

**Azure no. 8, Autumn 5760 / 1999**

## **On the Political Stupidity of the Jews**

By Irving Kristol

Whether in America or in their own sovereign country, Jews still have no idea what statecraft is.

**T**he novelist Saul Bellow is fond of recalling a political incident from his youth. Saul, then an undergraduate at the University of Chicago, was, like so many of us in the 1930s, powerfully attracted to the ideologies of socialism, Marxism, Leninism and Trotskyism, as well as to the idea of “the Revolution.” He and a group of highly intellectual and like-minded fellow students would meet frequently at his aunt’s apartment, which was located next to the university. The meetings lasted long into the night, as abstract points of Marxism and Leninism agitated and excited these young intellectuals. Saul’s aunt, meanwhile, would try to slow things down by stuffing their mouths with tea and cakes. After the meetings broke up in the early hours of the morning, Saul’s aunt would remark to him: “Your friends, they are so smart, so smart. But stupid!” Of course, such hard-core adherence to Marxist or Leninist doctrines has declined with the years. But while the particular doctrines in question may have changed, the Jews, for the most part, have not. In Israel as well as in America, Jews to this day continue to combine an almost pathologically intense concern for politics with a seemingly equally intense inclination towards political foolishness, often crossing over into the realm of the politically suicidal. How is one to understand this very odd Jewish condition—the political stupidity of Jews?

It seems that the easiest explanation of this phenomenon is in terms of the actual political history of the Jewish people, a history which is for the most part one of political impotence. A people whose history is largely a story of powerlessness and victimization, or at least is felt to be such, is not likely to acquire the kinds of skills necessary for astute statesmanship. Neither the rabbinic nor the prophetic traditions can be of much assistance in this respect, since political thinking is inherently secular thinking, so that Jewish secular thinking about politics has traditionally focused on some splendid isolated incidents of resistance and rebellion, such as the wars of the Maccabees, and the resistance against Rome. But the memory of these incidents is hardly a sufficient basis on which to ground a real tradition of political wisdom that could teach contemporary Jews how to wield power and successfully defend Jewish interests. And the absence of such a tradition of political wisdom continues to haunt all Jewish politics, including the politics of Israeli Jews, despite the fact that they now have half a century of experience in self-government.

In fact, one of the most striking features of Israeli political discourse, when considered from the perspective of Anglo-American and European political thought, is how narrow and constricted it

is. Public discourse in Israel is often superficially sophisticated, even trendy, but it lacks genuine historical echoes, historical tonalities. Echoes of references to the traditions of Western political thought, which are common in American and Western European journalism, are relatively absent in Israel. It is not any deficiency of scholarly knowledge—Israel does have some fine academics in disciplines such as political theory and philosophy—but the presence of such individuals does not begin to repair the deficiency of Israel’s own political traditions. The main stream of Zionist political thought arose from the political thinking of nineteenth-century romantic nationalism in Central and Eastern Europe—and this is itself a movement whose shortcomings are plainly visible in Central and Eastern Europe today. In the Jewish state, as in Eastern Europe, an infusion of thought is needed from the outside; an infusion of thought, by which I mean the importation of genuine political wisdom, not just the imitation of whatever attitudes are prevailing in the West.

In this regard, it is tremendously important to translate the classics of Western political conservatism into Hebrew for the benefit of Israeli readers. It is possible that the readership of these translations will be small, but only through a serious study of this tradition will it be possible for Israelis to begin to develop a genuine understanding of the function of a conservative politics in a healthy polity.

Given the historic attitude of the European Right toward Jews, it is natural that Jews in Israel should incline to ignore the conservative political thought of other countries, thinking almost automatically in terms drawn from the European Left. And Israeli political discourse, in fact, is drenched with left-wing attitudes and assumptions. It is so drenched, in fact, that even where the socialist agenda has been largely discredited, the socialist ethos remains as powerful as ever, successfully delegitimizing any serious effort to pursue a non-socialist agenda. It is my experience that the majority of former socialists—in almost every country—remain opponents of capitalism. Socialism today is a political goal that dares not say its name, because socialism as a system has been discredited. But this does not mean that socialist societies stop being socialist. Instead, socialism takes refuge in a large variety of anti-capitalist attitudes and policies, which simply go under other names, or under no name at all. It is this type of socialism that is visible in Israel today, as well as in England and France, and elsewhere. Israel is almost singularly bereft of the kind of clear pre-socialist or post-socialist thinking that would be most useful to its leaders and citizens.

Translating such thinking into accurate and readable Hebrew is essential. Translate and publish, and the readers will come eventually. I have seen this happen in the United States and in Britain, although it does require a tremendous amount of patience to see the process through—often more patience than we can imagine. Wrong ideas, once implanted in a young person’s mind, become so plausible, so self-evident as it were, that change is hard. I remember a course I once taught at New York University on urban problems, in which we took up the issue of rent control. After a

few weeks, the students had grasped what is apparent to most people who study the problem: That, except under emergency conditions, rent control is a bad idea in both theory and practice. Nevertheless, by the time the students took their examinations at the end of the term, it became clear that at least half the class had simply forgotten what they had learned about rent control; and once again, it seemed to them to be a perfectly good idea. It is a “progressive” illusion to think that, in the marketplace of ideas, truth will always win out over error. It is truth that needs help, while error usually manages to make its own way very nicely.

So in pursuing the path to political wisdom, one needs books to read, magazines and essays and articles to read. One has to be willing to work tirelessly to produce all these books and articles until the climate of opinion slowly changes. What I am describing is actually a formula for success devised by Lenin, which I still remember from my days as a young Trotskyist. First you publish a theoretical organ, then you proceed to books and pamphlets, and finally you publish a newspaper. Once you have a newspaper that can apply the theories developed in more sophisticated publications to day-to-day politics, you are in business.

This formula does not always work, of course, and one certainly cannot expect it to work if the ideas in question are poor ones. But one of the important virtues of the conservative political tradition is that, from a literary and intellectual point of view, it is really first-rate. And this is not merely a question of one’s subjective preferences. The test of a great tradition is whether its perspective is sufficiently insightful to be of use long after it is first written, and the fact is that conservatives can continue to read and reread a good part of the literature in this tradition and profit from it. One should compare this to what happens to leftist political thinkers, who have their day and then disappear from sight. The risk of being progressive is that there is always some new version of “progress” which seeks to outgrow whatever was thought to be important by progressives a few years earlier.

Who, for example, reads Harold Laski today? When I was in college everyone read him. He was one of the world’s leading political philosophers. He was a socialist and chairman of the British Labor Party, a very intelligent man who wrote endless volumes, and of course he was Jewish. He is simply not read anymore in political science courses in the United States or in England, and his books are out of print. Yet his successor at the London School of Economics, Michael Oakeshott, who was a conservative, was able to produce essays that are still being reprinted, still being quoted and still very readable—not only because his writing was so elegant, but because the ideas contained in them were of enduring value. This is the advantage the conservative has over thinkers on the Left writing on contemporary affairs. The conservative tends to think in permanent terms, so his ideas remain relevant.

**T**he living presence of such a conservative tradition in Israel could contribute much, not only in changing the socialist atmosphere of the country. For example, it could move some to think in

ways that might assist in bridging the divide between religious and secular Jews in Israel, which is one of the most vexing curses of Israeli politics. When I first started writing on conservatism, one of my major points was the need to reconcile Adam Smith with Edmund Burke—the economics of a free market with the political sociology of a conservative society. This contradiction between the two ways of thinking is a problem for American politics, since Smith’s perspective frequently clashes with that of Burke within the Republican Party. It is obviously, and very dramatically, a problem for Israeli politics, where those who have an appreciation for the importance of freedom frequently have difficulty understanding the role played in a healthy society by tradition, and vice versa.

Yet oddly enough, Adam Smith and Edmund Burke were friends who admired each other’s writings and, to the best of our knowledge, did not see them as being in conflict or fundamentally contradictory. Moreover, throughout the nineteenth century, conservatives in Great Britain had no problem regarding them with equal respect. How did they manage it?

They managed it by being sensible and non-dogmatic, and by understanding that ideas that are incompatible in the abstract can often coexist and complement one another in practice, so long as the imperial sweep of these grand theories is limited by political wisdom, which is itself distilled from popular common sense. In a way, this is the most conservative of all ideas, that there is such a thing as wisdom and that, in the end, it is of greater importance in determining good policy than any theory. It is this idea which, more than any other, is in need of affirmation in our time. We live in an age when wisdom is suspect in the eyes of what can only be understood as an overweening rationalism, and when what works in practice is inevitably regarded with suspicion until it is proved in theory.

The history of economic thought in the modern era is worthy of study precisely because it represents a largely successful effort to make rational sense of the workings of the free market, which had once appeared to be nothing but a seething cauldron of anarchic individual impulses, which could in no way be reconciled with what was good for a society. Today, one can come by an understanding of why a market economy is so beneficial to society without too great an effort; a careful reading of Adam Smith and Friedrich Hayek will do the job. But this understanding flies in the face of our initial intuitions on the subject, so the educational effort to retain our hold on this tradition of ideas has to be constantly renewed, year after year, generation after generation, or the profound insights contained in these books will simply be lost. And unless government and society work diligently to “internalize” what has been learned on this subject, transforming the abstract economic ideas involved into practical habits of the heart, the ability to make sound decisions in this realm will continually slip from our grasp. In other words, government and society must take steps—educational steps, legal steps—which are independent of the market, and which are necessary to make the market possible and profitable for all of society.

The success involved in making a market economy work and prosper is a success of statesmanship—another conservative idea which is not rooted in ideology, but in experience. The statesman may pursue any policy, so long as it is derived from political wisdom concerning what has worked to protect and better society in the past, and so long as it continues to work well in the present. And statesmanship is something that both Israel and the United States are today noticeably lacking.

Now, if we have such a successful and refined political tradition in economic affairs, which leaves so much up to the initiative and decisions of the individual, why do we need religion? Doesn't liberty suffice to create the good society? Although there are certainly those who make this claim, the Western conservative tradition holds otherwise. According to conservative thought, a market economy cannot work except in a society comprised of people who are, in sufficient degree, bourgeois: That is, people who are orderly, law-abiding and diligent, and who resolutely defer gratification—sexual as well as financial—so that, despite the freedom granted each individual, the future nonetheless continues to be nourished at the expense of the present. For people of this kind to lead lives of this kind, it seems to be the case that religion is indispensable. This appears to be a sociological truth. It is religion that reassures people that this world of ours is a home, not just a habitat, and that the tragedies and unfairness we all experience are features of a more benign, if not necessarily comprehensible, whole. It is religion that restrains the self-seeking hedonistic impulse so easily engendered by a successful market economy.

It is here that Edmund Burke makes such a decisive contribution to the political tradition of the West. Not that he was a particularly pious man (he was not a pious man) or a brilliant theologian (he was no kind of theologian). Burke's importance lies in the fact that he was a secular political theorist who could explain, to a critical mind, why a religious orthodoxy (like a political orthodoxy) can make intellectual sense. My wife, Professor Gertrude Himmelfarb, tells a pertinent story from a graduate course she taught on British political thought. In her class there was an Orthodox young woman, quiet and industrious. After several class sessions devoted to a close reading of Edmund Burke, this young woman approached my wife, and told her: "Now I know why I am Orthodox." What she meant was that she could now defend Orthodoxy in terms that made sense to the non-Orthodox, because she could now defend a strong deference to tradition which is the keystone of any orthodoxy in the language of rational secular discourse, which was the language in which Burke wrote.

It is the idea of tradition as a political concept which was central to the ideological debate between Edmund Burke and Thomas Paine, the latter being one of the best-known exponents of the French Revolution. It was Paine who declared: Let the dead bury their dead. It was Burke, on the other hand, who argued that the dead should have the right of suffrage. We should in effect

give them the vote in deciding on the ordering of our government and society because of the wisdom which we may gain from the ideas which they had derived from their experience.

Paine won this debate, unfortunately, which is why arguments based on tradition make so little headway with most young people today. There was a game I used to play with my own students in New York to try to assist them in understanding Burke's point. I would point out that in the United States, we have fifty states which are extremely different from one another in size, population, natural resources, per capita income, and so on. Yet despite these differences, each of these states has the same powers for dealing with such crucial matters as education, energy, transportation and welfare within its borders. Moreover, each of these fifty states sends two members to the United States Senate. I would ask them whether this was reasonable. Of course, they did not think so, and in the blink of an eye they would begin redrawing the map of the United States, completely redesigning the country so that all the states were more equal in every possible respect. Only once they had thought about it did they begin to wonder whether this perfectly egalitarian scheme made practical sense. They realized that the people living in other regions had social, economic and political attitudes which were not identical to those of New Yorkers, and that the new regions that they were inventing were not going to be homogeneous areas with a homogeneous population. And as they thought about this, they began to realize that at least some of the states represent local interests and points of view which would be silenced by their efforts to reach a kind of a pure rationalism in politics.

On the other hand, given the opportunity to study both Paine and Burke, there will always be some students who find Burke more persuasive. These include students who are subscribers to a religious tradition or are thinking vaguely of drawing closer to such a tradition. Burke is not usually thought of as a defender of Jews or Judaism, to which he seems to have given little thought. But it is interesting to read his remarks on what he called "prejudice"—by which he meant habit, custom, convention, tradition—with the Orthodox Jewish tradition in mind. According to Burke:

We are afraid to put men to live and trade each on his own private stock of reason; because we suspect that this stock in each man is small and that the individuals would do better to avail themselves of the general bank and capital of nations, and of ages. Many of our men of speculation, instead of exploding general prejudices, employ their sagacity to discover the latent wisdom which prevails in them. If they find what they seek, and they seldom fail, they think it more wise to continue the prejudice, with the reason involved, than to cast away the coat of prejudice, and to leave nothing but the naked reason; because prejudice, with its reason, has a motive to give action . . . and an affection which will give it permanence. Prejudice is of ready application in the emergency; it previously engages the mind in a steady course of wisdom and virtue, and does not leave the man hesitating in the moment of decision, sceptical, puzzled and unresolved. Prejudice renders

a man's virtue his habit; and not a series of unconnected acts. Through just prejudice, his duty becomes a part of his nature.

**I**t is impossible to legitimize a conservative predisposition in politics, as well as a conservative predisposition in religion, without having an authentic respect for tradition. And this respect for tradition must be intellectually defensible. For such a defense one turns to Burke who, when confronted by the radical opposition to tradition which was the essence of the French Revolution, became the first political theorist of the modern world to articulate a powerful defense of tradition.

But once deference to tradition has been rationally justified, it has to be put into practice in society, and in government. And to do this, the innovative market economy which characterizes contemporary democracy, and the conservative tradition, have to be adjusted to one another—a fact which was well understood by the father of capitalist thought, Adam Smith. For unlike some of today's free-market enthusiasts, Adam Smith was no radical economic individualist. He thought a state would be foolish to try to usurp the prerogatives of the market, but he did not give these prerogatives a universal scope. He saw an important role for the state in education, in taxation including redistributive taxation, and in certain forms of poor relief. It is impossible to say what his attitudes would be regarding the affluent societies of our century, but he did, after all, write a book, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, which placed a strong emphasis on compassion as the natural bond between human beings, including human beings in a capitalistic market economy. So it is likely that, were he alive, he would not wish to uproot the welfare state root and branch. And as for Burke, while he emphasized the importance of the family and of the institutions of what we now call civil society, he also praised the properly ordered state—whose propriety was visible in the respect it showed for the institution of property—as a partner in the perfection of all things human. Nothing less than that.

The possibility of reconciling conservative traditions of religion or morality with the freedom of a market economy is not only a matter of speculation. It has formidable historical antecedents, which, even if they are unfamiliar to many today, are nevertheless at the heart of the Anglo-American tradition of free government. In the United States, between the founding of the republic and World War II, approximately 175 years of conflict between the secular market economy and a religious predisposition excited scarcely a tremor in the body politic. One can find proof of this by consulting any major textbook in American history published before 1945. A glance at the index may reveal a few passing references to “church and state” relations, but nothing more. You look up “censorship” and you find no reference at all, although there was a great deal of censorship taking place. Over the last fifty years, the national issue which we now refer to as “religion in the public square” has engendered an entire library of legal arguments, but prior to 1945, it is clear that the issue could not have been that controversial, for the simple

reason that there were hardly any legal rulings on the subject: There were virtually no Supreme Court decisions that addressed this issue.

The reason for this is an instructively practical one: Under the American federal system, issues such as school prayer, religious activities on public grounds, censorship of pornography—in short, the great majority of religious and moral issues—were adjudicated by political negotiations at the local level. These negotiations took into account the magnitude and intensity of public opinion on either side of an issue, and after some useful if sometimes painful experience, each community reached a *via media* that it could live with. In general, minority opinion was always respected, but majority opinion always received the greater deference. To reach such accepted norms in such a way that people could live together did not require a great deal of theorizing about absolute systems of universal rights; but what it did require was a great deal of inherited wisdom and common sense, on the part of the majority and on the part of the minority.

A few examples will suffice to make it clear what this meant in practice. When I went to elementary school in Brooklyn, we had an assembly once a week, which the principal of the school always began with a prayer. Now, the school was about one-half Jewish, with the rest of the students being Irish, Italian or Anglo-Saxon Protestants. The principal was no fool, so he read a Psalm. The nice thing about the Psalms is that they are of Jewish origin, are part of the Christian Bible, but Jesus is not mentioned. So what Jew was going to object? Mind you, Jews these days do object to the reading of Psalms in public schools. But in those days, there were no Jews who would object to reading a Psalm, and no Christians who would object either. It was a common-sense solution to a problem; it worked for many, many decades.

Similarly, when I was young, there were burlesque shows, “topless” shows, we would call them, in New York, and Fiorello La Guardia, a very liberal and progressive mayor, decided that this was not good for the city. He did not want New York City to be known as a center for strip-tease shows, so he prohibited them. Just like that. The issue was taken to court, and the court ruled that La Guardia was the elected representative of the public, and if the public wanted things that way, it was their right. People who didn’t like it could leave New York City and move to Newark, where you could go to a burlesque show. There was no outraged public debate, no crisis, no book written on the subject. In the United States in that era, any community that wanted to order its public life in a certain way was permitted to do so. One’s position had to be “within reason,” but the point is that the range of issues which one could reasonably decide one way or another was considered to be quite broad, and open to a process of political trial and error. If Boston wanted to ban a book that had sex scenes in it, it did so. And then the book sellers in New York put up big signs in their store windows that said “Banned in Boston,” and this would be great for business. This might have been difficult to fit into some great universal system, but it took into account the traditions and feelings of these very different cities, and as a consequence, public life

in both Boston and New York was conducted in a way that allowed most people in both cities to be happy.

**I**n general, the political handling of controversial religious and moral issues in the United States prior to World War II was a triumph of reasoned experience over abstract dogmatism. Unfortunately, since around 1950, it is abstract dogmatism that has triumphed over reasoned experience in American public life. As everyone knows, this unwarranted and unfortunate reversal has provoked a constitutional crisis where there had never been one before. And much as I regret to say this, the sad fact is that American Jews have played a very important role—in some ways a crucial role—in creating this crisis.

It is a fairly extraordinary story when one stops to think about it. In the decades after World War II, as anti-Semitism declined precipitously, and as Jews moved massively into the mainstream of American life, the official Jewish organizations took advantage of these new circumstances to prosecute an aggressive campaign against any public recognition, however slight, of the fact that most Americans are Christian. It is not that the leaders of the Jewish organizations were anti-religious. Most of the Jewish advocates of a secularized “public square” were themselves members of Jewish congregations. They believed, in all sincerity, that religion should be the private affair of the individual. Religion belonged in the home, in the church and synagogue, and nowhere else. And they believed in this despite the fact that no society in history has ever acceded to the complete privatization of a religion embraced by the overwhelming majority of its members. The truth, of course, is that there is no way that religion can be obliterated from public life when 95 percent of the population is Christian. There is no way of preventing the Christian holidays, for instance, from spilling over into public life. But again, before World War II, there were practically no Jews who cared about such things. I went to a public school, where the children sang carols at Christmastime. Even among those Jews who sang them, I never knew a single one who was drawn to the practice of Christianity by them. Sometimes, the schools sponsored Nativity plays, and the response of the Jews was simply not to participate in them. There was no public “issue” until the American Civil Liberties Union—which is financed primarily by Jews—arrived on the scene with the discovery that Christmas carols and pageants were a violation of the Constitution. As a matter of fact, our Jewish population in the United States believed in this so passionately that when the Supreme Court, having been prodded by the ACLU, ruled it unconstitutional for the Ten Commandments to be displayed in a public school, the Jewish organizations found this ruling unobjectionable. People who wanted their children to know about the Ten Commandments could send their children to *heder*.

Since there was a powerful secularizing trend among American Christians after World War II, there was far less outrage over all this than one might have anticipated. The Jewish campaign against any suggestion that America was a Christian nation won one battle after another; eventually it made sufficient headway in the media and the legal profession—most importantly

on the Supreme Court—that today there is widespread popular acceptance of the belief that this kind of secularism, which is tolerant of religion only so long as it is practiced privately and very discreetly, was indigenously and authoritatively “American,” and had always been so. Of course, it has not always been so, and Americans have always thought of themselves as a Christian nation—one with a secular government, which was equally tolerant of all religions so long as they were congruent with traditional Judeo-Christian morality. But equal toleration under the law never meant perfect equality of status in fact. Christianity is not the legally established religion in the United States, but it is established informally, nevertheless. And in the past forty years, this informal establishment in American society has grown more secure, even as the legal position of religion in public life has been attenuated. In this respect, the United States differs markedly from the democracies of Western Europe, where religion continues steadily to decline and is regarded as an anachronism grudgingly tolerated. In the United States, religion is more popular today than it was in the 1960s, and its influence is growing, so the difference between the United States and Europe becomes more evident with every passing year. Europeans are baffled and a little frightened by the religious revival in America, while Americans take the continuing decline of religion in Europe as just another symptom of European decadence.

And even as the Christian revival in the United States gathers strength, the Jewish community is experiencing a modest religious revival of its own. Alarmed by a rate of intermarriage approaching 50 percent, the money and energy that used to go into fighting anti-Semitism, or Israel Bonds, is now being channeled into Jewish education. Jewish day schools have become more popular, and the ritual in both Reform and Conservative synagogues has become more traditional. But this Jewish revival does not prevent American Jews from being intensely and automatically hostile to the concurrent Christian revival. It is fair to say that American Jews wish to be more Jewish while at the same time being frightened at the prospect of American Christians becoming more Christian. It is also fair to say that American Jews see nothing odd in this attitude. Intoxicated with their economic, political and judicial success over the past half-century, American Jews seem to have no reluctance in expressing their vision of an ideal America: A country where Christians are purely nominal, if that, in their Christianity, while they want the Jews to remain a flourishing religious community. One can easily understand the attractiveness of this vision to Jews. What is less easy to understand is the chutzpah of American Jews in publicly embracing this dual vision. Such arrogance is, I would suggest, a peculiarly Jewish form of political stupidity.

**F**or the time being, American Jews are getting away with this arrogance. Indeed, American Christians—and most especially the rising Evangelical movements—are extraordinarily tolerant, if more than a little puzzled, by this novel Jewish posture. And the lack of any negative Christian reaction has only encouraged American Jews in the belief that they have discovered some kind of universally applicable formula for dealing with non-Jews. One can see this in the way many American Jews have taken to speaking about Israeli foreign policy in recent years. After all, why

should getting along with believing Moslems be different from getting along with non-believing Christians? Many Jews honestly do not appreciate the difference, and therefore assume that if there is no peace in the Middle East, Israeli Jews must be doing something wrong.

But the political attitudes of American Jews have been shaped by something far deeper than their benign experience of life in Christian America in the last few decades. For what liberal American Jews, as well as liberal Israelis, have in common is nothing less than a deeply grounded utopian expectation that good “human relations” can replace political relations between other ethnic and religious groups, whether one faces these groups within the context of domestic American life, or across the border in Israeli foreign affairs. At the end of World War II, the major American Jewish organizations, preparing to fight a possible upsurge in anti-Semitism (which never came), discovered a category of contemporary psychology called “conflict resolution,” which they believed to be ideally suited to the problem they were facing; in fact, its great virtue was that it was ideally suited to their ideological predisposition. According to this branch of social science, ethnic, racial or religious conflicts are the result of bias, prejudice, misunderstanding or ignorance. The vision of politics derived from this kind of social science can fairly be described as “therapeutic,” as it assumes that ethnic, religious or racial conflicts can be resolved by educational therapy that will uproot the psychological causes of the conflict. But ultimately it is just one more variant of the universal humanism which was the unofficial religion of the Enlightenment—to which Jews, lacking a realistic political tradition, were especially susceptible, and still are. In the United States, as well as in certain circles in Israel, such a universal humanism has acquired the status of a quintessentially Jewish belief. Whereas once upon a time it was not unreasonable to ask whether a given turn of events or policy was “good for the Jews,” to ask that question in the United States today in Jewish circles is to invite a mixture of ridicule and indignation: Ridicule at the retrograde parochialism of such an attitude; indignation at the suggestion that there is such a thing as a Jewish interest distinct from the interests of mankind as a whole. This is the reason that Jews, of all the religious and ethnic groups in the United States, are the most committed supporters of the United Nations. They may whine about the UN’s unfriendliness toward Israel, but, despite considerable evidence to the contrary, prefer to think that this is a passing phenomenon; and like the ACLU, the United Nations Association floats on Jewish funding. The truth is that liberal Jews desperately need the United Nations, because it is their anchor in reality; the United Nations proves to them that their universal humanist ideals are not just daydreams, that they have a real existence in the world. The UN protects them from having to consider a reality of competition and painful political dilemmas and particularistic Jewish interests—which is to say, it protects them from thinking politically about foreign policy, something they have never done.

With the exception of a few quotations from the Prophets, there is nothing in the Jewish tradition that prepares Jews to think politically about foreign policy. It is not surprising, therefore, that Europe’s Jews were so vulnerable to the universalist utopianism that characterized the

Enlightenment, whose essence is the attempt to make do with abstract theories of universal rights and international laws, in precisely those areas in which a people most desperately needs the practical experience of statesmanship and the political wisdom which at great length grows out of it. This political utopianism has left the Jews intellectually disarmed as they attempt to deal with the intractable foreign policy problems of an independent Jewish state, and charging down a blind alley in their search for constitutional arrangements that serve the Jewish interest in both the United States and Israel.

Before the daunting task of instilling a tradition of thinking politically among the Jews, there is little to be done other than to continue the work of education. Such work is very difficult, but it must be done if both Jews and Judaism are to survive. Those of us in the United States who have been involved in this enterprise for some years now are certainly encouraged to see a comparable enterprise under way in Israel. For our destinies are fused. American Jewry will not survive without Israel, and Israel cannot survive without the Jews of the United States. And neither community can survive without the development of a sound Jewish political tradition, which will teach us to think realistically about our politics, our economics, and our foreign relations.

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