www.jcpa.org

by Dr. Manfred Gerstenfeld
Published May 2010

The opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect those of the Board of Fellows of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs

No. 56, 16 May 2010 / 3 Sivan 5770

American Jewry's Comfort Level: Present and Future

Manfred Gerstenfeld

- The challenges confronting American Jewry are multiple. Jewish continuity has many disparate aspects, among which are issues such as Jewish identity, education, marriage, aging, gender relations, the strengthening of communities, leadership, mobility, attitudes toward Israel, philanthropy, outreach, government relations, anti-Semitism and anti-Israelism, building alliances, interfaith relations, and many others. In a postmodern society, fragmentation of views on these issues is likely to increase further.
- The main leadership test seems to be: who will be able to speak for American Jewry about the multiple challenges the Jewish community will have to face? And as American Jewry is the largest Diaspora community, how will it be able to address the many problems concerning world Jewry in the years to come?
- A relatively small American community such as the Jewish one, which wants to protect its rights and advance its interests and those of Israel, must seek to build coalitions with other ethnic groups. Given its shrinking percentage within the American population, this will require greater efforts in the future.
- The battle for the future of a vibrant American Jewry begins with understanding the present better and continues with assessing as best as possible what the future might bring. The need to develop tools to understand faster the changes occurring and their effects is perhaps the greatest challenge the American Jewish community has to confront.

The condition and comfort level of American Jews are influenced to a great extent by society at large. The complex nature of postmodern society needs to be understood as well. Its major characteristics include the multitude and fragmentation of issues that come to attention in a disorderly fashion.

In such a culture, defining common priorities becomes increasingly difficult. The same is true for the maintenance of common values by large parts of society. In a postmodern

world, multiple identities, secularism, fundamentalism, and the breakdown of authority can all flourish simultaneously. How postmodernity's characteristics will influence American society, whose values include multiculturalism and pluralism, is largely unpredictable.

Individualism leads to the breakdown of responsibility. Alan Mittleman suggests that a key issue in contemporary society is the loss of faith in institutions, especially those of government, but including other traditional institutional loci as well. He observes: "There is a hollowing-out of faith in long-established American myths, such as progress, upward mobility, and so on. There is a concomitant loss of social or public hope. None of these malign phenomena precisely map onto 'individualism.'"[1] Indeed it may well be that the next generation of Americans will not do better economically than that of its parents.

The combination of some of these factors leads to increased polarization, which further intensifies the disintegration of society and is affecting the American Jewish community as well. David Harris, executive director of the American Jewish Committee said: "Younger American Jews do not reflect their parents' attitudes so much as the overall apathy or cynicism toward society."[2] Yet at the same time new institutions, initiated by members of the younger generation, are flourishing.

When trying to forecast where the United States may be ten years from now, one must assess, as much as possible, trends regarding a large number of issues. Is the world moving toward a large-scale clash of cultures? There seems little place for this in a postmodern reality. Far more possible is that there will be many clashes of segments of cultures. The main ones are likely to be between parts of Muslim and parts of Western culture.

What can those who hold responsibilities do to cope with these challenges? The answers seem to be varied, and include greater flexibility in thought and action. Requirements include the acquisition of multiple skills, continuous monitoring of change, and developing as many safeguards against risks as possible.

A Classic Approach

Hereafter, a more classic analysis will be made of a necessarily limited and selective number of issues concerning American Jewish society's present, as well as its future prospects and challenges.

"Jewish continuity" became a key subject in the American Jewish public discourse following the publication of the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS). This study provided a wealth of data about the community and caused disquiet among its leaders, partly because of the high percentage of interfaith marriages. The 2000-2001 NJPS further strengthened these feelings.

Jewish continuity has many disparate aspects, among which are issues such as Jewish identity, education, marriage, aging, gender relations, the strengthening of communities, leadership, mobility, attitudes toward Israel, philanthropy, outreach, government relations, anti-Semitism and anti-Israelism, building alliances, interfaith relations, and many others. In a postmodern society, fragmentation of views on these issues is likely to increase further.

Demography

In each of these areas the Jewish community faces major challenges. In the discussion about the Jewish community's continuity, great importance is ascribed to the number of Jews who identify as such. This has led to an increased interest in Jewish demography. A 2008 publication by the Jewish People Policy Planning Institute (JPPPI) estimates the Jewish population in the United States at 5,275,000. This represents the middle range between two large national surveys conducted in 2000 and 2001, the abovementioned NJPS and the American Jewish Identity Survey (AJIS).

Despite the fact that they are dated, these surveys still provide the best estimates of the size of the American Jewish population. Both pointed to effective Jewish population reduction since the early 1990s. The causes for this negative trend are later and less frequent marriages, low fertility, continuing increases in out-marriage rates, an aging population, and declining numbers of Jewish immigrants from other countries.[3] Various other figures have been mentioned for the number of American Jews. These depend largely on how one defines "who is a Jew." It may well be that this definition will become so elastic that figures will be almost meaningless.

Retaining as many Jews as possible for the Jewish collective is even more crucial because the overall U.S. population is likely to increase substantially in the coming decades. The percentage of Jews in the total population is thus inevitably bound to decline. This has multiple consequences, and influences the discussion on many subjects of concern to American Jewry. The desire to preserve Jews for the Jewish community has led to an increased emphasis on Jewish education, both formal and informal, as well as manifold entrepreneurial outreach activities.

Several major matters concerning the future of the Jewish community are dependent on developments in American society at large. One example among many: the economic crisis and specific aspects of it, such as the fallout from the Madoff affair, have shown how some individual projects may be greatly affected if the wealth of certain philanthropists interested in them is harmed. This random impact is not related to the importance of specific activities for the Jewish community. It might be described in management terms as prioritizing by accident.

Regional Dispersion and Mobility

New York, California, Florida, and New Jersey together account for close to two-thirds of American Jewry. Four more states, Pennsylvania, Illinois, Massachusetts, and Maryland, contain another 15 percent.

A 2009 study on the impact of the geographic mobility of the Jewish community found that

Jews continue to exhibit high levels of residential mobility, especially in growing Jewish communities in the South and West.... More recent movers are much younger than non-movers, less likely to be married, more likely to be college graduates (but with lower income) and slightly less likely to have a Jewish denominational identity.... Mobility reduces all Jewish Federation related perceptions and behaviors, including familiarity with the local Federation and giving to the Federation at any level. In general, the strongest adverse effects of mobility are in the domain of philanthropy, particularly with respect to local Jewish Federations.[4]

Mobility in general affects Jewish institutional life. Those who have relocated may not identify with the institutions of their new residence, while having severed ties with those in the location they came from. In a few cases, however, households maintain strong relationships with other communities. For example, many elderly Jewish retirees in Florida continue to maintain synagogue memberships and to donate to Federations in other states.[5]

Jewish Identity

Before analyzing how to strengthen Jewish identity, the term has to be defined. Sociologist Steven M. Cohen posits that there is no accurate word for the complex of Jewish belief, behavior, and belonging. He says that, purely for lack of a better term, the word identity is used for this purpose. Cohen comments that, for most American Jews, Judaism is an aesthetic understanding and being Jewish has increasingly become a matter of individual choice. Therefore, the essential challenge confronting American Jewry today is to develop policies for bridging the gap between the Judaic mission and the Jewish marketplace.[6]

Rabbi David Ellenson, president of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion notes that nowadays many Jews who intermarry "want to remain in the community and identify as Jews. The Reform movement would not have decided to accept patrilineal descent if there were not so many intermarried Jews who still want to be part of the Jewish community." He suggests that only the future will tell whether this approach will succeed.[7]

Talk-show host Michael Medved opines: "For most American Jews, the core of their Jewish identity isn't solidarity with Israel; it's rejection of Christianity.... Jewish voters don't embrace candidates based on their support for the State of Israel as much as they passionately oppose candidates based on their identification with Christianity - especially the fervent evangelicalism of the dreaded ‘Christian Right.'"[8]

Another important issue for the future of American Jewry is the relationship between generations. The American Jewish community is subject to the cultural patterns, fashions, and trends of society at large. As noted, postmodernism has brought with it a fragmentation of society and a desire for greater individualism, and this also finds major expressions among Jews.

Marriage

When analyzing the future of the Jewish community, rates of intermarriage are important. But this alone is too crude a measure for a detailed assessment. Not surprisingly, more in-married than intermarried Jews consider being Jewish important. However, the differences are not as dramatic as one might have expected. This has been pointed out by Sylvia Barack Fishman and Daniel Parmer of Brandeis University.[9]

Cohen says:

The in-marriage norm is so critical that it has true value. I believe the in-marriage norm affects the size of intermarriage, even if it is not a total obstacle. We have some evidence that when people say "my parents were against it," there are lower rates of intermarriage. In my work, I saw the connection between being worried about the State of Israel, and concerned about one's relationship to intermarriage.[10]

Ellenson mentions how touchy it is to express preference for in-marriage in the Reform movement. He relates that Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the Union for Reform Judaism, stated that it is desirable for a born Jew to marry another Jew, or to have the non-Jewish partner convert to Judaism. A third alternative is for the intermarried couple to decide to raise their children as Jews. When Yoffie made this statement at the movement's biennial convention in 2005, it sparked much controversy.[11]

Gender, Aging

Barack Fishman and Parmer found that among the non-Orthodox denominations women have become increasingly prominent, while men are being marginalized. This is a major departure from the historical norm where men were the leaders in Jewish affairs, including public religious functions as well as rituals. This remains so in the Orthodox settings.

This development has many implications. One is that, among many non-Orthodox Jews, men and boys attach less value to Jewish activities and friends as well as to in-marriage. Barack Fishman and Parmer maintain that research and policy planning may change the situation.[12]

The age structure of the community presents multiple challenges for Jewish institutions as well. According to demographer Ira Sheskin,

The percentage of Jewish elderly is currently much higher than is the case for all Americans, with 16 percent of Jews being age sixty-five and over compared to 12 percent of all Americans. In addition, the first baby boomers will soon reach age sixty-five, which will further increase the number of Jewish elderly. As life expectancy continues to increase, the percentage of elderly who are age seventy-five and over, and more importantly age eighty-five and over, will see significant increases and lead to greater demand for services.

Sheskin comments that planning housing and social services for this population will soon strain Jewish, other private, as well as secular social service agencies.[13]

Denominations

Synagogue membership is the largest affiliation of American Jewry. According to the 2000-2001 NJPS, at that point 44 percent of Jews were members of a synagogue. However, many more Jews who at present are not members of a synagogue were so or will be during specific periods in the life cycle. In many communities, about 85 percent of American Jews are synagogue members at some point during their adult life.[14]

The sociologist Chaim I. Waxman has analyzed the shift in synagogue memberships among the various denominations. Reform has become the leading denomination in American Jewry. At the turn of the century, of Jewish households belonging to a synagogue, 38.5 percent were Reform, while 35 percent of Jews were Reform. Waxman points out that the Reform movement's numbers have grown fivefold since 1937.

Conservative Judaism, on the other hand, is seeing a significant decline. Over a decade it has lost two hundred congregations. Orthodoxy is growing. Waxman mentions that, according to the 2000-2001 NJPS data, the percentage of American Jews whose affiliation is Orthodox had risen to 10 percent in 2001, while they represented 21 percent of synagogue members.[15]

Historian Jonathan Sarna observes:

American Jews, living in a society that privileges individualism and gives no official recognition to religious group identity, face the challenge of preserving Jewish unity. With so many bitter divisions in Jewish life - between the different religious movements

and among them; between Jews of different backgrounds and ideologies; between in-married Jews and inter-married Jews; between matrilineal Jews and patrilineal Jews; between straight Jews and gay Jews; between born Jews and converted Jews; between American Jews and Israeli Jews; between committed Jews and indifferent Jews - some have questioned whether Jews can remain a united people at all in the twenty-first century.[16]

Outreach

In a shrinking community that views Jewish continuity as a key aim, a multipronged approach to outreach is necessary. On the one hand, households with Jewish members must be sustained. On the other hand, one must reach out to others. A prime target here is the non-Jewish partner in mixed marriages.

The inclusion of many intermarried people in Jewish communal institutions poses new challenges. Historian Jack Wertheimer comments on some of them:

The continuing ripple effects of massive intermarriage have had huge implications for Jewish education, even if little systematic thinking has gone into addressing the needs of children of intermarried parents. Jewish institutions seem to assume that inclusion is the sum total of what is necessary for intermarried families and everything else will work itself out. But as anyone who reads the blogs of young Jewish adults who have been raised this way knows, matters are far more complex.[17]

The Taglit-Birthright Israel project plays, thanks to its size, an important role in both strengthening Jewish identity and outreach. By autumn 2009, nearly 225,000 young Jewish adults aged eighteen to twenty-six from around the world had participated in this program, which consists of a ten-day educational experience in Israel. About 75 percent of the participants were from North America, with the great majority coming from the United States.

Leonard Saxe of Brandeis University says that "We have learned from Birthright Israel that the program has an attitudinal impact irrespective of whether your parents are both Jewish, whether one parent was a convert to Judaism, or whether he or she never converted. The children of intermarried parents also come out of the program with strengthened Jewish identities."[18]

He adds: "The Jewish community needs to decide if it wants an Israel experience to be a normative element for its youth. If the funding is available, and we can reach a point where well over 50 percent of the American Jewish population has had an Israel experience, Diaspora Jewry would be transformed."[19]

Universalism, Ethics

Humanitarian aid to weaker communities and people nowadays attracts significant numbers of mainly younger Jews who participate in either non-Jewish or Jewish frameworks. Ellenson stresses that one of Judaism's important challenges is its insistence on universal human dignity and simultaneously on the Jews' particularity.

He adds:

Whether and how this involvement in *tikkun olam* (social justice and repair of the world) will ultimately bring all these Jews to accept Jewish particularity - and whether the source of this activity is actually Judaism itself or the ethos of the modern world - remains a matter of debate and discussion in the Jewish world. However, I remain optimistic about what these developments may mean for the relevance of Judaism to countless young American Jews.[20]

Ethics are likely to become a more important issue in the American Jewish discourse. The subject has gained major impetus in recent years particularly concerning kosher food. This came to a head because of a scandal involving Agriprocessors, formerly the largest kosher meatpacking company in the United States with more than $300 million in revenues and over a thousand workers.[21]

In 2008, the leaders of the Conservative movement had asked its rabbis to speak about Magen Tzedek, a seal of ethical justice that kosher food manufacturers should be persuaded to apply.[22] At the biennial conference of the Union for Reform Judaism in November 2009 in Toronto, its president Rabbi Eric Yoffie asked Reform Jews to eat less red meat and to check carefully the food being served in synagogues.[23]

In the wake of the Agriprocessors and Madoff scandals, the Orthodox Union (OU), the Rabbinical Council of America (RCA), and Yeshiva University sent a joint letter to affiliated rabbis in advance of the 2009 High Holidays asking them to address Jewish ethics in their sermons. It was the first time ever that such an appeal was issued by the three bodies together.

Education

Jewish education is a central element of Jewish identity. According to Jonathan Woocher, chief ideas officer of the Jewish Education Service of North America (JESNA), "organized American Jewry is not yet capable of adequately measuring the scope of Jewish education." Thus any assessment of the situation in the community can only be an impression. Jewish education seems to be improving for those who are engaged Jews, as they have increasing educational opportunities. Woocher concludes, however, that for those not engaged, the community tends to lose ground.[24]

A 2008-2009 census of American Jewish day schools, conducted by political scientist Marvin Schick, found that there were 228,000 students enrolled in such schools, representing an 11 percent increase from 2003-2004. He found that five out of every six day schools are Orthodox. The overall enrollment in non-Orthodox day schools had fallen by 2.5 percent in the same period.[25]

Woocher identifies a number of sectors as currently receiving special attention: early childhood education, day schools, informal education, and adult education. There has also been greatly increased interest in Israel education. He mentions that part-time education - also called supplementary education - has not yet attracted major funding. However, this still remains the framework with the largest number of pupils.[26]

A census of Jewish supplementary schools, prepared by Wertheimer, found that an estimated 230,000 children were enrolled in such programs during the 2006-07 school year as against about 170,000 in the earlier census for 2003-04.[27] Wertheimer says that, among the important new trends that have reshaped the field of Jewish education, one overarching development in recent decades has been families' insistence on choice, as they try to find the schools and programs offering the best for each of their children. These expressions of consumerism have required Jewish educational institutions to tailor their programs to the needs of individual students and their parents. He adds that a number of "immersive educational experiences" have attracted larger populations. These include day schools, overnight summer camps, and a diverse mix of programs in Israel.[28]

Technological changes will also impact Jewish education. Woocher points out that "changes in domains such as global telecommunications, the Internet, wireless technologies, and on-demand media have created a new environment for Jewish education."[29] Wertheimer summarizes: "In all likelihood, we are only at the beginning of a revolution in the delivery of Jewish education that will remake schools, classrooms, the roles of educators, and individual learning."[30]

Jewish Studies at Universities

The expansion of Jewish studies programs at universities over the past decades has been remarkable. This has manifested itself in many ways including, for instance, the increase in the number of Jewish studies faculty, the rise in membership of the Association for Jewish Studies (AJS), and the publication of important studies.[31] The AJS, founded in 1969, now has more than 1,800 members and there are about 230 endowed chairs for Jewish studies in the United States.[32]

An emerging field is Israel studies. A program for visiting Israeli professors was organized by the American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise (AICE) and began in 2004-05. It has gradually brought an increasing number of Israeli professors to the United States and by the academic year 2008-09, twenty-seven such scholars were teaching on twenty-

six campuses. By the end of 2008 about fifteen chairs in Israel studies had been endowed.[33]

The publication of the new edition of the *Encyclopedia Judaica* in 2006 has shed further light on the development of Jewish studies in the United States.

Much can be learned about trends in the Jewish world, including American Jewry, from what this encyclopedia's editors considered topics demanding emphasis as well as those they considered controversial.

Its executive editor Michael Berenbaum said one important indication was that women had been largely left out of the history, biography, and other sections of the previous edition. Sociologist Rela Mintz Geffen, who collaborated in the new edition says: "The role of women had to be mainstreamed into existing articles such as, for instance, those on kashrut and candles, while many biographies had to be added."[34]

Among the more controversial issues were how editors should deal with homosexuality, the Israeli settler movement, and who should be included as Jews. As Berenbaum observes, "Many who are not halachically Jewish see themselves within the context of Jewish discourse and Jewish faith."[35]

Leadership

One crucial current issue is Jewish leadership. Wertheimer asserts that there are no longer any universally recognized leaders among American Jewry. He found that among the national organizations those more frequently cited as leading forces in the Jewish community are the ones that address international needs, such as AIPAC, the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, and the Claims Conference.

He contends that the locus of organized activity has shifted from the national to the local level, where much of American Jewry's energy is now focused. Synagogues, *chavurot* (small religious fellowships generally focused on prayer and study), federations, educational programs and institutions, as well as grassroots social-action organizations and salons seem to appeal particularly to younger Jews.[36]

The main leadership test in the future thus seems to be: who will be able to speak for American Jewry about the multiple challenges the Jewish community will have to face? And as American Jewry is the largest Diaspora community, how will it be able to address the many problems concerning world Jewry in the years to come?

A relatively small American community such as the Jewish one, which wants to protect its rights and advance its interests and those of Israel, must seek to build coalitions with other ethnic groups. Given its shrinking percentage within the American population, this

will require greater efforts in the future. Much of coalition building is done by local Jewish Community Relations Councils (JCRCs). Particularly in cities where the ethnic composition changes rapidly, the JCRCs must be very dynamic and establish contacts with growing new communities. New York is one of these.[37]

Economics

Economics have an important impact on all communities. There are some economic issues that affect the Jewish community specifically. One of these is that in an aging community, the need to take care of the elderly will necessitate investments in nursing homes and assisted-living and other senior-citizen facilities as well as greater support for them, as there will be more people not earning a living and who have small retirement funds.

A second economic aspect concerns the cost of living Jewishly, particularly for those with the strongest Jewish identity. Their commitment entails great expenses for schooling, camps, and so on. Keeping a kosher home also involves above-average costs. To this must be added synagogue and often also Jewish Community Center memberships.

A third economic impact stems from the recent financial crisis. It affected both individuals who lost their jobs and philanthropic donations. Another aspect of economics concerns a number of scandals in the financial world. In the *Forward*'s annual list of the country's fifty most prominent Jews, a special section was devoted to scandals.[38]

Costs of Education, Poverty

As noted earlier, Jewish education is a central element promoting Jewish continuity and identity. The burden on the Orthodox community especially, with its relatively large number of children, is already heavy, with tuition costs increasing faster than income.

Wertheimer has estimated that the average annual cost for a Jewish day school education per child was around $10,000 a few years ago. This meant that the total outlay for day school attendance of parents, philanthropists, and communities came to about $2 billion per annum. Adding another hundred thousand children to the day school system would mean not only an additional $1 billion annually, but also investment of $135 million in school buildings and maintenance.[39]

Even before the economic crisis that started in 2008, poverty was a problem in some Jewish communities, particularly in large northeastern ones. John Ruskay, executive vice-president of UJA-Federation of New York, drew attention to the nature of the substantial Jewish poverty in New York. He notes that one has to think globally as well. "There are also Jewish poor in the former Soviet Union, Argentina, and Ethiopia, as well

as elsewhere...We have a shared responsibility for Jewish education in communities that cannot afford it."[40]

In its report on Jewish poverty the UJA-Federation states that "244,000 Jewish New Yorkers are poor and that an additional 104,000 live just above the poverty line, disqualifying them for entitlements."[41]

Israel in American Jewish Identity

The place of Israel in American Jewish identity is a subject of much debate. This is likely to increase further in the future. The issue of whether American Jewry is getting more distant from Israel has been debated for a long time.

Attacks on Israel in the new century not only fostered an increase in commitment to Israel among many core elements of American Jewry. They also led to the establishment of an array of grassroots organizations. This development should also be seen within the framework of the mounting individualism in American society at large.[42]

Since its initiation in 1965, the "Salute to Israel" parade in New York has grown into a major expression of American Jewry's identification with Israel. Marissa Gross of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs writes that "the parade is a barometer for the community and its trends. The attendance of the parade also suggests American Jews' sense of comfort and security in the United States. The participants, the themes that are chosen, and the dynamics of the parade itself reflect how American Jews relate to Israel and to themselves."[43]

Future Comfort Levels

One major question that will remain on the American Jewish agenda concerns the level of comfort of Jews in American society. Rabbi David Wolpe says:

We are not used to being, and being accepted as, part of the great collective. Whether labeled Jewish American or American Jews, "Jewish" always pulled at the purity of the other half of the compound word.... This tension, of course, has long been an accusation of our enemies. But it is not an issue of divided loyalty; that is a canard. Rather, the sense of disquiet is a natural accompaniment to being the outsider, the marginalized one who does not feel fully at home.[44]

American Jewry can find comfort in the large number of Jews in Congress and the Jewish presence on the Supreme Court. There are also many Jews among American Nobel Prize winners. Jews, moreover, are found in the forefront of philanthropy and many other respected activities.

One structural example of tension was mentioned by Sarna: "The holiday of Christmas, for example, annually reminds American Jews just how far apart they stand from central aspects of contemporary American culture. Although they may attempt to magnify the relatively minor holiday of Hanukkah into a surrogate for Christmas, Christmas remains an awkward day for many American Jews."[45]

The 2000-2001 NJPS questionnaire included a question phrased as "I feel like an outsider in American society because I am a Jew." Three percent of those polled strongly agreed, 14 percent somewhat agreed, 18 percent somewhat disagreed, 63 percent strongly disagreed, and 2 percent did not respond.[46]

The status of Israel in American society at large also contributes to the comfort level of American Jews. A Gallup poll in February 2010 found that Israel ranked fifth among countries viewed most favorably by Americans. Only Canada, Britain, Germany, and Japan ranked higher. Sixty-seven percent of the more than a thousand people polled said they had a favorable opinion of Israel compared to 25 percent who had an unfavorable one. Sixty-three percent had more sympathy for Israel than for the Palestinians. This was the highest level of support for Israel in nineteen years. About 15 percent said they sided more with the Palestinians.[47]

Anti-Semitism and Anti-Israelism

In recent years it has become increasingly clear that anti-Israelism and anti-Semitism overlap to a great extent. Anti-Semitism is not a major issue in American society at large. This is borne out by various studies by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL). Nevertheless, Jews remain the religious group most targeted for hate in the United States.[48]

Abraham H. Foxman, national director of the ADL, has said that while the ADL audit is a barometer of anti-Semitism, there are certain fields where anti-Jewish manifestations are hard to quantify. He specifically referred to the internet, Facebook, and YouTube. Foxman added: "In 2008, the financial crisis brought about an increase in rhetoric targeting Jews, with letters in newspapers and on Web sites blaming Jews for the misdeeds of a select few, with Bernard Madoff topping the list."[49]

Steven Bayme comments that in general American society has demonstrated repeatedly that when Jews commit misdeeds, Americans react fairly and do not blame the Jews collectively. This has been the pattern consistently since the Rosenberg trial in the 1950s.[50]

The ADL's October 2009 poll of American attitudes toward Jews found that "Anti-Semitic propensities are at a historic low since 1964, matching the previous all time low point in 1998." Only 12 percent of Americans hold anti-Semitic views. Yet, as far as particular stereotypes are concerned, 79 percent of Americans think Jews have too much

power in business and 64 percent say Jews have too much influence in the United States. Twenty-nine percent of all Americans believe that Jews were responsible for the death of Christ.[51]

There are various areas where anti-Semitism manifests itself significantly. This pertains mainly but not exclusively to its anti-Israeli mutation. Some examples are college campuses, mainstream Christian denominations, and major progressive online media. Another source of anti-Israelism about which very little is known is public-high-school curriculum and teachers.

Human Rights and Racism

For many reasons, Jews have always played a role disproportionate to their size in the promotion of human rights. This is still the case as shown by organizations such as the AJDC and the American Jewish World Service (AJWS). The issue of human rights has also become for many an alternative religion. Yet, in recent decades, the cause of human rights has been increasingly undermined in several areas. While many worthy causes are still being promoted, the moral integrity of the human rights movement at large is doubtful at best.

Many of the humanitarian activities of the United Nations have been corrupted. This became evident at the infamous UN World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance in Durban in August-September 2001.

Former Canadian justice minister Irwin Cotler says that by its discrimination against Israel, "the United Nations has become a case study of the new anti-Jewishness and the singling-out of the Jewish people for differential and discriminatory treatment."[52] The Goldstone Report has become yet another example of this.

The abuse of human rights language has increased drastically over the past decade and there is little indication that this trend will be reversed. In this process a new type of racism has emerged that can best be called humanitarian racism. It is based on the assumption that only powerful people - in particular whites - can be responsible for their deeds, while others can only be victims.[53]

Promoting Peace as a Tool for Totalitarianism

For almost a century many people claiming to be pacifists and peace promoters have used dishonest semantics in the field of ethics. In doing so they have also served the interests of various totalitarians. Lenin is just one example of those who have abused pacifists.[54]

The corruption of the civil liberties and social justice movements has not progressed as much as that of the human rights movement. Yet there are indications that, from time to time, promoters of social justice serve the perpetrators of crimes more than their victims. Those who consider civil liberties an absolute priority will increasingly have to confront accusations that they are facilitating terrorist attacks. These are further phenomena that must be monitored in the coming decades.

The concept of *tikkun olam* (repairing the world) could be furthered as well if certain pseudohumanists who are hiding behind a humanitarian mask were to drop out of promoting ethics all together. What *tikkun olam* - a nowadays popular term for which there are few traditional sources - should embody will also require a thorough examination.

These challenges, which have emerged from the corruption of human rights and other types of ethics, will have a substantial place on American Jewry's agenda in the years to come. As Ambassador Alfred Moses put it: "We cannot afford to have those who would destroy Israel pose as champions of the antiracism cause in the world."[55]

Muslims

In 2004, Harris said:

We will continue to confront radical Muslims, as we believe existential questions are at stake here that go far beyond Jews. The American Jewish community will not unilaterally withdraw itself from the public debate on central questions about America's future and the world's destiny. Let me be clear about this: We are not concerned about drawing too much attention to ourselves and roiling the waters - those days are over.[56]

In the United States the problems caused to Jews by segments of the Muslim community are far less severe than those in Western Europe, where calls of "Death to the Jews" have been heard in the public domain in many cities. This has happened particularly, but not exclusively, during periods of tension in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. There has also been substantial violence by Muslims against Jews, and often few or no Muslim organizations have condemned this behavior.

In the United States the mass murder of 9/11 came at an early stage of Muslim violence in the Western world. Muslim terrorism directed at general society thus became part of the American worldview relatively early. There are other reasons why the American Jewish community is not (yet?) confronted with major problems of this kind. Unlike in Western Europe, Muslim immigration to the United States largely consists of a much more educated population. Many make an effort to integrate into a pluralistic society. Furthermore, according to the 2008 American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS), the American Jewish community is still substantially larger than the Muslim population.[57]

Yet there are pockets where Muslim anti-Semitism in various forms has made substantial inroads in the United States. One such area in particular is university campuses. There were also anti-Semitic episodes elsewhere during Israel's 2008-2009 Gaza campaign. It was mainly Arabs and Muslims who participated in numerous demonstrations against Israel.[58] In some of them calls of "Death to the Jews" were heard.

The Obama Presidency

Jewish comfort levels also depend on the attitude of leading U.S. politicians toward Jews and Israel. The first year of the Obama presidency has not provided clear indications of how its policies might develop and what impact they may have on the American Jewish community, both directly and indirectly, as a result of the United States' changing position in the world.

All one can do is watch the president's attitude concerning Jewish issues and Israel. At present this gives a confused view. From its beginning the Obama presidency has been characterized by a soft rhetoric toward the Arab and Muslim world, despite the many racist and other crimes as well as multiple human rights violations in these societies. The one exception where this administration's solicitous behavior has gradually changed is that of Iran.

Even though it was only after much hesitation, the Obama administration decided in February 2009 not to participate in the Durban II conference that took place in April 2009 in Geneva. In May Obama insisted that Israel freeze all construction in East Jerusalem and the West Bank.[59]

His Cairo speech in June 2009 contained many inaccuracies about Islam. Obama also linked the establishment of the state of Israel to the Holocaust, as if the Zionist movement had not already existed for more than forty years prior to World War II. Yet another indication was his choice of Jewish invitees to the White House for a meeting with Jewish leaders in July 2009. Besides well-established bodies these also included J Street, a very young and dovish organization.[60]

The Jew as an Indicator

Because of their history and the reactions to it, what happens to Jews has often become an indicator of developments in society at large and a sensor for future trends. Very often one can, by looking at a smaller group, see more clearly what is happening in a broader frame. In recent decades attitudes toward Israel in several countries have also become a prism through which certain phenomena there can be analyzed more easily and earlier than by looking at society at large.

The phrase "canary in the mine" is often used for this indicator function of the Jews. These birds would fall ill from the increasing concentration of gas before the miners did, thereby enabling them to exit in time. It is an unfortunate association that should be avoided, since it entails that the canary must die so the miners can live.

This function of Jews is far more pronounced in Europe than in the United States. In the latter too, however, it exists in certain areas. One is academia. Academic freedom has in many cases become freedom of propaganda, indoctrination, incitement, and distortion. Together with tenure it has created a bulwark for the academic inciters that is almost impenetrable. On a significant number of campuses, many teachers of humanities have infected the search for knowledge with anti-Israeli propaganda and are fostering ideology rather than advancing learning.[61]

Watches Counteract Bias

Another area in which Israel fulfills a similar prism function is that of media bias. Here too distorted reporting on Israel is an indicator of a much wider problem that has permeated journalism. Thomas Friedman has pointed out that Western correspondents stationed in Beirut before 1982 did not even give a hint about the well-known corruption of the PLO leadership there. He also noted that these correspondents judged the PLO much more gently than they did the Phalangists, Israelis, or Americans.[62]

As Jews and Israel are in the forefront of those attacked, they are also often the first to develop mechanisms to counteract the aggressions, distortions, and bias. While Jews, and nowadays Israel, are often among the first to be attacked, they are never the last. It would thus make sense for the outside world to watch what happens to the Jews and Israel so as to better understand what they might expect in the future.

Where to Go From Here?

Sarna takes stock of some present-day critical issues:

Jews feel bewildered and uncertain. Should they focus on quality to enhance Judaism or focus on quantity to increase the number of Jews? Embrace intermarriage as an opportunity for outreach or condemn it as a disaster for offspring? Build religious bridges or fortify religious boundaries? Strengthen religious authority or promote religious autonomy? Harmonize Judaism with contemporary culture or uphold Jewish tradition against contemporary culture? Compromise for the sake of Jewish unity, or stand firm for cherished Jewish principles?[63]

The challenges confronting American Jewry are multiple. Some derive from developments in the societal environment, such as the declining general consensus on

many issues. Others are the result of generational problems, both in society at large and within the Jewish community.

For the individual Jew private and family concerns exist, with a heavy emphasis on economic issues accompanied by religious, social, and cultural needs. The communities' leaders, however, will have to confront a varied set of challenges. The battle for the future of a vibrant American Jewry begins with understanding the present better and continues with assessing as best as possible what the future might bring.

With this comes the need to become more flexible in thought and action. Jews, because of their circumstances, have frequently outperformed larger societies as far as dynamic approaches are concerned. In other situations the challenges were so great that even this was not adequate. The need to develop tools to understand faster the changes occurring and their effects is perhaps the greatest challenge the American Jewish community has to confront.

* * *

Notes

[1] Alan Mittleman, personal communication.

[2] Manfred Gerstenfeld, interview with David Harris, "Confronting Existential Questions," in *American Jewry's Challenge*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 138.

[3] Chaim I. Waxman and Ruth Yaron (project leaders), The Jewish People Policy Planning Institute Annual Assessment, 2008, Executive Report No. 5, 18.

[4] Sid Groeneman and Tom W. Smith (principal investigators), "The Impact of Geographic Mobility on the Jewish Community 2009," Mandell L. Berman Institute, North American Jewish Data Bank (the Jewish Federations of North America and the Berman Institute - North American Jewish Data Bank of the University of Connecticut, November 2009), www.jewishdatabank.org/study.asp?sid=90146&tp=3.

[5] Ira Sheskin, personal communication

[6] Manfred Gerstenfeld, interview with Steven M. Cohen, "Changes in American Jewish Identities: From Normative Constructions to Aesthetic Understandings," *Changing Jewish Communities* 30, 16 March 2008.

[7] Manfred Gerstenfeld, interview with David Ellenson, "How Modernity Changed Judaism," *Changing Jewish Communities* 36, 15 September 2008.

[8] Michael Medved, in "Why Are Jews Liberals?: A Symposium," *Commentary*, September 2009.

[9] Sylvia Barack Fishman and Daniel Parmer, "Policy Implications of the Gender Imbalance among America's Jews," Jewish Political Studies Review, vol. 20, nos. 3-4 (Fall 2008)

[10] Manfred Gerstenfeld, interview with Steven M. Cohen, "The Ethos of Young American Jewish Leaders: Generational Contrasts," *Changing Jewish Communities*, forthcoming.

[11] Manfred Gerstenfeld, interview with David Ellenson, "The Future of Reform Jewry," *Changing Jewish Communities* 21, 15 June 2007.

[12] Sylvia Barack Fishman and Daniel Parmer, op. cit.

[13] Ira Sheskin, personal communication.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Chaim I. Waxman, "Winners and Losers in Denominational Memberships in the United States," *Changing Jewish Communities* 1, 15 October 2005.

[16] Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 372.

[17] Manfred Gerstenfeld, interview with Jack Wertheimer, "The Future of Jewish Education," *Changing Jewish Communities* 52, 15 January 2010.

[18] Manfred Gerstenfeld, interview with Leonard Saxe "The Birthright Israel Program: Present and Possible Future Impacts," *Changing Jewish Communities* 41, 15 February 2009 and Leonard Saxe, personal communication.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Gerstenfeld, interview with David Ellenson,, "The Future of Reform Jewry."

[21] Nathaniel Popper, "Agriprocessors Files for Bankruptcy," *Forward*, 5 November 2008.

[22] Sue Fishkoff, "Orthodox Focus on Jewish Ethics at High Holidays," Jewish Telegraphic Agency, 5 October 2009.

[23] "Yoffie to Reform Jews: Eat Less Meat, Blog More," Jewish Telegraphic Agency, 8 November 2008.

[24] Manfred Gerstenfeld, interview with Jonathan Woocher, "Jewish Education in the United States: Improving but Still a Long Way to Go," *Changing Jewish Communities* 15, 15 December 2006.

[25] Marvin Schick, "Summary of Key Findings: A Census of Jewish Day Schools in the United States 2008-09," www.jesna.org/sosland/resources/Jewish-Day-Schools/A-Census-of-Jewish-Day-Schools-in-the-United-States-2008%252D2009/details.

[26] Manfred Gerstenfeld, interview with Jonathan Woocher.

[27] Jack Wertheimer, "A Census of Jewish Supplementary Schools in the United States, 2006-2007," Avi Chai, August 2008.

[28] Manfred Gerstenfeld, interview with Jack Wertheimer, "The Future of Jewish Education."

[29] Jonathan Woocher, "Jewish Education in the Age of Google," *Changing Jewish Communities* 8, 15 May 2006.

[30] Manfred Gerstenfeld, interview with Jack Wertheimer, "The Future of Jewish Education."

[31] Manfred Gerstenfeld, *American Jewry's Challenge*, 72-74.

[32] www.ajsnet.org/index.htm (viewed on 3 March 2010).

[33] Manfred Gerstenfeld, interview with Mitchell Bard, "Introducing Israel Studies in U.S. Universities," *Changing Jewish Communities* 39, 15 December 2008.

[34] Rela Mintz Geffen, personal communication.

[35] Manfred Gerstenfeld, interview with Michael Berenbaum, "The Transformation of Jewish Knowledge over the Decades: The New Edition of the *Encyclopedia Judaica*," *Changing Jewish Communities* 27, 16 December 2007.

[36] Manfred Gerstenfeld, interview with Jack Wertheimer, "The Fragmentation of American Jewry and Its Leadership," *Changing Jewish Communities* 29, 15 February 2008.

[37] Michael Miller, presentation at the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, "New York, New York," 16 March 2007.

[38] www.forward.com/forward-50-2009.

[39] Gerald Bubis, "The Cost of Jewish Living," American Jewish Committee, 2005.

[40] Manfred Gerstenfeld, interview with John Ruskay, "UJA-Federation of New York: Strengthening a Global Jewish Identity," *Changing Jewish Communities* 5, 15 February 2006.

[41] www.ujafedny.org/combating-poverty (viewed on 3 March 2010).

[42] Carl Schrag, "Ripples from the Matzav: Grassroots Response of American Jewry to the Situation in Israel," American Jewish Committee. (2004)

[43] Marissa Gross, "The Salute to Israel Parade," *Changing Jewish Communities* 33, 15 June 2008.

[44] David Wolpe, in "Why Are Jews Liberals?: A Symposium," *Commentary*, September 2009.

[45] Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism* , 371.

[46] I am grateful to Ira Sheskin for bringing this to my attention.

[47] "Poll: Israel among Americans' Most Favored Nations," Jewish Telegraphic Agency, 1 March 2010.

[48] "Anti-Semitic Incidents Decline for Fourth Straight Year in U.S., According to Annual ADL Audit," Anti-Defamation League, June 2009.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Steven Bayme, personal communication.

[51] "American Attitudes towards Jews in America," Anti-Defamation League, October 2009.

[52] Manfred Gerstenfeld, interview with Irwin Cotler, "Discrimination against Israel in the International Arena," in *Europe's Crumbling Myths: The Post-Holocaust Origins of Today's Anti-Semitism*, (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 2003), 220.

[53] For more details on humanitarian racism, see Manfred Gerstenfeld, *Behind the Humanitarian Mask: The Nordic Countries, Israel and the Jews* (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 2009), 22-23.

[54] Jean-François Revel, *How Democracies Perish* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984), 149.

[55] Alfred Moses, "From Durban I to Durban II: Preventing Poisonous Anti-Semitism," *Post-Holocaust and Anti-Semitism* 71, 1 August 2008.

[56] Manfred Gerstenfeld, interview with David Harris, 144.

[57] Cathy Lynn Grossman, "Most Religious Groups in USA Have Lost Ground, Survey Finds," *USA Today*, 17 March 2009.

[58] "Widespread Protests in US against Gaza Attack: Israel Still at It in Gaza," *Pakistan Tribune*, 1 January 2009.

[59] Helene Cooper, "Obama Calls for Swift Move toward Mideast Peace Talks," *New York Times,* 28 May 2010.

[60] Barak Ravid, "Obama to U.S. Jewish Leaders: Israel Must Engage in Self-Reflection," *Haaretz*, 14 July 2009.

[61] Manfred Gerstenfeld, *Academics against Israel and the Jews* (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 2007).

[62] Thomas L. Friedman, *From Beirut to Jerusalem* (New York: Anchor Books, Doubleday, 1990), 72-73.

[63] Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism,* 373.

A longer version of this essay will appear in the forthcoming book by Manfred Gerstenfeld and Steven Bayme, "*American Jewry's Comfort Level: Present and Future.*"

* * *

Dr. Manfred Gerstenfeld is chairman of the Board of Fellows of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs. He is an international business strategist who has been a consultant to governments, international agencies, and boards of some of the world's largest corporations. Among the sixteen books he has published are *Academics against Israel and the Jews* (JCPA 2007), *Behind the Humanitarian Mask: The Nordic Countries, Israel and the Jews* (JCPA and Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center for Holocaust Studies, 2008) and *The Abuse of Holocaust Memory: Distortions and Responses* (JCPA and ADL, 2009).