

Commentary

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The New American Jews

A manifesto for change, survival, and national flourishing

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A CENTURY AGO, THE ZIONIST LEADER ZE'EV JABOTINSKY OFFERED EUROPEAN Jewry a nobler self-conception: the “New Jew.” The antithesis of the caricatured *shtetl yid* who cowered in fear as Cossacks violated his wife and town, the New Jew would be physically strong, brave, capable of defending his people and seeding Jewish life in unturned soil. The New Jew would shed his dependence on the goodwill of non-Jews and work toward his goals, returning to Zion and national sovereignty chief among them. A proud pioneer, the New Jew stood ready to impose his will on the world in service of the Jewish people.

It was a reversal two millennia in the making, and the New Jew has made his mark on history—in Israel. In America, not so much. The irony is that the least New of us think they are the Newest, as they seek to curry favor with and join in on trendy cosmopolitan anti-Zionism. Not coincidentally, these false New Jews take a dim view of America and its ethos of ambition, and denigrate the pursuit of happiness as a ruse for injustice and inequality. Many have adopted a simpleminded hostility against traditional religion, taking solace in the notion that widespread secularization would make Americans more reasonable and Jews more safe.

But those ideologues do not make up the key cohort of the American Jewish community. Instead, most American Jews have simply become complacent about our place in a secular liberal culture, defining their success by the credentials,

behaviors, and tastes prized by American elites. We pay through the nose to meet those standards, and cluster in locales alongside sophisticates who claim they love us—or the “us” that most closely resembles the cast of *Seinfeld*—as much as we desperately want them to.

That is, until recently. Since October 7, nearly all the conventional wisdom about Jewish life in 21st-century America and the communal choices keeping us secure and prosperous has proved wrong.

Universities, the loci of American Jewish credentialist aspirations, are rife with America-hating, Jew-hating budding domestic terrorists. But sending our best and brightest to Columbia was far from our only expensive mistake in this mind-bogglingly expensive system we have developed for “making it” as Jews in America. Our best-heeled nonprofits proved themselves toothless, having spent most of their effort and capital seeking to maintain friendships in high places that proved entirely one-sided once we were beset by trouble. They had no vocabulary to fight back against those they had courted for so long.

The prevailing wisdom that broad cultural liberalism would be “good for the Jews” has been cracking for decades, but the dam broke over the past two years. The increasingly secularist public square is adopting social justice as its code, which might seem to be friendly to those Jews who preach the centrality of *tikkun olam*, or “healing the world,” as Jewish doctrine—only the social justice warriors have been in the forefront of Jew-hatred since October 7, not a bulwark against it. Our reluctance to organize politically to advance our own interests has left us reliant on religious-freedom exemptions from laws when we could have been shaping laws in the first place to protect us more actively. Our communal hesitation to avail ourselves of our Second Amendment rights led us to cluster in gun-restrictive jurisdictions and elect anti-gun politicians. Now that we face significant threats against our shuls and schools, we are scrambling for permission to protect ourselves.

Our habits of mind, heart, and action have been misdirected at best and self-destructive at worst.

Put simply, we have until now sought to be tolerated. We staked our communal welfare on not making too much trouble. We figured that if we stuck together geographically, showed our countrymen that we were cosmopolitan high achievers, and advocated a politics of “you do you,” the sophisticated American establishment would reward us with the same courtesy and a cherished place in our national tapestry. And we were wrong.

Hope is not lost for Jews in America, nor are our successes over the last century all a mirage. To the contrary, we should feel hopeful. We have an opportunity to clear away the thicket of counterproductive assumptions and behaviors that led us to this point, and replace them with ones that reflect reality as it is. We have also seen that we are not alone. Hundreds of millions of Gentile friends consider us equal citizens, which is unprecedented in Jewish history. We are not abandoned; America truly is a haven, but we have been in denial about who is on our side.

There has never been a moment like this to reassess the way we view ourselves and our place in this country, and adjust our habits accordingly. There are steps we can take, as individual Jews and as communities, to renew American Jewish purpose, to harness the energy of frustration felt so profoundly by so many Jews and channel it productively, for the good of the Jewish people and for America, the “almost-chosen nation.” To be the New American Jews.

So who are we?

The New American Jews would seek, above all, to transcend the exilic mindset of being an outsider in America. We would contribute our individual strengths and the wisdom of the Jewish tradition to the nation, believing that Jewish teachings and practices contain a salve for our national malaise. We would advocate American Jews’ interests without apology, believing that they are righteous and in line with the American public interest.

Anchored by these core principles—mostly aspirational, for now—New American Jewish attitudes and habits could take shape in the following ways.

Jew-Hatred. How to solve it? You don't.

Jew-hatred exists because Jews exist. Anti-Semitism and philo-Semitism are two sides of the same coin; the Jews inspire greater suspicion *and* admiration precisely because we are the inheritors of God's covenant. Jews must accept that being unapologetically Jewish will inspire more hatred—but can also command the respect of non-Jews. The only alternative is to shed our Jewishness, which is no option at all.

In combating Jew-hatred, New American Jews would avoid making Jews out as victims. We would instead assert that Jew-hatred is wrong because it is un-American. Jews are not second-class citizens here, because America has no classes of citizenship. As Jew-hatred is a sign of civilizational decay, its rise would concern us less as Jews than as Americans. And because we would not define a person by the horrors that befell his ancestors but by the resilience that brought them to these shores, we would free ourselves of the incessant neurotic effort to understand the motivations of his haters. We would instead embody a great truism: The only effective deterrents against violence against Jews are strong Jews and a stronger America.

Strength. If Jewish values are to enter the world, there must first be Jews. Recognizing this, the Torah does not teach pacifism but the righteous use of force when necessary. The Constitution reinforces the principle with its protection of the inalienable right to self-defense. Accordingly, we New American Jews would protect ourselves by strengthening our bodies to deter threats and learning how to deploy violence responsibly. Jews, like other Americans, are more open now than ever to developing physical competencies that allow us to protect ourselves. That impulse must be cultivated.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that Jews are also learning how to use guns at higher rates, with Jewish shooting clubs springing up across the country. This may alienate us from gun-shy elites, but New American Jews must no longer make decisions on that basis. Those attuned to the growing threats from both the woke left and conspiratorial right know that we cannot rely on external security forces (grateful though we are for them) to assert our American birthright to self-defense because our enemies are not so easily deterred.

Embodying Jewish strength means being deeply suspicious of cultural norms that cast Jews as victims lacking personal agency. The timeless truth is that while nobody likes a bully, everyone detests an eager victim. New American Jews would leave the “unsafe” talk to fire marshals and recognize that lip service to Jews as beneficiaries of victimhood status is just that. It signals weakness, not virtue, when Jews complain they are afraid on campus...but return to Columbia every semester.

Tradition. We have a glorious history—martial, moral, miraculous—and we ought to be unafraid to share the wisdom of this tradition with our fellow Americans, because the Torah and its commentaries have at least as much to say about the life well-lived as any philosopher. And taking an interest in ritual life would show both our children and neighbors that there is more to Judaism than soup, comedy, and gas chambers. But most important, New American Jews would treat Judaism as a life force, a rich, nourishing, comprehensive system of obligation and reward—refusing to reduce Judaism to abstractions like *tikkun olam* or “resisting tyrants.”

Outreach. Without proselytizing, New American Jews could commit to being the representatives of the fulfilled life for their fellow Jews and Americans alike. Understanding that it will be impossible for many to believe in God, we would take our mission from Deuteronomy: “Observe therefore and do [the commandments]; for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the eyes of the nations, that, when they hear all these statutes, shall say: ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.’” Americans desperately need a code that can wrest them

from decadence, alienation, and aimlessness. Traditional Jews have largely avoided those plagues thanks to a strong sense of purpose, which we should share beyond our communities.

Drawing Jews nearer to their own tradition is the surest sign of confidence in its value. Chabad-Lubavitch deserves thanks for its remarkable work in outreach, *kiruv*, toward all Jews, but the campaign for Jewish connection should not be the near-exclusive province of one Hasidic sect. Non-Chabad communities have much to learn about welcoming the unaffiliated, and New American Jews should champion increased access to our liturgy and rituals. Our shuls should reemphasize welcoming Jews who grew up in no way traditional—as well as potential converts.

But perhaps the greatest lesson to take from Chabad is that one need not compromise on substance to welcome new people. Indeed, the opposite is true. Prospective additions to the Jewish community are not looking for whatever they could get elsewhere. Sources of affirmation fill every corner of our culture. Communities that embrace the New American Jewish ethos could offer ennobling obligation and the fulfillment that comes with developing its attendant virtues. We should not confuse an open tent for an infinitely capacious one.

Politics. What are Jewish politics? Only Jew-hating conspiracy theorists have an answer. We are a fractious people, divided by our common language of “Jewish values,” such as *chesed* (kindness or loyalty) and *tzedek* (justice). Different kinds of Jews define and order these concepts differently, leading to intractable disagreements about engagement in political affairs. New American Jews will know this is no way to advocate Jewish interests, much less to bring our tradition to bear on politics in the public interest. But we will believe that what’s good for the Jews is good for America, and vice versa. So we must first be willing to say: Not every view and policy is a legitimately Jewish one—but some do redound to our benefit and do advance the pro-social, liberal, rules-based order in which Jews

thrive. We must shape the law proactively to reflect our view of what is good, rather than asking for carve-outs when the laws shaped by secular morality conflict with Jewish security, freedom, and prosperity.

New American Jews would push our legal and political institutions to reflect a basic morality: Harming others is wrong, helping others is right. Recognizing that kindness to the cruel is cruelty to the kind, New American Jews would unabashedly support law-and-order regimes that punish wrongdoers regardless of their identity. While ascendant neo-pagan morality suggests that violence can be excusable if the perpetrator or victim is recognizably a part of particular groups, the Jewish tradition must play its historically revolutionary role of insisting that our laws favor neither rich nor poor. Similarly, we cannot stand for immigration policies that sow the seeds of our own demise by inviting the demographic disasters currently making the UK, France, and Australia all but uninhabitable for their beleaguered Jews.

This morality also informs a free-market political economy. New American Jews would know that with few exceptions, human beings are agents capable of choosing good or evil, life or death. They can choose to work hard, serve others, and reap the rewards of doing so. Or they can choose to engage in antisocial behaviors. These choices are not equally good. An economic system that rewards providing the goods and services that improve others' lives is the manifestation of choosing the good and life—mediated by the insight that sometimes people want bad things that should remain unobtainable.

Partnerships. There is a huge difference, as we have learned, between alliances and partnerships. The former is little more than a buzzword, deployed when our communal institutions affiliate with non-Jewish organizations on the basis of expressions of solidarity. Jews may feel a kinship with organizations that stand for justice, equality, and freedom, as we do. But those abstractions have turned out to be shallow, as these supposed allies displayed vividly with breathtaking indifference toward Jewish suffering in the wake of October 7. Many others have subsequently waffled in their support of Israel's just war abroad and the defense of

Jewish civil rights stateside. Shared abstractions were never enough. The progressive coalition we thought shared our commitments revealed itself willing to traffic in age-old anti-Semitic tropes when ideologically expedient. New American Jews have learned carefully from this betrayal.

Partnership means that though we do not agree on everything, we work together to advance concrete shared interests. New American Jews would not hesitate to stand with religious Christians and members of other faiths when their beliefs and practices face assault, even if we have different theologies and practices. We share crucial interests, as our basic assumptions about morality are undermined by an ascendant identity-based system. Our failure to stand by “privileged” groups that faced unrelenting discrimination over the last few decades was a betrayal of our principles, an error whose full extent is only now coming into view, with the collapse of secular-Jewish alliances built on principles that elites would wield against whites, Christians, and men. Renascent Jew-hatred by some Christians is not our fault, but each day we spend unwilling to stand by Christians as they fight militant secularism on our behalf *pro bono* invites more.

Pioneer Spirit. For millennia, Jews have started new communities out of desperation. New American Jews, profoundly grateful for the unique opportunity America provides in establishing new synagogues, mikvahs, and schools in new places, would see beyond traditional urban cores to the beckoning frontier.

Many of our peers report that they would love to have more children but can’t afford it. Taxes, housing, food, and private Jewish education costs are prohibitive. They also want to remain close to family, which often means moving back to expensive coastal suburbs. Rising crime rates in metropolises that served as centers of Jewish life in America for decades increasingly make life unnecessarily difficult for residents.

Something’s got to give. Affordable communities dot the American landscape. Those places tend to be full of faithful Christians and other decent people who govern themselves in ways that make Jewish life easier, rather than simply

incanting magic words like “tolerance.” Jew-hatred, among other challenges, may exist in some pockets. But knowing that familiar challenges are behind them and unfamiliar ones ahead, New American Jews can embrace the old American creed that takes hardship as a given and endless opportunity as its reward.

The best reward, pioneerism distilled to its essence, is building a family. Having many children is not just a Jewish imperative but a countercultural expression of hope in America’s future. Establishing flourishing communities in states with policies amenable to young families is crucial to grow Jewish communities. Family life is simply more tenable in states with Education Savings Accounts and school choice, low income and property taxes, permissive zoning policies, and respect for law and order. Many Jews are moving to Arizona, Florida, and Texas. More should also consider affordable, growing cities with small Jewish populations such as Omaha and Reno. This is an economic issue with a significant political dimension: We will continue to be taken for granted as constituents as long as we remain clustered in places where our representatives call anti-Semitism a “fake Republican issue.” And we will deserve it.

Education. As anti-Israel campus demonstrations devolved into lawlessness, university administrators showed the world they would rather tolerate such behavior than expel students. In doing so, they invited increasingly provocative stunts and accidentally revealed both the genuine menace of campus agitators and the ridiculous hogwash that animates them. To borrow a phrase from Hapsburg generals, the situation is catastrophic but not serious.

And yet, American Jews in large numbers still consider it praiseworthy to attend institutions whose idea of merit is not intellectual excellence but ideological radicalism. Breaking free of the hypnotic power of credentialism is key to the survival and thriving of the Jewish American population of the 21st century. Trade schools, apprenticeships, entrepreneurship, and other alternatives to the four-year degree may not earn elite adulation and prestige, but they offer something much more important: making Jewish life in America better. They answer the key question of Jewish education: Does a young person’s time here make it easier for

Jews to pray, observe mitzvot, date and marry fellow Jews, and live serious Jewish lives? Truly rich communities serve their members by making it easier to fulfill their shared needs.

Sending our best and brightest to rotten elite universities is diametrically opposed to this goal. Diploma-chasing encourages Jews to keep their heads down and let their credentials do the work; New American Jews would keep their heads up and develop the skills we need to be self-sufficient.

To be sure, we need Jewish lawyers, doctors, and donors. But the Jewish American ideal need not privilege prestige. That is not what serves our people. Nor must Jewish education be as expensive as it is now. The two reinforce each other, compounded by our geographic concentration. The New American Jewish culture shift says it's just as honorable for bright young Jews to eschew Harvard Law School and instead move to Overland Park, Kansas, to become a teacher. In fact, that is an ideal. It does far more for Jewish life than having another upper-middle-class lawyer in Bergen County.

As distinct from the New Jew in Israel and around the world, New American Jews would undertake this reinvention because we believe that Jews provide America with something unique. Many American Jews have perceived the communal failures we have enumerated, and they understandably conclude that the American Jewish future is bleak and that aliyah to Israel is a matter of simple self-interest.

Far be it from us to discourage Jews from building a future in the Holy Land. We will, however, encourage American Jews not to ask, "Do Jews still need the United States of America?" That gets things backward. The question ought to be, "Does America still need its Jews?"

The answer is an emphatic yes. It is no coincidence that when the barbarians storm the gates, they come for us first. With barbarism threatening the West from without and within, Jews must rise to its defense. We come bearing the raw materials of civilizational defense: a magnificent moral tradition, enormous human capital, and a unique historical perspective on the rise and fall of civilizations.

The world needs America, the principles of justice and liberty need America, and America needs its Jews. But if we are to fulfill our vocation here, we need to make Jewish life in America substantive, intentional, and durable. That begins with a mindset shift. We must stop acting as if we exist here at the sufferance of others, and start behaving as equal and rightful stewards of this nation. The Founders are our Founders too. The American dream, and its spirit, is available to us. We stay not out of desperation but from gratitude, committed to protecting both ourselves and the features of American life that have enabled us to flourish. In this moment of civilizational crisis, New American Jews may be this republic's last, best hope.

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