orthodox exerting so much pressure to export their Judaism to Israel? Can a formula that has failed to stem assimilation, intermarriage and Jewish ignorance in the Diaspora—despite huge numbers of affiliates and large infusions of money—be expected to bring religion to Israel?

The recent decision of the Israeli courts that a Reform Jew be admitted to the Religious Council of the town of Netanya is a manifestation of such pressure. Abetted by a sympathetic judiciary and the Orthodox-bashing media, this newest member of the religious council will now have a voice in the building of *mikva'ot*, in the validation of *kashrut* procedures, in the enhancement of *Shabbat* observance, in the processing of *gittin*, in the supervision of conversions, and in the election of religious judges and rabbis of municipalities. That any influence in these matters should be given to a representative of a movement whose primary historical connection with *mikva* has been to deride it; with *kashrut*, to disdain it; with *Shabbat*, to flout it; with *gittin*, to ridicule it; with conversion, to distort it; and with halakha, to reject it—is of course ludicrous. Inevitably, Isaiah's lament in 1:12 comes to mind.

But then again, perhaps it is not inappropriate that such things should take place in Israel, the only country in history that has willingly given land and weapons to those pledged to destroy it; that has with equanimity released convicted terrorists from its jails who then join the Palestinian "police" force and use Israeli weapons to kill Israeli soldiers; whose Arab Knesset members visit sworn enemies like Assad and urge Israel to surrender land to him; that has given respectability to an Arafat whose stated aim is to destroy the state and its inhabitants. In a country that has been inured to such an absurd political environment, the introduction of farce into the religious environment hardly makes a ripple.

• • •

It is nevertheless highly unlikely that the non-Orthodox political and financial pressures on Israel will ultimately be effective. The soul of Israel's Jews will not be won or lost in the courts or the media. It will be played out in the hearts of individual Israelis. And Israelis—even the secular ones—simply do not take the non-Orthodox seriously. Israelis are aware of the diluted non-

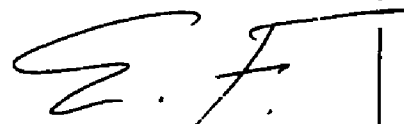
Orthodox Judaism of the Diaspora, the quickie conversions and the intermarriage and the defections. They know that the preponderance of American *aliyya* to Israel is Orthodox, and that the non-Orthodox, by and large, do not settle here. This is why even secular Israelis still identify Judaism with the Orthodox. They may not be willing to follow it in their own lives, and may even occasionally resent it, but for them this is still the authentic faith of their fathers.

Israelis do not read *Commentary* or *National Review*, but they sense instinctively what Wertheimer and Abrams have identified so perceptively: Reform and Conservative Judaism in America have led to a dead end—the natural consequence of too little attention to one's own values and too much attention to the values of the world around us. And Israelis are too level-headed to import a form of Judaism that has demonstratively failed to create or sustain Jewish Jews in America.

• • •

Rather than expend resources in exporting the dying embers to Israel, would it not be more beneficial to put these resources to work in America, to help revive what can be revived and restore what can be restored? The non-Orthodox observers who are pointing to the dire facts on the ground, and those non-Orthodox rabbis who are working to stem the tide, should not casually be dismissed. And instead of raging against the Orthodox, the non-Orthodox leadership might take to heart the salutary lesson that the best way to create a learned, devoted and passionate following is to expose people to the basics: study of Torah, practice of *mitsvot*, and faith in the God of Israel. These are not slogans or gimmicks or P.R. stunts. These are the real things, the things that work.

The loss of huge numbers of Conservative and Reform Jews is an unfolding tragedy within American Jewry. Intelligent, caring, and serious Jews will rage against the dying of the light; they surely will not go gently in that good night.



EMANUEL FELDMAN