

A "Golden Decade" for American Jews: 1945–1955

Arthur A. Goren

Few would deny the proposition that American Jewish life has undergone a radical transformation in the half century since the end of the Second World War. Lucy Dawidowicz, in a synoptic review of American Jewish history, captured this sense of major change in two chapter titles. She designated the years 1920 to 1939, "Decades of Anxiety," and the years 1945 to 1967, "The Golden Age in America." "Recovery and Renewal" is how Dawidowicz conceived of the postwar period as a whole.

Remarkably, the essential features of that transformation—the suburbanization of the Jews, the fashioning of a new communal order, and the emergence of a collective self-confidence and sense of well-being—were already in place by the mid-1950s. At that point, American Jewry seemed to pause to take stock. The occasion was the year-long celebration, beginning in the fall of 1954, of three hundred years since the first group of Jews settled on the shores of North America. The flood of tercentenary events intensified group consciousness and pride. The celebrations also encouraged the search for self-definition and self-understanding. Alongside the official and dominant theme of achievement and thanksgiving, a contrapuntal note of disquiet and discontent with the state of American Jewish life was sounded. In this respect, too, the culminating event of the decade set the terms for the years to come. Important publicists and ideologues recognized and debated what Charles Liebman would later pose as the tensions between "two sets of values." In Liebman's formulation, the "ambivalent American Jew" is torn between "integration and acceptance into American society" and "Jewish group survival." Precisely because Jews were fulfilling, at last, their aspiration to integrate into the society at large, identifying with the group and maintaining it were becoming increasingly matters of personal choice. For the most part, Jews responded to their new condition by instinctively adopting a dual construct of identity that aided them in locating and relocating themselves in

the volatile pluralism that characterized the nation as well as the Jewish community. This essay seeks to place the first decade of our times, with its new conditions and new perceptions, in historical perspective. It also examines the Jewish community's endeavors to fix its place on the map of the new era and set its future course.

Surely, the subject most discussed among observers of the American Jewish scene in the late 1940s and early 1950s was the exodus of Jews from city to suburb. This was the most concrete expression of the new affluence of the rising Jewish middle class. Entering the professions and the higher levels of entrepreneurship on the wave of postwar prosperity, benefiting from the decline in occupational and social discrimination, integrating culturally both in the workplace and in the classroom and pursuing leisure-time activities similar to those of their social class, the new Jewish suburbanites embraced the tolerant, cosmopolitan image of the suburbs. For the majority of Jews, the creation of an amiable and lenient communal order, religious by definition, went hand in hand with the suburban ethos.

The suburban setting was a far cry from the compact, big-city, middle- and working-class neighborhoods where they had grown up and where some had started their own families during the interwar decades. The Jewish group life in those urban neighborhoods as recalled by the newly arrived suburbanites had contained a multiplicity of synagogues, Jewish secular societies, informal social street settings, and "neutral" public institutions that possessed a Jewish ethnic coloration merely by virtue of the high ratio of Jews attending. Less by design than geography, the Jewish neighborhoods had served the broad spectrum of interests, convictions, and degrees of Jewish identification both of second-generation Jews and of acculturated immigrant Jews.

The communal order reconstructed during the 1945–1955 decade reflected the new affluence and the rapid pace of social and cultural integration. The synagogue, now including educational and recreational facilities, became the primary guardian of ethnic identity and continuity. The social and educational services of the suburban synagogue expanded enormously when compared with the synagogues of the urban neighborhoods, at the same time as its ritual functions contracted. The years from 1945 through the 1950s witnessed the construction of some six hundred synagogues and temples. In their imposing size and sumptuous architectural design, they reflected their preminent place in the suburban landscape as the accepted presence of a Jewish community. At the same time, the secular ideologies and particularistic interests that had existed in the urban neighborhoods faded away or were absorbed by the synagogue centers or by the broad-based federations of philanthropies.

This blurring of differences during the early postwar years enabled the national coordinating agencies of American Jewry to flourish, particularly

those agencies that guided fund-raising campaigns and the policy-making implicit in allocating the funds. The local communities channeled vast sums of money and political influence to these bodies through their federations. They, in turn, dispersed overseas relief, aid to Israel, support for the community relations organizations and help for the national denominational and cultural institutions. There is a striking correlation between the enormous increase in the sums raised to aid Jewish displaced persons in Europe and their resettlement in Israel, which peaked between 1946 and 1948, and the decline in such revenue in the 1950s when the overseas crises seemed to have abated and synagogue building and domestic concerns were high on the community's agenda. Nevertheless, American Jewry was sufficiently affluent and committed enough to Israel to give more aid to the young state than to any other nonlocal cause.

Two compelling experiences during the first few years following the end of the Second World War gave coherence to these developments and provided the basis for the collective behavior of American Jews that has persisted ever since. The first, the establishment of Israel, has defined the one arena of greatest concern to the Jews. The second, the emergence of an aggressive liberalism, has directed the political energies of the Jewish community into the general American domain. This parity of interests and commitments, which has been at the heart of the Jewish communal consensus for nearly half a century, was firmly in place by the mid-1950s.

In the first instance, at the war's end, American Jews confronted the enormity of the destruction of European Jewry and the urgent need to resettle and rehabilitate the one-third that had survived. This task merged almost immediately with the struggle for Jewish sovereignty in Palestine. Linking the solution of the problem of the survivors with the attainment of statehood created a unity of purpose on a scale unprecedented in the modern history of the Jews.

The American Jewish community mobilized its communal, financial, and political resources in a massive outpouring of support. One gauge of this response was the dramatic rise in the contributions to the central communal campaigns. These soared from \$57.3 million in 1945 to \$131.7 million in 1946 and to \$205 million in 1948, when 80 percent of the monies raised went for settling immigrants in Israel. There were other indications of momentous change. Eminent Jews who had taken little part in Jewish affairs now assumed crucial leadership roles, while others who until then had rejected all affirmations of Jewish nationalism rallied their organizations to the common endeavor. Henry Morgenthau, Jr.'s acceptance of the general chairmanship of the United Jewish Appeal in 1946 is one striking case; the collaboration of Joseph Proskauer, president of the American Jewish Committee, with the Jewish Agency in the final diplomatic push for statehood is another. Political figures and presidential advisers such as Herbert Lehman, Felix Frankfurter,

David Niles, Samuel Rosenman, and Bernard Baruch overtly or covertly aided the Zionist cause, which they now considered to be the sole means of saving Jews.

The three years between the surrender of the German armies and the declaration of Israel's independence also saw many rank-and-file American Jews take part in European rescue work at considerable personal risk. Soldiers, chaplains, and merchant mariners participated in the clandestine operations directed by the Jewish Agency and the Yishuv to transport refugees from the Allied-occupied zones in Germany to Mediterranean ports and from there in ships (purchased in the United States) to Palestine. Arms, too, were acquired surreptitiously in the United States with funds given by wealthy American Jews and shipped illegally to the Jewish underground in Palestine. At the same time, Jewish war veterans were recruited for the fledgling Israeli army.

Pockets of animosity or indifference remained. The small but vocal American Council for Judaism opposed the widespread support for a Jewish state with singular passion. Denouncing Jewish nationalism as an aberration of Judaism and support of a Jewish state as a violation of American loyalty, the council was soon swept to the fringes of the community. Some left-wing circles remained outside the consensus. Pro-Soviet Jewish radicals, except for the brief period when the Soviet Union supported the partitioning of Palestine, opposed the Jewish state; and a number of ex-socialist writers, the children of Jewish immigrants who were beginning to make their mark in intellectual circles, simply took no notice. However, mainstream Jewish America from the very beginning accepted the State of Israel as haven and protector of the Jews. Sovereignty was recognized as the guarantee of security for the dispossessed.

The alacrity with which statehood was embraced was in fact quite extraordinary. The specter of charges of divided loyalties, and the fear of providing grist for the mills of anti-Semites, had long haunted the Zionist movement in America. Even after the Biltmore Conference in May 1942 declared a Jewish commonwealth to be the immediate postwar goal of Zionism, the American Jewish leadership (including some Zionists) viewed the demand for a sovereign state as being at best an opening gambit for later bargaining and compromise, or at worst an unrealistic if not perilous political program. Yet four years later, nearly the entire American Jewish community joined in the political battle for a Jewish state. To take one symbolic act, in May 1947, in the absence of David Ben-Gurion, Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver of Cleveland, representing the Jewish Agency (then the shadow government of the state-to-be), presented the case for a Jewish state before the United Nations General Assembly.

Today it is a truism that the security and welfare of Israel have literally become articles of faith in the belief system of American Jews. Nurtured by

the writings of publicists and theologians, encapsulated in the slogans of communal leaders and celebrated in commemorative and fund-raising events, Israel, as nearly every observer of Jewish life has suggested, has become "the religion for American Jews." One must stress, however, that *the conjunction of circumstances*—the crying need, on the one hand, to resettle the surviving remnant somewhere, and the growing recognition, on the other hand, that establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine was the only feasible means of saving the remnant—was the nexus at the heart of the overwhelming support for statehood between 1945 and 1948.

This coupling of circumstances molded the sentiments and attitudes of American Jews. At its birth, Israel's survival became inextricably bound to that other primal remembrance of our times, the destruction of European Jewry. Later events, such as the alarm for Israel's survival in the weeks preceding the Six-Day War in 1967, demonstrated the depth of American Jewry's concern. True, in the 1950s and early 1960s, other concerns appeared to diminish the emotional identity with Israel that marked the years 1945 to 1948 and the years following 1967. Nevertheless, the transcendent place of the "destruction and renewal" theme in the group consciousness of American Jews was actually set in the formative decade beginning in 1945.

At the same time, American Jews were deepening and intensifying their identity as Americans. America's role in the defeat of Nazism and its emergence as leader of the free world—the one effective force blocking Soviet expansion—induced American Jews not only to participate in the civic and political life of postwar America but to do so with unprecedented vigor and effectiveness. The high percentage of Jewish participation in elections compared with the voting public as a whole, the prominence of Jewish contributors as financial backers for political candidates, and the increase in the number of Jewish elected officials were some of the outward indications. No less notable was the ease with which political figures of Jewish background began to move out from Jewish organizational life into the larger political world and then, with their enhanced stature, back again to the Jewish. Philip Klutznik is perhaps the most striking example. His Jewish leadership track took him through the ranks of B'nai B'rith to the presidency of the organization in 1953. In a parallel career in government, Klutznik moved from commissioner of Federal Public Housing under Franklin D. Roosevelt and Harry Truman, to U.S. representative to the United Nations at various times during the Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson administrations, and then to a cabinet post during Jimmy Carter's presidency.

Most significant of all was the new departure of Jewish communal institutions in assuming an active role in American civic affairs. Community relations agencies, formerly almost exclusively concerned with discrimination against Jews, now entered the realm of social action in its broadest sense. They lobbied for legislation directed against racial discrimination, in favor of

social welfare programs, against weakening trade unionism and for a foreign policy that stressed internationalism, aid to democratic governments, and a tempering of superpower confrontations. So, too, they joined in litigation against racial discrimination and for the strict interpretation of the constitutional principle of separation of church and state. In 1945, the American Jewish Congress created its Commission on Law and Social Action and committed itself to "working for a better world . . . whether or not the individual issues touch directly upon so-called Jewish interests." Soon after, the American Jewish Committee, in a more circumspect manner moved beyond its original purpose (as expressed in its charter) "to prevent the infringement of the civil and religious rights of Jews and to alleviate the consequences of persecution." It now declared its intention to "join with other groups in the protection of the civil rights of the members of all groups irrespective of race, religion, color or national origin."

The religious wings of Judaism followed suit. By the end of the Second World War, both the Reform and Conservative rabbinic associations had long-standing commitments to pursue the goals of social justice, and the Orthodox Rabbinical Council of America began taking a similar stand. In the 1930s, for example, Reform's Central Conference of American Rabbis had declared that the "individualistic, profit-oriented economy is in direct conflict with the ideals of religion." At the same time, the Conservative Rabbinical Assembly of America announced a program for world peace, declared for a thirty-hour work-week and proclaimed a goal of "a social order . . . based on human cooperation rather than competition inspired by greed." These resolutions, which undoubtedly reflected the social sensibilities of the rabbis, did not go beyond the ritual of affirmation by the annual conferences. But beginning in the mid-1940s, the Reform and Conservative movements as a whole, and not merely the rabbinate, placed both specific domestic issues and international policy matters on their lay agendas. They established commissions, organized local action groups, and collaborated with parallel Protestant and Catholic agencies on behalf of social justice issues. (In contrast, although the Orthodox Rabbinical Council began adopting annual resolutions on a number of welfare state issues such as price and rent controls and continuation of federal housing programs, social activism did not become an integral part of the Orthodox lay associations.) Thus, the militancy demonstrated by rabbinic leaders and Jewish organizations during the 1960s over civil rights, school integration, and the Vietnam War stemmed from the Jewish community's active stand on political issues that began in the 1940s.

In a broad sense, American Jewry's two public commitments—assuring Israel's security and striving for a liberal America (and, by extension, a liberal world order)—have constituted the basis for a "functional consensus" ever since the linkage between the two was forged in the aftermath of the defeat of Nazism and the establishment of the Jewish state. On the whole, the two

elements have meshed well, and in fact have reinforced each other. American Jewish leaders have presented Israel as both a haven for the persecuted and a doughty democracy surrounded and threatened with destruction by totalitarian Arab regimes allied, until recently, with an expansive Soviet Union. This has been a theme repeated often when U.S. presidents address American Jews and when party platforms are formulated. As a consequence, the dual identity of American Jews has resulted in less anxiety than some would have anticipated. The fear that vigorous support of Israel would give rise to charges of divided allegiance and fan the fires of anti-Semitism has not been borne out. The patriotic fulminations of right-wing extremists, bearers of a fundamentalist anti-Semitism, and the revolutionary rhetoric of the radical Left that has equated Zionism with racism have of course been causes for concern, but they have not infected mainstream America. This is not to say that a latent disquiet has never been present, rising on occasion to the surface. For example, Jacob Blaustein, president of the American Jewish Committee, intervened with the government of Israel on a number of occasions until he obtained formal assurances from Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion in 1950 that the Jewish state held no claim on the political loyalties of American Jews, whose sole allegiance, it was stressed, was to the United States.

Nevertheless, American Jews intuitively sensed that the functional consensus based on supporting Israel and defending a liberal America was not sufficient. What was needed was a doctrinal or ideological core that, while identifying the group, would also justify the operative elements of the consensus. During the first postwar decade, American Jews almost unanimously viewed religion as that doctrinal core. It was the way Jews identified themselves. Sociologists studying the new Jewish communities documented its currency. They also noted the paradox of Jews defining themselves overwhelmingly by religion while at the same time showing indifference and apathy for actual religious practice. Contemporary observers explained this incongruity as a form of adjustment to an American society that recognized religious activity alone as justifying self-segregation. These were the years when Jewish communal leaders found so congenial the notion that a trifaith America—Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish, “the religions of democracy”—formed the underpinning of the “American Way of Life.” This interpretation of American society placed Judaism and its bearers in the mainstream of the nation’s cultural and spiritual tradition.

Since Judaism as interpreted by the American rabbi taught its followers to seek social justice, being Jewish in America meant fighting for open housing and fair employment practices, for social welfare and pro-union legislation—in short, for the New Deal, the Fair Deal, and their successors. Judaism also demanded fulfillment of the religious commandment that “all Israel are responsible for one another,” hence the duty to rescue Jews and strengthen

the Jewish state. As individuals, Jews identified themselves as belonging to a religious community. As a group, they acted like an ethnic minority.

It is important to remember that, for American Jews, Judaism and Jewishness became identical only during the decade beginning in 1945. Although such a religious self-definition long preceded the postwar years (it was the cornerstone of American Reform Judaism), the East European immigrants had earlier created an ethnic and secular reality that overran, without obliterating, the purely religious formulation of Jewishness of the older, established community. One need merely mention the variegated Jewish associational life the immigrants created and the flowering of Yiddish literature—the most impressive cultural creation in a foreign language by an American immigrant group—to indicate the range and depth of this Jewish ethnic world. In acculturated form, significant elements of this world carried over into the second generation. Obviously, Zionism and an aggressively secular Jewish radical tradition stand out. Yet the considerable numbers who were brought up in this milieu in the urban neighborhoods of the years before 1945 failed to seriously challenge or to qualify the religious identification of American Jewry that so quickly became universal in the post-1945 decade. Surely, the prevailing drive for conformity, which was in part a by-product of the Cold War and the accompanying fear of Communist influence at home, saw religion (*any* religion, to paraphrase Eisenhower) as the cornerstone of democratic society and an antitoxin against the Communist heresy. And quite possibly the political and financial aid being so prominently extended to the Jewish state was best explained to the nation as religiously motivated. Separation for religious purposes did conform, after all, with patriotic norms. In part, these factors hastened the trends toward consensus within the Jewish community.

On occasion Jewish secular thinkers gave explicit and anguished expression to this change. In 1951, the Labor Zionist Organization published an essay by C. Bezalel Sherman, “Israel and the American Jewish Community.” The Labor Zionist movement, an amalgamation of socialist Zionist parties transplanted to the United States with the mass migration, was staunchly secularist. It had favored the formation of democratically elected Jewish communal politics and bilingual education in a manner similar to its European sister parties. Sherman himself was an ideologue of the organization’s left wing. Nevertheless, in reappraising the future of the American Jewish community in the new era ushered in by the establishment of the Jewish state, he abandoned the position that American Jews should strive for the status of nationality. Now he wrote, “America, insensible to the existence of a Jewish nation, insisted on classing them [American Jews] with the religious communities,” the only type of ethnic group recognized by “American constitutional life.” Sherman continued:

Jews thus have no other alternative but to constitute themselves as a community operating in a religious framework. . . . The irreligious Jew . . . will have to

accept a religious designation for the group of which he wishes to be a member without sharing the tenets of its faith. This is the price a secularist Jew will have to pay for his voluntary sharing in a minority status.

Ten years later, in his study *The Jew Within American Society*, Sherman used this redefinition of Jewish identity to explain Jewish group survival in America. It was the key to understanding Jewish "ethnic individuality." On a note evoking Mordecai Kaplan's analysis of Jewish identity, Sherman concluded: "American Jews can no more conceive of the Jewish faith severed from the framework of Jewish peoplehood than they can conceive of a Jewish community removed from its religious base." Since Jewish peoplehood embraced Jews everywhere, concern for persecuted brethren abroad and the well-being of the State of Israel had increased the sense of "belongingness" among American Jews. "For this reason, they may be expected to continue as a distinct ethnic group—on the level of spiritual uniqueness, religious separateness, ethnic consolidation and communal solidarity, but not in a political sense."

In terms of the Jewish establishment (the synagogue movements, federations, defense agencies, and the Zionist organizations), American Jews had created by the early 1950s a consensus and a degree of equanimity they had not known before. They were meeting their dual responsibilities as Americans and Jews admirably. On domestic issues, they aligned with the liberal-centrist position and upheld America's role as defender of the free world. Within the Jewish community, the divisive issues of the interwar years—class differences, the intergenerational tensions between immigrant and native-born, conflicting notions of Jewish identity, the assimilationist-radical deprecation of Jewish life, and the strident polemics over Zionism—were vanishing or were gone altogether. Not surprisingly, then, the tercentenary planners proposed stressing not only communal harmony and achievement but also the beliefs and values Jews held in common with all Americans.

In December 1951, Ralph E. Samuel, the vice president of the American Jewish Committee, announced the formation of a committee to plan the three-hundredth anniversary of the establishment of the first permanent Jewish community in North America. Samuel emphasized the opportunity such celebrations would provide to pay homage to the "American heritage of religious and civil liberty." American Jews had built a "flourishing American Judaism," he declared, and at the same time they had taken part "in building the American democratic civilization that we have today." In his single reference to contemporary affairs, Samuel concluded his remarks with the note that the tercentenary celebration would demonstrate to the world "the strength of the American people's commitment to the principles of democ-

racy in our struggle against communism and other forms of totalitarianism of our day."

This collective undertaking to popularize an American Jewish ideology proved to be an extraordinary enterprise in itself. It also raised a number of questions. Who indeed did the tercentenary organizers represent? How meaningful and tenable could a least-common-denominator ideology be? What were the constraints the planners faced in relating to the American-political and Jewish-political context? Were the provisional tenets Samuel set forth adequate for setting a course for postwar American Jewry?

In January 1952, when the committee on organization met to launch the tercentenary project, Samuel stressed that the American Jewish Committee saw its role as initiator rather than sponsor of the enterprise. In fact, it had been the American Jewish Historical Society that had first proposed the tercentenary celebration. Eager for the broadest communal participation, it had turned to the American Jewish Committee for organizational assistance; the success of the project depended on leaders whose eminence and integrity assured the nonpartisanship of the endeavor.

In addition to Samuel, who was chosen general chairman, two eminent members of the American Jewish Committee were appointed to key committees. Simon Rifkind, who had distinguished himself as a federal judge and special adviser on Jewish affairs to General Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1945 and 1946, headed the "Committee of 300," the policy-making body of the organization. Samuel Rosenman, also a judge, who had served as a principal adviser to Presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt and Harry Truman, chaired the program committee. Another important committee, that of research and publication, was headed by Salo W. Baron, professor of Jewish history at Columbia University.

The composition of the committee reflected nearly the entire spectrum of Jewish religious and communal life. Among the members of the steering committee were Samuel Belkin, president of Yeshiva University; Louis Finkelstein, president of the Jewish Theological Seminary; Israel Goldstein, president of the American Jewish Congress; Samuel Niger, the Yiddish journalist and critic; and Jacob S. Potofsky, president of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union.

In April 1953, after nearly a year of deliberations, the program committee, which, in addition to Rosenman, included Benjamin V. Cohen, Adolph Held, William S. Paley, and David Sarnoff, submitted its report on the "meaning of the anniversary" to a national meeting of the Committee of 300. Obviously the presence of Paley, the head of CBS, and Sarnoff, the head of NBC, indicated the direction and scale of the celebrations. The proposed theme of the celebration—"Man's Opportunities and Responsibilities Under Freedom"—was in fact suggested by Sarnoff and was approved at this meeting.

The major opening event, the National Tercentenary Dinner with President Eisenhower as guest of honor and keynote speaker, took place on October 20, 1954, at the Hotel Astor in New York. It was preceded and followed by forums, exhibitions, pageants, musical festivals, and public dinners organized by local committees in at least four hundred cities and towns. New York, for instance, was the venue of a coast-to-coast radio broadcast of the reconsecration of Congregation Shearith Israel (founded by the original settlers of New Amsterdam) in the presence of representatives of the Jewish and Christian congregations that had either aided or functioned alongside it in the eighteenth century. A special national committee supervised the preparation of a national historical exhibit on the theme "Under Freedom," which was shown at the Jewish Museum in New York and the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. The Chicago committee commissioned Ernst Toch to compose a symphonic suite for the occasion, while the national committee commissioned David Diamond to compose the tercentenary symphony *Ahavah*, which was given its premiere by the National Symphony on November 17, 1954, in Washington. (The other works on the program were Ernest Bloch's *Israel Symphony* and Leonard Bernstein's *The Age of Anxiety*, a thematically balanced program by Jewish composers.) In Atlanta, Georgia, the local committee presented the city with a portrait of Judah P. Benjamin, secretary of state of the Confederacy.

Television played a major role. The main events, such as Eisenhower's address, received national coverage. Leading commercial programs offered commemoration salutes. CBS broadcast a four-part teledrama, "A Precious Heritage," while NBC followed suit with a four-part series entitled "Frontiers of Faith." The tercentenary also generated a plethora of educational material—filmstrips, curricula, and guidebooks on American Jewish history—for use in schools and adult education circles that were sponsored and published by the national organizations. B'nai B'rith organized a nationwide search for historical source materials and provided programs and speakers for its lodges and Hillel foundations. The American Jewish Committee commissioned a series of studies that it published in the *American Jewish Year Book* and an *Inventory of American Jewish History* to further historical research. A volume of studies subsidized by the Workmen's Circle and other Jewish labor organizations gave special attention to the era of the East European Jewish migration.

This history-mindedness anteceded the tercentenary "revival." It was one expression of a self-assertiveness that stemmed from the new position of centrality that had been thrust upon the American Jewish community. And it paralleled the notion of the "American Century," the conviction that became popular during the war years that America had at last taken its "rightful" place as the leader of the free world and the guardian of world order. This national temper stimulated a reexamination of the American past.

Historians and political scientists elaborated the idea of an "American exceptionalism." Typical of their writing was Daniel Boorstin's book *The Genius of American Politics*. "I argue, in a word," Boorstin wrote, "that American democracy is unique. It possesses a 'genius' all of its own."

The new era that began in 1945 was, in a sense, also perceived as "the American Jewish Century." The conviction that American Jews were at last "making history" required recovering a "usable past" showing that Jews had indeed been "making history" for some time. One important expression of this sentiment was the Hebrew Union College's announcement, in the fall of 1947, of the establishment of the American Jewish Archives to document the historical record of American Jewry. The need for such an institution was explained in these words:

American Jewry has become the "center" of world Jewish spiritual life. When the Jewish historian of the next generation reaches the year 1939, he will begin a new chapter in the history of his people, a chapter which must be called, "The American Jewish Center." This Jewish community has now become the pivotal and controlling factor in that historic development which began in the thirteenth pre-Christian century in Palestine.

There were more manifestations of a search for "American Jewish exceptionalism." In 1953, the Jewish Theological Seminary established the American Jewish History Center. Soon after, the center commissioned a series of communal studies and organized regional conferences to generate interest in the projects. The tercentenary accelerated this newfound interest in an American Jewish past. Jewish communities—Buffalo, Rochester, Milwaukee, Cleveland, and Los Angeles—allocated money for writing their communal histories. In September 1954, a revitalized American Jewish Historical Society convened the most impressive conference of historians ever held on the writing of American Jewish history. Thus the new self-consciousness American Jewry displayed after the conclusion of the war swelled under the impetus of the tercentenary. Pride and awareness of its preeminence in the Jewish world reverberated in the public and institutional interest in recording and interpreting the Jewish experience in America.

One interpretive history of Jewish life in America that appeared during the tercentenary year captured the tercentenary ideology faithfully. Oscar Handlin's *Adventure in Freedom* (1954) stressed the process of Jewish integration into a society that was distinguished by its "diversity, voluntarism, equality, freedom, and democracy." Handlin, who taught American social history at Harvard and who had won a Pulitzer Prize for his 1951 study on immigration in American life, *The Uprooted*, was perhaps the most influential writer on the American pluralist tradition. Handlin insisted that American Jews be viewed as one ethnic group among many in a pluralist America that neither

impeded nor encouraged ethnic group maintenance. This was the opened, wholesome "adventure in freedom." Yet Handlin also struck an ominous note. Although the Jews of America were celebrating the year 1654, they could not forget "the stark facts of our present situation." Jews had not recovered "from the shock of the six million victims of the European catastrophe"; at the same time they shared in the "enormous burden upon American society," which was "locked in unremitting struggle" with "the forces of totalitarianism."

It was the tercentenary theme, "Man's Opportunities and Responsibilities Under Freedom," that required explication. When the program committee presented its recommendations after months of deliberations and after soliciting the opinions of scores of leaders from all fields and walks of life, it explained the criteria it had used in these words:

The theme should express the outstanding fact of the past 300 years of our participation in America; that it should describe the significance of the present day for American Jews, and that it should express the hopes and aspirations and objectives of the future for ourselves and for all Americans—indeed, for all human beings throughout the world.

When the recommendations were published as a brochure—thirty thousand copies were distributed—no explicit reference was made to the Jewish community itself, or to the American Jew's "responsibility under freedom" to help other Jews, although the members of the committees in their other communal capacities were deeply involved in Jewish affairs. In a section entitled "All-Embracing Nature of Celebration," the committee warned that the tercentenary should not be made "a vehicle for propagation of any particular ideology in American Jewish life. . . . It should be neither Zionist, non-Zionist, nor anti-Zionist. It should not try to formulate or advance any particular definition of Jewishness."

The tercentenary committee defined the principal goal of the observance as a celebration of America's democratic ideals. Thus the American Jewish experience was significant in that it bore witness to the success of this free society. No less important was the emphasis placed on the congruence between Judaism and American democratic ideals. Indeed, the authors of the report declared, "The teachings of the Hebrew prophets have vitally affected the growth of freedom and the development of human dignity in America and throughout the world." In a summing-up statement at the conclusion of the year of festivities, David Bernstein, the tercentenary committee's executive director, justified the choice of the theme in these words:

At a time when the Jewish community and its leaders felt that they were on display before the world, they chose to speak, first, in religious terms and, next,

in terms of such political ideas as civic responsibility, strengthening democracy, protecting individual liberty, and expanding civil rights.

Was there perhaps, in the midst of the deserved self-congratulations, also a measure of anxiety and insecurity? What seemed implicit in Bernstein's statement and had been alluded to in Samuel's first announcement of a tercentennial committee four years earlier was stated explicitly in Handlin's measured words. Praising democracy and liberty at a time when the nation was locked in what it perceived to be a global struggle with an aggressive and ruthless totalitarianism was understandable enough. The "golden decade" for American Jews was also the decade of the Cold War, McCarthyism, and fear of Communist subversion.

Abroad, postwar America confronted an expansive Communist power that now possessed nuclear weapons. Not only had an "iron curtain descended across the continent," in Winston Churchill's words in his March 1946 address, but it was followed by the fall of China to the Communists and the invasion of South Korea by the North in 1950. At home, an alarmed government responded with drastic measures to curb and root out real and perceived instances of Communist infiltration. It began in 1947, when Harry Truman put into effect his loyalty program, and it ended, at least symbolically, in December 1954 when the United States Senate censured its member Joseph McCarthy—a time span nearly identical with the first years in the new American Jewish postwar era. Thus the years of optimism were also the years of the "Attorney General's list" of subversive organizations, the Alger Hiss case, the loyalty oaths and security clearances, the high-handed investigations of Senator Joseph McCarthy, and the congressional committees who went hunting for Communists and who blacklisted those they termed "Fifth Amendment Communists."

Here was the snake in the garden: the agony and trepidation caused by the conspicuous presence of Jews among those accused of disloyalty and even espionage, and the presence of a marginal but vocal radical Left within the organized Jewish community. Thus the arrest in 1950 of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg for handing atomic secrets to the Soviet Union, and their trial, conviction, and execution in 1953, jarred the self-confidence of American Jews. (The trial judge, prosecuting attorney, defense attorneys, and the principal witnesses who turned state's evidence were all Jewish.) Arnold Forster, general counsel of the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), recalled the period as a time when American Jewish leaders "came to fear the establishment of a link between being a Jew and being a 'communist traitor' in the popular mind." A bitter fight ensued within the Jewish community over aiding Jewish victims of the anti-Communist crusade. The most prominent instance was the campaign for clemency for the Rosenbergs in which Communist and left-wing groups were active.

The American Jewish Committee created a special committee to combat the "Jewish/Communist stereotype." It launched an educational program exposing the techniques and strategies used by the Communists to infiltrate Jewish organizations and called on the community to expel Jewish "Communist-front" organizations. During the height of the hysteria, the American Jewish Committee was less than forthright in its commitment to civil liberties. On this last score, in contrast, both the ADL and the American Jewish Congress maintained their aggressive stand in defense of civil liberties. In 1952, at the height of McCarthy's influence, the ADL chose to honor Senator Herbert Lehman at its annual convention because of his opposition to McCarthy. The American Jewish Congress, for its own part, waged an incessant battle against congressional and state legislation that required loyalty oaths, providing legal aid in appealing cases where there appeared to have been infringements of constitutional rights. To a considerable degree, the Red Scare hastened the political integration of American Jews. It greatly weakened Jewish radicalism, fortified the liberalism of "the vital center," and drew American Jews, as never before, into a whirl of "American" issues. In dealing with these issues, both civil libertarians and anti-Communist activists operated through Jewish agencies.

The official tercentenary ideology, orchestrated by a group of conservative and cautious leaders, aroused a spirited debate over the direction of American Jewish life. Jewish journals of opinion provided the platforms for a more reflective consideration of the issues. Robert Gordis, editor of *Judaism*, devoted an entire issue to the tercentenary in which contributors evaluated Jewish philosophy, culture, and communal life in America. Eugene Kohn gathered a dozen articles from *The Reconstructionist* on the communal and cultural life of American Jews and published them in a volume commemorating the tercentenary. The score of mass-circulation house organs published by B'nai B'rith, Hadassah, the American Jewish Congress, and others devoted whole issues to critical essays that examined American Jewish life. For the most part, the conclusions were laudatory and the prognosis for the future optimistic. Typical was Gordis's introduction to the tercentenary issue of *Judaism*. American Jewry, Gordis wrote, had not been "altogether without influence or creativity within the confines of Judaism." It had been innovative in the fields of religion, philanthropy, education, and group defense. Indeed, "the instruments for a renaissance of Judaism, in the days to come, are at hand."

There were also dissenting voices. Horace Kallen, the philosopher and ideologue of cultural pluralism, published a blistering piece in the *Congress Weekly* entitled "The Tercentenary, Yomtov or Yahrzeit." He accused the organizers of violating the essence of the "American Idea," that is, of his well-known notion of cultural pluralism. Kallen had interpreted American freedom as granting the right to any ethnic, religious, or racial group to preserve

and diversify its communal culture. Nothing in the rhetoric of the tercentenary encouraged American Jews to do this, he argued; even the tercentenary emblem was assimilationist. Not a Hebrew word was on it, and above the menorah that dominated the face of the emblem was a star—but it was a five-pointed, American star rather than the six-pointed Magen David. For Kallen, the challenge of American freedom for the American Jewish community meant creating, first of all, a democratic communal polity. A community so organized would then be able to nurture—and here Kallen employed his famous metaphor of the orchestra—the specifically Jewish part in the total orchestrated production that was the pluralistic culture of the American people.

Mordecai Kaplan, the philosopher of Reconstructionism, criticized the planners for failing to confront one of the crucial questions in American Jewish life. "Why is no reference made in all the literature, speeches and lectures concerning the tercentenary to what it means from the standpoint of our survival as a people in dispersion? . . . This is the first time in the history of the Jewish people that it is jubilant over its sojourn in any land outside of Eretz Yisrael." What was the Jewish context of the celebration? What signposts for the future course of American Jewry had the tercentenary offered? The establishment of the State of Israel had raised the question of "the ultimate destiny of the Jewish People." Was Eretz Israel to be the ingathering of the exiles or merely the creative nucleus of the Jewish people? Building on his formulation of living in two civilizations (American and Jewish), Kaplan emphasized the permanence of Diaspora and rejected the Israel-Zionist claim that American Jews were in Galut (exile). For Kaplan, the influence of the American democratic tradition on the Jews and "the inexhaustible reservoir of Jewish creativity in Israel" promised a creative future for "the American sector of the Jewish people [that had] at last found a resting place for its feet." But these matters had to be debated, clarified, and decided upon.

Ben Halpern, the secularist Zionist thinker, began his study of the American Jewish community, *The American Jew, A Zionist Analysis*, by considering the conviction underlying the tercentenary that "America is different." Indeed it was different, Halpern agreed. In the shadow of Hitler's destruction of Europe's Jews and in the presence of Soviet totalitarianism and Stalin's anti-Semitism, Jews had special reasons for celebrating America's democratic tradition. However, American Jews had missed one crucial way in which America was different for them. As a historic entity, American Jews constituted one of the youngest Jewish centers of the Diaspora. In terms of "real history"—of grappling with the specific problems of their existence as a group—American Jewish history began at most with the rise of the first, authentic American Jewish creation, Reform Judaism, and the formation of native American Jewish institutions. Unlike European Jewry, Halpern argued, American Jews had never had to wrestle with the question of emanci-

pation and self-emancipation; American Jewish history began long after the questions of equality and political rights were resolved. His analysis led him to conclude that the indigenous ideologies of American Jews, as programs intended to foster a creative Jewish group life, were failing. Neither the secular ideologies such as cultural pluralism and neo-Zionism nor an innovative religious movement such as Reconstructionism could prevent the erosion of Jewish life. Assimilation? Survival? Was America different from Europe? His answer was: "In Europe, the stick; in America, the carrot." Indeed, Halpern, the fundamentalist Zionist, was utterly pessimistic about American Jewish group survival.

Surely by the final years of the 1950s one could confidently point to a baseline that demarcated American Jewry from what had existed prior to 1945 and that would hold, for the most part, during the decades ahead. The searing recollections of the poverty of immigrant parents or the crushing collapse into destitution of the Great Depression years had been replaced with an affluence that opened new social opportunities. This affluence enabled the postwar generation to devote some of its time and wealth to societal needs. Establishing entirely new communities in the suburbs demanded an enormous collaborative effort. Building communities, expanding the institutions and agencies serving American Jewry as a whole, and meeting the needs of world Jewry also required politically sophisticated leaders, trained professionals, and efficient organization. An organizational ideology developed "of acts and tasks, of belonging and conforming, of *na'aseh venishma*." "To be a Jew," one perceptive observer wrote, "is to belong to an organization. To manifest Jewish culture is to carry out . . . the program of an organization." Support for Israel as refuge and home—which more than it swept aside its opponents, co-opted them—became the overarching endeavor, the one that transcended the local and the particular. Hence it came to define the active community.

Purely *Jewish* concerns could also be linked to liberal politics through the argument that to support American liberal causes was in the "Jewish interest," or else group interests could be denied in favor of appealing to the universal teachings of Judaism. Whatever the justification, Jewish communal participation in American politics in the decade beginning in 1945 became widespread and was found acceptable. For postwar America commended communal ties that encouraged spiritual self-preservation and self-fulfillment. In the state of fluid pluralism then prevailing—of changing self-images and expectations of religious, ethnic, and racial groupings—any number of ways were possible for identifying oneself. Understandably, the Jews, eager to take their place in the more tolerant postwar society, defined their group identity to fit the reigning mood. Judaism as ethnic religion and Judaism as "peoplehood," as "religious civilization," and as one of the three

"religions of democracy" were some of the terms that came into use. In the case of the tercentenary platform, Judaism became American democracy, reflecting a strand of insecurity that was present during the golden decade.

A number of ideologues were distressed by the assimilationist thrust of this formulation. They called on American Jews to instead confront the complexity of their dual identity, indeed to view it as the source of an American Jewish distinctiveness. Rabbis and theologians challenged the cult of organization and the emptiness of "religion as the American way." Yet ideologues and rabbis were also committed to a pluralist America. They collaborated in ways that were inconceivable during the prewar years, not only accepting but applauding the internal pluralism of Jewish group life. Precisely the give-and-take of contending movements and ideas within a communal consensus indicated a commitment to group survival. One could understand, for example, the much-criticized slogan, "Man's Opportunities and Responsibilities Under Freedom," as a shrewd strategy to maintain the community. (Rabbis used the phrase as the text for their sermons on the need for better Jewish education, support for Israel, and a richer synagogal life.) Unmistakably, whatever ideological issues were placed on the Jewish public agenda during the decade beginning in 1945—which have remained there to this day—no longer called into question the worth or desirability of Jewish survival. The issue henceforth would be the quality and character of Jewish group survival.