

America was different. America is different.

By Jerry Klinger

"The orthodox Jewish influences, still at work upon (the Jewish boy) are rapidly weakened. He grows to look upon the ceremonial life at home as rather ridiculous. His old parents, who speak no English, he regards as 'greenhorns'.... The growing sense of superiority on the part of the boy to the Hebraic part of his environs extends itself soon to the home... he runs away from the supper table to join his gang on the Bowery, where he is quick to pick up the very latest slang, where his talent for caricature is developed often at the expense of his parents, his race, and all 'foreigner.' For he is an American, he is 'the people.'"

- Hutchin Hapgood, *The Spirit of the Ghetto*, 1908

"America is a 'trefa land' where even the stones are impure".

- Rabbi Jacob David Willowski

"It preaches suicide for us.... Americanization means what Mr. Zangwill has the courage to say it means: de-judaization... The Jew is asked to give up his identity in the name of brotherhood and progress."

- Judah Magnes – Re: Israel Zangwill's play the "Melting Pot"

"It is difficult to write temperately on this subject. It is little short of exasperating to stand idly by while a band of fanatics, so blinded by religious bigotry as to the unavoidable consequences of their acts, are playing into the hands of anti-Semites, the anti-immigrationists, the Ku Klux Klan, and all other enemies of Israel."

- American Hebrew, New York 1924 on the establishment of Yeshiva University

America was different. America is different. It had been two thousand years, since the land of Israel had been destroyed by the Romans. The Romans even obliterated the name and association of Jews with the land renaming it Palestine. Throughout the period some Jews still clung to the land of Israel but for the vast majority their lives were in Diaspora, in exile. Their lives were in search of a place that they could live and achieve and participate as secure equal citizens. Until the Jews came to America that potential was not found fully anywhere in the world. America wanted immigrants to settle the new vast continent to the West, from the Atlantic to the Pacific Oceans. America welcomed all immigrants, including Jews.

In 1890 the American frontier was officially closed. America was evolving from a frontier experience to a developing industrial world power. The relationship of America to the immigrant and the immigrant to America was changing. The change was most clearly defined with the final closing of open legal immigration in 1924.

The American Jewish experience is best characterized as inclusion and assimilation. Jews wanted to share in the opportunity of America. What needed to be retained to maintain cultural and ethnic identity was not clear for most Jews. Were Jews a religion, a culture, a people? In Europe the question of who or what was a Jew was externally imposed by physical, cultural, social, religious and legal impositions of the broader Christian, all too frequently anti-Semitic,

world. In America things were different. The Western frontier experience had translated into the American legal system different ideas "*that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.*"

An American was to be judged on what they can do not who they were. The official closing of the frontier marked a new reality. America increasingly judged a person on who they were and not only on what they can do.

Discrimination, bigotry and all the ugliness that it implied were not unknown in America. The U.S. Supreme Court decision of Plessy Vs. Ferguson (1896) clearly defined the State's Right to separate Americans on what they were and not what they could do. The argument centered on the right of States to require separate but equal travel accommodation between Black American and White American travelers. The court case established legally what had been done conventionally, that "*separation*" or "*discrimination*" was equal. At least for Jews their skins were white and they were much more readily welcomed into American society.

For the American Jew bigotry was not new. What was new after the Court's decision was that racial discrimination was legal. Latent bigotry was legalized. Compared to Jewish life in Europe, American discrimination was very, very mild. The American Jewish immigrant was still free to seek life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

America is both a blessing and curse for the Jew. The open door of safety from the horrors of European anti-Semitism was officially closed in 1924. The flood of Eastern European Jewry that had begun in 1880 was dammed up. The American Jewish world would not be further infused and renewed with masses of Jewish immigrants. Jewish cultural and religious survival in America was always tenuous at best not because of bigotry but rather the opposite. The threat to American Jewish survival was never the lack of freedom. The threat to survival was that Jews were free to choose to be Jews or not.

When presented with the freedom to choose to be Jewish, a significant majority chose simply not to become Christian. The 1926 U.S. Census of Religious Bodies found only one synagogue for every 1309 Jews. Yet there was one Christian Church for every 220 people. In 1938 the Jewish community of San Francisco could only identify 18% of Jewish families that had one or more members associated with a synagogue. None of the major branches of American Judaism, Reformed, Conservative or Orthodox were able to stem the "headlong flight of young Jews to a total secular life."

How to be American and remain Jewish was a struggle whose origins were far from American. The very essence of the Chanukah story was about how to be a part of Greek Culture and yet remain Jewish. The Chanukah story, centered in the land of Israel, provided a violent and definitive answer, be Jewish or else, there was no compromise. In America there is no chief Rabbi making definitive legally binding decisions as there had been in multiple European countries. The role of the Rabbi in America was not authoritative but voluntary adherence to Rabbinic leadership.

Jews came from multiple European countries and did not respect or follow the leadership of a chief Rabbi from a different country. The very lack of a centralized Jewish leadership model quickly led to dissention and multiple interpretations of who a Rabbi was. The first Rabbinic training center was created by the American Reform movement in 1875 with the establishment of the Hebrew Theological Institute which became the Hebrew Union College.

The great schism of the "*trefa dinner*" that broke the only unifying effort of Reform and Orthodox in America led to the creation of the American Conservative Movement. The Conservative movement in turn established the Jewish Theological Seminary in 1886. The American Orthodox movement did not lay the cornerstone for Yeshiva University until 1927. The American Orthodox movement itself was and is fragmented by multiple definitions of who could and could not grant *Smicha* – Rabbinic ordination. They never developed a centralized Rabbinic ordination school that was recognized by all Orthodox adherents.

By the 1920's Conservative Judaism itself a compromise between Reform and Orthodox interpretations of Judaism, with a distinctly American flavor, became the direction of choice for the majority of American Jews. Over time the very reforms that early American Reform Judaism promoted – joint family seating, sermons in English, appropriately abridged prayers, liberalized Jewish-Christian interaction, communal charitable responses to both Jewish and non Jewish communities became normalized. The social activism of the Protestant reformist movements were quickly incorporated into Jewish synagogue life as a religious obligation. Social activism had risen to the level of a substitution for religion itself in parts of the reform movement. The Jewish religion, as a binding force, in American life never truly succeeded.

A second direction that was an outgrowth of European Judaism did transplant itself successfully in America – *Yiddishkeit*. *Yiddishkeit* or cultural Judaism, sometimes sarcastically referred to as gastronomic Judaism, bound Jews from all countries together in a common shared culture. The Yiddish language, shared recognition of the centrality of the Torah and Talmud and a common shared experience of anti-Semitism bound Jews together.

Interestingly, it was the recognition of Judaism as a culture that created the only true American form or religious expression in America – Reconstructionism. Reconstructionism as a religion was a blend of *Yiddishkeit*, Jewish culture with non-structured overtones of God worship. It was developed by Mordechai Kaplan, who founded the Society for the Advancement of Judaism in 1922. Kaplan's ideas and directions were derided as heresy for which he would be nearly excommunicated by the Orthodox in 1945. His ideas would eventually be largely incorporated into the Reform, Conservative and Orthodox synagogue life: For example, the study and experience of Jewish culture by making the synagogue a form of a Jewish Community Center.

Jews tended to live near each other from the standpoint of comfort, commonality and age old concerns of self protection. They unconsciously recreated ghetto life only now it was American ghetto life. Jews wanted to live where other Jews lived. They were free to move wherever they chose.

Even the children of the immigrant generations tended to live near other Jews. Traditional religion was not itself a binding force for American Jews and *Yiddishkeit* was only a partial

answer for others, new Jewish institutions needed to be created. The Young Men's Hebrew Association was founded in New York in 1874 promoting social, cultural, religious and eventually sports affinity groupings. The idea spread rapidly across the United States and eventually evolved into the American Jewish Community Centers of the 1920's. The Jewish Community centers did not promote religion but *Yiddishkeit* and Jewish interactions. In response to the direct needs of impoverished Jewish immigration the American Jewish institutions or Jewish Community Federations quickly developed and became bulwarks of Jewish life again approaching the level of a replacement for religion itself. "*Doing the work of the Lord, helping the Jewish people, is worship of the Lord.*"

Other surrogates for religion took hold in America. The 19th century German Jewish ideal of protecting Jewish life in America was to be better Americans – learn the language, dress, customs – look and present as an American not as old world Jews. Strive to protect the rights of all Americans – black, brown, yellow and in turn the Jew will be protected. In the background was always the thought that America was special, American law and ideals were unique but Jewish repression could come here as well. It had done so many times in the last two thousand years.

In the famous 1879 Pittsburgh Platform that outlined what Reform Judaism was, included the key understanding that Judaism was a religion and not a people. The definition became a major difficulty between Reform Judaism and the much larger Conservative Judaism of the 1890's - 1938 because of a Austrian Jew. Theodor Herzl proposed that Jews could never be ultimately secure except in their own ancient homeland, Israel. The traumatic awareness of the highly assimilated Herzl was a message. The only place a Jew would ever be free was in their own land. Most Jews chose to go America with the ancient dream of Zion in their hearts but practical reality in their heads. Israel and Zionism were dreams. America was a reality.

American Zionism was anathema to the American reform movement. Zionism created a charge and a threat of dual loyalty in their minds. Zionism, to them, negated everything that they had worked so hard to prove, that Jews were a religion and not a separate people. They feared confirming the worst anti-Semite in their belief that Jews could not be true Americans. Reform Judaism was unable to recognize that American Zionism was a response to the reality that not all Jews lived under the American Flag. Not all Jews benefited from the protection of the American banner. Jews had a human right to seek the welfare of their coreligionists elsewhere.

Many members of the Reform movement were threatened by the growing voting power of the newer Jewish immigrants pushing to protect and aide their *lantzmen* (fellow Jews from their former old communities and countries). The accusation that America was dragged into WWI by Jewish outside interests and radicals were a fear of old established Jewry. The new immigrant saw things differently. For the first time the vote permitted Jews to exert group interests. The new immigrant felt the reality of fellow Jews singled out and murdered, by the hundreds of thousands in WWI.

The American Jewish escape valve remained closed during WWI. The ideal of Zionism, as an answer for world Jewry, grew stronger in the 1920's in America. Under the respected leadership of men such Louis Brandeis and Felix Frankfurter, Zionism grew and prospered in America.

Confronted with the reality of Fascism and the horrific prospects for European Jewry the American Reform movement withdrew its virulent opposition to Zionism in 1938. Zionism in America, especially after WWII, would rise to the level of a near religion.

The great immigration of the 1880-1920 period brought with it many radical ideas – anarchism, socialism and communism. The ideas were shared by many of the immigrants both Jew and non-Jew. Jews tended to play a more prominent role in the dissemination of the various '*isms*' because of the desire for social justice. The recognition by many Jews that the old world institutions had failed them as evidenced by the planned Pogroms (government sanctioned massacres of Jews as scapegoats) at Kishinev, convinced many that God was not there to help. God only helps those who help themselves.

They carried with them new Gods – the Gods of the '*isms*' and attempted to interject those into the American experience through the labor movements in particular. After WWI, America reacted to its involvement in WWI and retreated into a world of nativism and isolationism. The famous Red Scare of 1919-1920 with government sanctioned anti-radical terrorism further pushed American reactionism forward. It was the fear of the foreigner, the imagined Jewish international banking interests that pushed American anti-Semitism upward.

The 1920's were a period of upward mobility for the Jew. Jewish attendance at institutions of higher learning was far greater than ever. Despite that American reactionism increasingly led to direct and indirect quotas restricting Jewish access to professional schools and corporate America, the Jewish immigrant's children increasingly realized the American dream.

The very definition that Jews were a religion and not a separate people would be used, ironically during the civil rights struggles of the 1960-1980's, to exclude Jews from admittance to higher education again. If Jews were a religion and not an identifiable people such as American Blacks, American Indians or American Hispanics, then by affirmative action quotas they could be excluded from admittance to universities. The very effort of trying to be part of America would eventually be used to exclude Jews.

The rising wave of American anti-Semitism, in the 1920's and 1930's, was led by respected leaders such as the American auto magnate Henry Ford through his newspaper the Dearborn Michigan Independent. Ford's serialization of the false anti-Semitic Russian secret police creation, the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, granted an increasing level of legitimacy to American anti-Semitism. Ford believed that WWI was caused by German Jewish banking interests. American anti-Semitism reached its pre WWII zenith under the near fascist support of the nationally syndicated radio broadcaster Father James Coughlin, the famous aviator supporter of the America First Committee, the establishment of the German American Bund and fears generated by the Great Depression.

The Great Depression began in 1929 with the October collapse of Wall Street. Millions upon millions of people were disastrously affected economically. Many looked for someone to blame. Jews were scapegoated and directly impacted when the Bank of the United States failed in 1930. The Bank of the United States was a Jewish bank. Almost all of its 400,000 depositors were Jews. The Bank of the United States held the assets of 1/5 of New York's Jews and 1/10 of all

American Jews. With the failure of the Bank, came the Great Depression and wiped out most of the assets of the Jewish immigrant generation; their retirement savings, their college funds for their children, their economic future.

The Great Depression and consequent economic implosion led to a very human reaction in America. Jobs, scarce as they were, went to one's own. Young Jewish Doctors were generally excluded from hospitals except for the 44 Jewish Hospitals in the country. Being a Jewish attorney was a guaranteed ticket to virtual starvation. Jews, like the American Black, were the last to be hired and the first to be fired. Radicalism grew rapidly in the 1930's, along with anti-Semitism.

Physically, Jews were rarely attacked but that the American environment could turn on them suddenly was a terrible shock. The Great Depression made anti-Semitism respectable and not just the domain of the lunatic Ku Klux Klan. As Howard Sachar noted "*A 1930 research study undertaken by New York's Federation of Jewish Philanthropies concluded that 'normal absorption of Jews within the American economic structure is now practically impossible.'*" Eight years later, an American Jewish Congress report noted that anti-Jewish restrictions in want ads had reached their highest level in history.

Herbert Hoover's inability to respond to the new realities of the Depression led to the 1932 election victory of Franklin Roosevelt. Jews saw in Roosevelt a liberal alternative to the backsliding reactionism of the Republicans. As early as 1928, Jewish voting power was beginning to exert itself in Presidential elections when Alfred E. Smith garnered 72% of the Jewish vote for the Democratic ticket. The fact that Alfred Smith – an Irish Catholic who spoke serviceable Yiddish as well as Italian and who had prominent Jews on his staff earned himself the nickname of the "*Irisher mensch.*"

By the 1932 election, Roosevelt garnered 82% of the Jewish vote and 86% in 1936. Roosevelt promoted more Jews to position of prominence than any American President before him. Judge Jonah Goldstein of New York, quipped that "the Jews have three *velten* (worlds), *die velt* (this world), *yene velt* (the next world) and *Roosevelt.*"

Roosevelt was President until 1945. He was President during the rise of Fascism and Hitler. He was approached and begged to do something to help dying European Jewry in WWII. American Jewry rose in protest during the war, but their cries were not heard. During WWII, 550,000 American Jews served in her armies; 8,000 Jews paid the ultimate price for America's freedom.