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## THE NEW JEWISH ETHNIC

Whatever currency America as a melting pot sociology enjoyed in past has been eroded by the ethnic forces which surfaced in the late 1960's. While factors such as age, education, wealth and religious observance mark which Jews join America's growing ethnic bandwagon, clearly there exists a movement of Jews as Jews seeking power for themselves.

Even casual observation shows the rise of Jewish political ethnicism—a new breed of yarmulka-wearing activists highly visible in the media; an aggressive Jewish political clout forcing previously indifferent politicians to take their measure; the mushrooming of spontaneous grassroots organizations challenging both the political style and strategy of the Jewish “establishment.”

As is well known, Jews more than any other American group were America's liberals *par excellence*. The objectives of this country's liberal “vital center” were seen by most Jews as running parallel with their own. Why liberalism? Explanations for this behavior run the gamut from Milton Himmelfarb of *Commentary* magazine linking political liberalism with Jewish good taste (i.e., Mario Procaccino, regardless of his positions on the issues, failed to win much Jewish support in New York's 1969 mayoral election because of his *prust* (crude) mannerisms), to more standard theories based on religious messianism and heritage of anti-Semitism (i.e., liberalism presumed to stand for a high degree of social justice and fair play) to a Jewish desire to belong, to be *au courant* (liberalism being fashionable poli-

tics). How valid these arguments, or whether or not liberalism served the interest of American Jews in the past better than, let us say, conservatism or moderation does not concern us here.

Nonetheless, Jewish liberalism from World War II through the dawn of the “new politics” of the late 1960’s stood for a wide use of governmental power as a means for securing Jewish rights and advancing American society in general. This stance meant Jewish support for political reforms, civil rights, civil liberties, and internationalism. Political reform stood for fighting the urban “bosses” (most of whom were not Jewish), civil rights meant Negro voter registration and anti-discrimination laws (such statutes were also seen as fighting anti-Semitism), civil liberties provided more protection of the rights of the individual (free speech) versus those of society, and internationalism endorsed an activist United States foreign policy, particularly support for the United Nations. The main elected Jewish officeholders in that period—Senators Lehman, Javits, Ribicoff—backed these programs and liberal goals Jews felt squared with their own power interests. Furthermore, as Harvard sociologist Nathan Glazer reminds us, the dominant liberal intellectual thought in that period was positive towards America and its government, and the national Jewish organizations, which over the years have taken the tenets of liberalism more seriously than most Americans, saw anti-Semitism declining in this climate of increased governmental activism.

What brought on the falling out between the Jewish ethnics (ethnics here defined according to sociologist Andrew Greeley as “a human collectivity based on an assumption of common origin, real or imaginary”) and liberalism? Basically, the pulling up of roots by Jews was not an isolated event, but part of the overall decline of the Old Left consensus. By the early 1970’s, the Old Left was in a withered state. They were divided by the New Left on issues such as anti-Communism, the role of the university, the work ethic, the media’s relations with politics and most importantly where Jewish ethnics were concerned, the growing insecurity of urban Jews. In other words, the tenor of American politics had changed, and while after the reshuffling many Jews still told themselves they marched under the familiar liberal

banner, there were fewer and fewer issues where they could stand together with liberalism's recognized new spokesmen. To be sure, many Jews, perhaps most, did not share the discomfort of the ethnic Jews with liberalism's changed rhetoric.

How could Jews have moved away from the plight of the Blacks? For one, as has often been cited, Blacks, in their own ethnic emergence, increasingly sought to determine their future, rejecting a leading role by "outsiders," however helpful they may have been in the past. Secondly, Jews and Blacks were pitted against one another by politicians outside their own ethnic groups. The attempts by such outsiders to rectify wrongs committed against Blacks in the past were interpreted by Jews as undermining their employment prospects in the civil service and schools through the adoption of tacit ethnic quotas. Thirdly, through an unfortunate set of circumstances, Jews saw themselves threatened by the Black movement to economic and social autonomy. Bewildered not only by apparent Black rejection of their past help, but also by their alleged new role as competitors with Blacks, Jews retrenched. The conflict between Jewish conscience and ethnic self-interest was well put by William Wexler, former president of B'nai B'rith, who said on the one hand Jews didn't want "to reject the black man's quest for justice," nor, on the other, to ignore "discrimination in reverse" against Jewish businessmen, educators, social workers and others who are "visible and vulnerable in Black communities."

More than other Americans, Jews advocated non-discrimination in housing. But as soon as their neighborhoods declined they moved out. This was in contrast to other white ethnics who refused to abandon familiar turf. While erosion of urban areas did not begin in the 1960's, such decline in earlier years was steady, consistent and to that extent "evolutionary." In contrast to such slow, ongoing "evolutionary" processes, another development encouraging neighborhood change might be termed "revolutionary"—that which by dramatic events accelerated a process already underway. Here specific large-scale headline-catching phenomena were at work—tanks rolling down streets in the wake of riots, predictions of "long, hot summers"—to hasten Jewish migration from the cities.

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The Forest Hills low income scatter-site housing conflict in the early 1970's illustrated the "revolutionary" process. In the minds of opponents, to construct a large low-income development in the relatively new neighborhood of Forest Hills represented unnatural, forced decay or "revolutionary" change. How did the Jewish ethnic reaction to Forest Hills differ from previous experiences with neighborhood deterioration? In the past, self-interest was seen in individual terms—those who could afford it, picked up and ran. Here, collective action served self-interest and Jews fearing that the Forest Hills project threatened their neighborhood were forced into joint action.

Likewise, the principle of collective action as serving self-interest was shown in a new Jewish aggressiveness in competing for public anti-poverty funds. Previously, Jewish poverty was regarded by Jews themselves as a private, Jewish communal problem, and the Jewish poor were seen as a relatively small part of the Jewish population. Indicative of the failure of Jewish national organizations to cope with the poverty problem before the surge of ethnicism was the dearth of comprehensive data on poverty among Jews, an especially telling omission given currently accepted estimates of Jewish poor as numbering between 400,000-800,000.

Accordingly, pressure in the early stages for more recognition of Jewish poverty came spontaneously from the Jewish poor themselves rather than from the initiatives of national organizations. To be sure, certain factors militated against attention to poor in addition to the fact that the term "minority group" no longer in the popular mind seemed to refer to Jews. Setting up geographic bases for poverty eligibility, especially in New York City, under a system of local poverty councils hurt Jews living outside the designated areas. Since an estimated two thirds of Jewish poor are believed to be over 65 years of age, not much political activism necessary to win places on local community councils could be expected from this source. Finally, guidelines from the federal Office of Economic Opportunity as to poverty status were not applicable to the overwhelming solid family makeup of Jews.

Nevertheless, attention to Jewish poverty surfaced in Congress-

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sional hearings as well as in the grudging admission by the Office of Economic Opportunity that the charge that Jewish poor were systematically excluded from New York City's anti-poverty program "while imprecise is not totally devoid of validity." The formation of the Association of Jewish Anti-Poverty Workers as well as the cancellation of elections for poverty councils on the Sabbath also reflected the growing recognition of Jewish poverty.

Jewish institutions responded to this heightened ethnicism by taking a turn toward more parochial matters while reducing their traditional concern with secular, universalist social justice causes. Developments both within and without the Jewish community forced this shift. Organizational accountability was a watchword in the late 1960's, whether such accountability referred to students asking a greater share in university policy, in accusations against a government "credibility gap," or in consumerism. Sensitive to current political rhetoric, Jews likewise assessed their organizations from a "what's in it for us" stance. Previously, most American Jews were content not to exert too much pressure on their Jewish organizations. Describing such a Jew, Howard Singer wrote:

He is usually a member not out of persuasion but out of gregariousness, and a group insurance and cut-rate travel plans loom larger in his mind than some press release put out by the national office. If he has a complaint, he must remember to submit it to the resolutions committee three months before the convention opens next year . . .

The typical member will not go to chapter meetings. He will be content to mail his check once a year, serenely confident that the organization is "doing something for Jews and Judaism." But the handful of volunteers and professionals at the top have their own axes to grind. (*Bring Forth The Mighty Men: On Violence and the Jewish Character*: New York, Funk and Wagnalls, 1969).

Confrontation was the name of the game and the established Jewish organizations mirrored in well-worn tactics of the press release and private representations were out of their league. Even had they wanted to fight with the new public relations

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instruments, most Jewish groups lacked the activist mass memberships necessary for gaining media attention. Moreover, the passiveness of most members made it easier for organized dissidents to force the professional staff who really run the Jewish "establishment" (as opposed to lay executive boards) to redirect their priorities.

Jewish critics of Jewish organizations became standard fare. They accused their organizations of not being Jewish enough. The ethnics' heaviest assault focused on the alleged lack of emphasis of Jewish education by Jewish communal federations. Critics accused the Jewish federations of putting disproportionate value on community centers, hospitals and other social services, serving Jews and non-Jews compared with the needs of Jewish education. Challenging the religious integrity of Jewish federation fund raisers, some critics demanded that all organizational leaders prove their personal commitments to Judaism by participating in Jewish studies courses. According to the Jewish Defense League's Rabbi Meir Kahane,

At a time when the Jewish youth can look forward only to the farce of the afternoon Hebrew School which leaves him looking upon Judaism as a travesty dreamed up by a Bar Mitzvah caterer, status-seeking parents and a glittering but empty Temple, the Federation refuses to recognize the need for a maximum Jewish education.

Adding insult to injury in the minds of critics was that while major secular American Jewish organizations refused to support the burgeoning Jewish Day School movement, they also took exception to increased government support to Jewish education on grounds of church-state separation. Rabbi Hillel Levine, a graduate student at Harvard, claimed,

the priorities of organized Jewish philanthropies favor a greater mobilization of resources to combat one crack-pot anti-Semite than to deal with the Jewish illiteracy of millions of Jews.

Given this intensified ethnicism, not only was the Jewish "establishment" forced to become more "Jewish," but a proliferation of Jewish youth groups which never before existed

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sprung up. Spontaneous, unforeseen and often lacking centralized coordination, these groups took everyone by surprise, most of all the older Jewish organizations themselves. Marking this new inwardness were Free Jewish Universities, a Jewish student press service and the offering of courses in Jewish studies for credit in some 185 universities by the end of 1971.

Purist in ideology, the new Jewish youth groups stressed Jewish pride, the joy of being a Jew, Jewish education and culture (Yiddish dramatic offerings), religious observance and Jewish fellowship. They derided supposed Jewish materialism, the extravagance of Jewish social affairs and secular universalism—"Uncle Jake" (the Jewish Uncle Tom) busy fighting other people's battles while neglecting his own. *Kadima*, the Jewish student paper at the University of Illinois, bitterly protested,

Bombing the tracks of Auschwitz alone would have saved 100,000 Jewish lives. But then American bombs cost money, and you must remember that Jewish flesh is cheap. And did your father open his mouth? Even once? Why get involved, right? How about you? Like father, like son?

Stress on denominationalism, these youth held, weakened Jewish unity. "There is a suspicion that the major divisions serve organizational rather than religious purposes," claimed William Novak, editor of *Response*. The Synagogue, argued James Sleeper, a Harvard graduate student,

is simply an appendage to middle class suburban culture that arose out of the assimilationist needs of a previous generation. The young Jew today has already seen the American dream come true, and he's sick of it.

—What brought on the ethnic consciousness of these youth? The awareness stemmed both from the times and the admired actions of other Jews. While there is no underestimating the lesson of Black ethnicism in igniting Jewish consciousness (as it also spurred ethnic awareness in other groups), these youth were, after all, adolescents trying to resolve on a personal level the question "Who am I?" The Jewish ethnics by and large rejected drugs and opted for identity in terms of the group. The

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Jesus movement among Christian youth attested to the general religious revival from which the Jewish consciousness arose. Israel's amazing victory in the 1967 Six Day War and the courage of Soviet Jews in defying the Kremlin in order to gain exodus to Israel, gave the Jewish youth heroes of their own. The drama of contemporary Jewish survival battle spurred a fascination with the Hitler Holocaust.

Jewish youth had not abandoned liberalism; they simply re-directed it to a new target—Judaism. They "sat in" as they had in the past, but in new quarters, the Jewish offices. They confronted, but this time it was the Jewish "establishment." To be sure, most of their fellow young Jews remained committed to secular causes rather than Jewish ones, but the movement was unprecedented in American Jewish history, and the fervor of the believers was there to remind assimilated Jews that the tents of Jacob could still accommodate the reform spirit.

While preaching Jewish spiritual renewal, Jewish ethnicism was forced to put first things first by providing for Jewish self-protection in the decaying cities. High crime neighborhoods saw the appearance of Jewish defense and escort groups. Such moves sometimes spurred police action such as in New York City where police decoys posed as Hassidim. Other Jews having lost confidence in civic authorities turned to vigilanteism. The Jewish Defense League, most prominent such body, capitalized on the fashionability of violence as well as the natural tendency of people to seek simple answers when threatened by complex, unmanageable forces. The JDL's entrance on the Jewish scene was eased by the fragmentation of American Jewish organizational life as well as an already existing criticism of the "establishment's" failure to protect Jewish interests in earlier episodes, such as New York City's teacher strike in 1968.

The JDL and the young Jewish ethnics shared many complaints—the complacency of Jews toward other Jews, the alleged unaggressiveness of the Jewish "establishment," the urgency of Jewish physical self-protection. Both factions stressed the need of *aliya* (emigration of Jews to Israel), although for the JDL's Rabbi Kahane settlement in Israel had not only religious and cultural importance, but was necessary for Jewish

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physical survival.

I believe in the marrow of my bones that the days of the Jews in the United States are numbered and that there is coming a storm of physical brutality that portends a holocaust.

JDL's support of violence, harassment and physical threats towards Soviet officials as a legitimate means for aiding Soviet Jews was not accepted by most young activists. While Kahane was mistakenly labelled a conservative because of his anti-Communist and anti-New Left stands, he shared the view of left-of-center activists that a right-wing backlash loomed as the ultimate threat to American Jews (Kahane arguing that the right would have been sufficiently provoked by left-wing extremism).

It is no accident then that the emergence of Jewish ethnicism was paralleled by a rejection of familiar battle cries. On international issues, Jewish support for the United Nations waned as Israel faced impossible odds in receiving justice from the world body as a result of the Arab-Communist-Afro-Asian coalition. The failure of most of the American Christian community to answer more positively to Israel's case following the Six Day War came as a bitter pill to Jews championing ecumenicism. The New Left likewise fell into disrepute among the ethnics as a result of its affinity for the Arabs.

Voices arose in the American Jewish community urging a new self-interest in judging the White House—that Presidents be evaluated not only on their Southeast Asian or domestic policies, but on how many Phantoms they allowed Israel to buy. President Nixon's gains among Jewish voters in the 1972 election is attributable in no small degree to steadfast support of Israel during his first term. As for the Soviet Union, American Jewish ethnics did not minimize their protests on Soviet anti-Semitism merely to fall in line with Washington's basic goal of building bridges to the Kremlin.

The new political reality was clearest in New York City, traditionally the country's most liberal city. By the time of the 1969 Democratic Mayoral primary, Jewish distaste with "limousine liberals" for discarding their interests was so strong that Mario Procaccino bettered the showing of Abe Beame, a Jew, four

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years earlier in certain largely Jewish Assembly Districts. John Lindsay running in 1969 as the most liberal of the three Mayoral candidates received less than one-half of the Jewish votes cast and no doubt this figure would have been smaller, perhaps resulting in Lindsay's defeat, had he faced opponents with better media images. The 1969 election vote was a landmark because it was the first time New York's Jews forsook liberalism on behalf of ethnic self-interest. A good case could be made, too, for the national publicity given the largely Jewish protests over the Forest Hills housing project as being the deathblow for Lindsay's 1972 Presidential ambitions.

Where will Jewish ethnicism lead? To begin with, growing Jewish desertion from the melting pot portends more than simply one small population group beating out an identity. If Jews, who despite such strong past support for American universalism, seem to be closing ranks, other traditionally less outward looking ethnic groups probably are even more disaffected. In fact, one of the bad effects of Jewish ethnicism might be that as parochial affairs assume a higher priority, Jews (as other ethnics) will be deflected from general obligations to the body politic. As of now, this danger has not materialized.

While it is hard to judge how many Jews even loosely fall under the ethnic heading, American Jewish ethnicity did not begin with today's touted new pluralism. Jewish survivalists, Orthodox Jews who pray for the welfare of fellow Jews, Zionists and Yiddishists had trained antenna for spotting the Jewish component of current events long before the revision of melting pot sociology.

However thoroughgoing this new Jewish ethnicism, there is still the Jew on the other extreme who as a result of the breakdown of old communities, secularism and mobility flees anything Jewish. The ethnic sees these assimilated Jews as knee-jerk liberals who in their trendiness forsake not only 3,000 years of Jewish continuity, but ultimately endanger their own survival. Most Jews, however, fall somewhere in the middle rank, eschewing both ethnicism and secularism. While few of these middle level Jews take to the streets or carry placards, America's increasing ethnicism has made almost inevitable their taking note

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of their minority of Jewish activists. Furthermore, certain urban Jews who may not in the past have defined their political interests by their Jewishness—the poor, the aged, the civil servant, residents of blighted neighborhoods—have begun to accept as favorable for them also the positions the ethnics espouse. Many Jews in such vulnerable situations regard the ethnics as an idealistic vanguard, something akin to the following Black Panthers or Young Lords have among their communities, and on key issues (which politician is best for Israel) the advice of the ethnic leaders filters down.

Some analysts, in criticizing Jewish ethnicism as standing for the status quo, misunderstand this phenomenon's complexity. In asking for more governmental financing for parochial schools, increased public housing, the strengthening of anti-poverty programs and a tougher hand in combatting crime, Jewish ethnics are clearly advocating change—and on these issues they have forged alliances with other ethnic groups. Status quo thinking appears, however, in the ethnics defense of an internationalistic American foreign policy, as opposed to neo-isolationism which they fear endangers Israel, in opposition to quotas which they see as prejudicial to Jewish interests and, particularly from more Orthodox quarters, hostility to the personal and family morality positions of the fashionable counter culture.

The achievements of the ethnics include a revival of Jewish learning, the exposure of the plight of the Jewish poor, introducing a new sensitivity by politicians to Jewish problems, the spurring of older Jewish organizations to discard yesterday's weapons in fighting today's battles, a new interest in co-religionists abroad, and a greater sense of commitment to community rather than to self. Where an unknown future threatens to replace America's dying social accommodations, the response of the Jewish ethnics has been to shift the focus from universalism to "What's in it for us?" Nevertheless, the extent to which they succeed in substituting ethnicism for the slippage of the center will depend on how well America's open, tolerant society will be able to balance the demands of its many subgroups with those of the nation.