



**Amerikanisches Judentum**  
*heute*  
**American Jewry**  
*Today*

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# American Jewry in a Multi-Religious and Multi-Ethnic Society

By A. James Rudin

Jews first arrived in what is now the United States in 1654. A group of 23 Jews reached the Dutch colony of New Amsterdam in that year after fleeing Recife, Brazil when the "long arm" of the Inquisition had crossed the Atlantic Ocean and reached the Portuguese colony. While New Amsterdam was more hospitable to Jews than Recife, the newcomers still encountered anti-Jewish policies and behavior from some of the Dutch colony's leaders, most notably Governor Peter Stuyvesant.

The situation improved somewhat when the Amsterdam-based Jewish members of the Dutch East India Trading Company, the colony's parent body, intervened in behalf of their co-religionists. Still, when the refugees from the Inquisition organized the first synagogue in what was to become the U.S., they named it "Shearith Yisrael," "the Remnant of Israel". They had no way, of course, of knowing that they were the founders of the largest Diaspora Jewish community in history.

## Religion and State in the U.S.

Indeed, the religious strife in Europe, especially the "Thirty Years War," the Inquisition in Spain and Portugal, and the excesses committed in Great Britain against religious dissenters and minorities in the 17th and 18th centuries, provided the Founders of the





American Republic with a very different relationship between religion and state than existed in much of Europe. The framers of the American Constitution, particularly Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, took extraordinary care to provide specific guarantees for religious freedom and liberty. The concluding clause of Article Six of the Constitution reads:

*... no religious test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any office or public Trust under the United States.*

Immediately following the Constitution's ratification, Ten Amendments, the "Bill of Rights," were added. The First Amendment dealt in part with religion:

*Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.*

These Constitutional guarantees and more than 200 years of religious pluralism in the United States helped create the foundation of religious liberty that is a hallmark of American society. And that unique relationship, as embodied in the Constitution and in American history since 1787, strengthened the survival and security of all religious groups in the U.S., including the Jewish community. Indeed, American Jewry cannot be fully understood without an awareness of the role of the unique relationship that exists between religion and state in the U.S.

This special emphasis on religious liberty is particularly impressive when one remembers that there were only 5,000 Jews in the United States in 1787 out of a total population of 3,000,000, most of whom were Protestant Christians. Jefferson, Madison, and their colleagues could easily have designated Christianity as the official established religion of America, but they quite consciously chose not to do so. Their action had far reaching and positive implications for the emerging American Jewish community.

Under the law, no religious group, no matter its size, can become the favored or "established church," and all faith communities in the U.S. are free to mount campaigns to win the hearts, souls, and purses of the American people.



By Constitutional law and practice, there is no established religion in the U.S., no control of the religious communities by the Government, and conversely, no control of the Government by any religious group or coalition of groups. To put the matter in contemporary business terms: from the very beginning of the American Republic, religion was a "deregulated" activity, free of Government support or control.

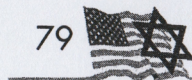
As a result, the United States has been a fertile ground for Jews and Judaism because as a nation America has no collective memory of the Middle Ages, the Crusades, the Inquisition, the many religious wars of Europe, the Protestant Reformation, the Roman Catholic Counter-Reformation. As a nation, there was no bitter legacy from the dark European past; a past that was filled with bloody intra-Christian battles and anti-Jewish pogroms. This historical reality, too little noted, had an extremely positive impact upon America's Jews.

## From Discrimination to Full Participation

However, despite the Constitutional guarantees, American Jews faced discrimination, bigotry, and hatred, both official and unofficial beginning in 1654. On the official side of the ledger, it was until well into the 19th century that the final legal restrictions against Jews were lifted in the areas of voting, taking public oaths, and holding elective office.

However, most anti-Semitic activity in the U.S. was in the form of discrimination in housing, employment, and education. Until quite recently, many prestigious American universities, including medical and law schools, frequently employed a quota system on Jewish applicants. Almost every American Jewish family has its traditional stories of how relatives and friends were denied jobs, housing, or employment solely because they were Jews. Happily, that kind of discriminatory action has sharply decreased, but collective memories linger on in the memory banks of many American Jews.

It should also be noted that anti-Semitism, that is, hatred of Jews and Judaism, was never fully institutionalized in America as it





was in many parts of Europe. Anti-Semitism as a political ideology or program was never adopted by either major American political party. The example of the anti-Semitic Viennese Mayor, Karl Lueger, has no counterpart in the United States. And during the time of the Kaisers' rule in Berlin, Adolf Stocker, served as a Court Preacher. Stocker openly endorsed anti-Semitism and worked to develop that odious ideology within his political party.

It is for this reason that Presidential candidacies of Jesse Jackson in 1984 and Pat Buchanan in 1992 were met with such dismay and anger from millions of Americans of all faiths. The Democrat Jackson and the Republican Buchanan were both criticized for uttering statements and advocating policies that were perceived as detrimental to American Jews, or were even anti-Semitic in nature.

While the "Recife 23" were Sephardic Jews, the overwhelming majority of today's American Jewish community, numbering around 5.5 million people, is of Ashkenazic or European background. Many demographers and historians estimate that nearly 70 % of contemporary American Jews trace their family roots to Poland or to what was once Poland. But German, Austrian, and other German-speaking Jews began arriving in the United States in large numbers immediately after the failed political revolutions in Europe of 1848. Polish Jews arrived later in even larger numbers.

The bulk of Jewish immigration to the U.S. took place between 1881, following the imposition of harsh anti-Semitic laws by the Russian Czar, and 1924, when America adopted a highly restrictive immigration policy that discriminated against immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe. In more recent years, especially after the Islamic takeover of Iran and the collapse of the Soviet Union, Jewish immigration has come from those areas of the world as well as from Israel.

It may safely be said that the American Jewish community did not fully "come of age" until the Second World War. Jews served in the U.S. armed forces in large numbers and as direct result of that wartime experience, millions of Jews saw themselves not as immigrants, but rather as full participants in the American democratic experiment.



## A New Chapter in Christian-Jewish Relations

At the same time, positive Christian-Jewish relations began to accelerate in both quantity and quality in the U.S. In 1965, two decades after the end of the War, the Second Vatican Council's "Nostra Aetate" Declaration gave the phenomenon even more impetus. This landmark statement struck at the taproot of Christian-based anti-Semitism by declaring that Jesus's death "cannot be blamed upon all the Jews then living, without distinction, nor upon the Jews of today." The Catholic declaration added: "[The Church] deplores the hatred, persecution, and displays of anti-Semitism directed against the Jews at any time and from any source."

Reflecting this new chapter in Christian-Jewish relations, many Protestant denominations have also denounced all forms of anti-Semitism, revised their liturgies vis-à-vis Jews and Judaism, and embarked, along with the Roman Catholic community, on an extensive series of interreligious programs and projects with American Jews.

Today Christians and Jews work jointly on many shared concerns including immigration, refugees, preventing nuclear war, assisting the poor and homeless, bio ethical questions, religious liberty and human rights, world hunger, crime, drugs, preserving family life, and opposing all forms of anti-Semitism, racism, and sexism.

This development of constructive Christian-Jewish relations in the U.S. is unique in history. There have been more positive encounters in the U.S. between Christians and Jews since 1945 than there were in the first 1900 years of Christianity. Unlike the past, many Christian bodies have followed the teachings of the great American Protestant scholar, Reinhold Niebuhr, who urged his fellow Christians to abandon all attempts to convert Jews to Christianity.

As a result of the teachings of the Second Vatican Council and subsequent documents, the Roman Catholic Church has abandoned all formal efforts at conversion. And many Protestant churches have followed suit. The notable exception to this policy is the Southern Baptist Convention, America's second largest Christian body.







In 1996 the SBC adopted a resolution calling for increased “Jewish evangelization,” but this policy was publicly condemned by some SBC leaders as well as by America’s most prominent Christian evangelist, Billy Graham. And, of course, the so-called “Hebrew Christian” movement, especially the “Jews for Jesus” group, also seek Jewish converts. The latter groups practice deceptive tactics in their efforts to attract Jews to Christianity.

The end of formal Christian conversion campaigns has provided American Jews with a refreshing and welcome change from the past when they were frequently perceived as two-dimensional caricatures, and seen solely as candidates for conversion. Jews, especially in Europe, generally experienced the Christian mission in highly negative ways. For centuries, Jews were the victims of forced conversions, mediaeval disputations, expulsions, and sometimes death at the hands of those Christians who sought to “bring the Jews to Christ.” For more than a thousand years in Europe, Jews were an oppressed minority within a Christendom that did not permit religious freedom as we know the term today. In that sense, America has provided a different religious environment. And for Jews that was good news indeed.



## A Change in Self-Perception: American Jews and Israel

In recent years another interesting trend has developed that has important consequences for American Jewry. Until recently Jews, by and large, encountered two major Christians in the United States: Protestants and Roman Catholics. And for many years, White Anglo-Saxon Protestants [WASPS] were perceived by many as the "real" or truly authentic Americans. In fact, because of their number and their early arrival in America, White Anglo Saxon Protestants did dominate many aspects of American society, especially the realms of politics, commerce, education, and culture. For that reason, some Jews sought to emulate WASPS in their life styles, including religion. The Reform Jewish movement, although founded in Hamburg in the early 19th century, took on many elements of the White Anglo Saxon Protestant ethos. Reform Synagogue services often reflected the worship style of Protestant churches. "Jewish" family names, which were often German in origin, were frequently changed to more English sounding ones.

But the last 20 years have seen a noticeable change within the American Jewish community. The creation and enduring quality of the State of Israel has profoundly affected the self-perception of Jews in the United States. For many years after Israel achieved independence in 1948, American Jews had a perennial love affair with the Jewish State. Israel personified national/ethnic assertiveness, a Jewish majority [the only place in the world where this is true], military prowess, and a flinty ability to build a new society with meager natural resources while being surrounded on three sides by implacable foes who were dedicated to the young State's destruction. On Israel's fourth side was the Mediterranean Sea.

In the heady days after the 1967 Six Day War, Israel captured the imagination, the head, and the heart of American Jewry. Strong in physical power and strong in its moral case for Jewish sovereignty, Israel became for some American Jews a substitute for religious commitment and observance. But even though the glamour and charisma of Israel have waned since 1967, American Jews have nevertheless drawn a kind of vicarious strength from the Jewish State.





The American Jewish enthusiasm for Israel is somewhat akin to Irish-Americans, Greek-Americans, Polish-Americans, Chinese-Americans, Hispanic-Americans, Armenian-Americans, Turkish-Americans, Arab-Americans, and a host of other groups who seek to develop, each in their own way, a mature relationship with the "homeland" and/or the "Old Country." American Jews are very much a part of this authentic American endeavor. What makes the Jewish effort somewhat distinctive is that the American Jewish-Israeli relationship is being played out on a global stage. One Jewish community resides in a giant highly pluralistic Western super power while the other Jewish community, almost equal in size to the American Diaspora, lives in an embattled small Middle Eastern state. The world watches as both Jewish communities seek a viable relationship with one another.

## A Multi-Religious Society

This growing self-confidence generated by Israel coincided with a discernible decline in WASP domination of American society. The powerful surge of Blacks and Hispanics into the national consciousness of America combined with a growing Roman Catholic community made the WASP just another American, and not the quintessential one at that. Of course, most Blacks and Hispanics are Christian in their religious identities, but just as clearly their roots do not stem from Great Britain or Western Europe.

Even as John Kennedy's election to the Presidency in 1960 personified the Roman Catholic "acceptance" into the general American society, so, too, the presence of ten Jewish U.S. Senators representing both political parties, the nearly 40 Jewish members of the House of Representatives, and a host of Jewish Cabinet members over the years has publicly validated the American Jewish community's move into the mainstream of political life at all levels.

The same phenomenon is taking place in corporate board rooms, executive suites, and University presidents' offices. Increasingly, Jews are assuming important positions of power and influence in American life that were once the exclusive possession of White



Anglo Saxon Protestants. There are few areas of the American society which remain closed to Jews.

And within the last ten years the Muslim population in the U.S. has rapidly increased. Some American Blacks have formally converted from Christianity to Islam, often as an act of specifically rejecting Christianity as the "slave owners' religion." Of course, they frequently neglect the fact that many Muslims in Africa, for example, in the Sudan enslave Blacks and engage in slave traffic. A second group of Muslims is the wave of immigrants to the U.S. from the Arab world, especially the Middle East. The final large group of Muslims has emigrated from the Indian subcontinent including Pakistan, Bangla Desh, and Sri Lanka.

The emergence of Islam, another world religion, on the domestic scene has changed the dynamics of American society. Once it was easy, if not totally accurate, to speak of American faith communities as "Protestant-Catholic-Jew." Such a facile term, coined in the 1950s by the sociologist Will Herberg, omitted the Orthodox Christian and Asian faith communities and usually neglected the Black churches as well as the theologically conservative Evangelical Protestant community.

Today America's religious communities are extremely diverse. Every religion known to the human family is represented in the United States. This dazzling and sometimes dizzying array of religions provides America with a robust, if sometimes chaotic spiritual life. In such a situation, Jews, the traditional "other" in so many societies throughout history, are free to shape their own religious identity and destiny at the crowded table of religious pluralism. I strongly believe this is a far better situation for Jewish life than situations in the past when Jews were the only visible divergence from a single faith community, be it Christian or Islamic.

## Jews in a Pluralistic Society: Attitudes and Political Behavior

American Jews live in a large continental nation-state of more than 260,000,000 fellow citizens. The United States is becoming





increasingly multi-religious, multi-ethnic, and multiracial in its population. The newest immigrants to the U.S. come today mostly from Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean. The polyglot character of the general American society promises to increase, and as a result, American Jews have become, in the main, strong advocates of a pluralistic, merit based society in which achievement is determined by individual talent and not by group identity.

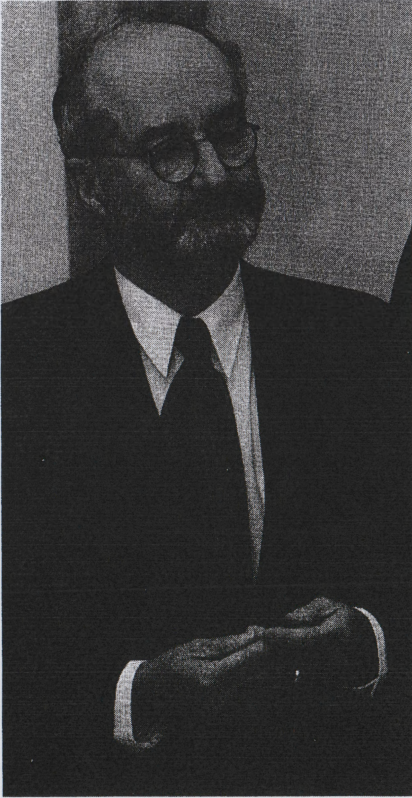
Because Jews were the victims of anti-Semitic quotas and religious discrimination in Europe and in the early years of the United States, American Jews are adamantly opposed to all numerical quotas in education, housing, and employment opportunities. Civil rights, civil liberties, social justice, individual freedom, and a commitment to a strict separation of church and state, based upon the Constitution's First Amendment, are the foundation stones of much of American Jewish political behavior.

## The Jewish Community in an "Open Society" – Demographic Losses vs. Religious Renewal

The growing personal and group acceptance within all sectors of American society, of course, poses difficult challenges for the American Jews. They constantly debate among themselves whether the quest for a voluntary "open society," one free of group discrimination, is good or bad for Jewish continuity. Not surprisingly, in such a society, intermarriage and indifference are the greatest enemies of Jewish life in the U.S.

The irony of all this is not lost upon most American Jews. While their grandparents have recounted endless stories of anti-Jewish policies and practices in Europe, and while Holocaust survivors are living testimony to the terrible years between 1933 and 1945 in Europe, a central Jewish concern in the United States is not persecution nor, thank God, genocide. Rather, the central issue is as one wit cleverly declared: "First, Christians wanted to kill us either because of a religious or political ideology. Now in America, many Christians want to marry us. Either way, it seems, we Jews lose!"





American Jewish life today is somewhat similar to the arrows going in two directions that are found in chemical equations. One arrow leads out of the Jewish community. As mentioned above, indifference and those intermarriages where the children are not raised as Jews, act as a hemorrhage on the Jewish demography. Population losses cannot be accurately quantified, but there is a gnawing sense that the raw numbers of Jews in the United States is in decline. What is not in dispute is that the Jewish percentage of the total population is decreasing. This loss is taking place primarily because of increased immigration to the U.S. by non-Jews and by the relatively low birth rate within the total American Jewish community. The one important exception to the low birth rate is the burgeoning

Orthodox Jewish community. In many Orthodox homes there are often more than ten children per family while the rest of American Jewry registers less than two youngsters in each family unit.

For people living outside the United States, it is important to remember that those Jews who leave the organized Jewish community are not converting in large numbers to other religions. In the benign religious atmosphere of contemporary American society, not participating in any religious community is a viable option for Americans, Jews and Christians alike.

While one arrow leads to an "Exit" sign for some American Jews, the other arrow leads to religious renewal or first time commitment to Judaism. As noted above, the Orthodox Jewish community is





not only retaining its own young people, but it is attracting many Jews who have had little or no contact with traditional Judaism. These newcomers to the faith are called in Hebrew, "baalay teshuvah" or "masters of repentance of return." Nicknamed, "BTs," these born again Jews are increasing in number and are frequently employed in the general American society as lawyers, teachers, physicians, business executives, and the like. Just as they are shaped by traditional Orthodoxy, the BTs will surely influence the established religious community they have voluntarily entered.

But a renewal of Jewish spiritual life is also taking place within the Progressive or non-Orthodox branches of Judaism. The Reform movement is currently undergoing an extraordinary internal transformation. Ritual, spirituality, Bible and Talmud study by lay people, and other forms of the Jewish religious tradition are being emphasized with the Reform and Conservative movements, which in their earlier histories sought to acclimate Judaism to the "modern" American society.

An interesting and potentially historic debate is now underway within the American Reform rabbinate. A new set of principles is being drafted for possible adoption by the Reform Rabbinate. The initial draft of the "Platform" represents a return to religious tradition, including the introduction of many rituals that were rejected in the early days of the Reform movement. A fierce internal debate has broken out among Reform rabbis, and the status and outcome of the new set of principles are not clear. However, the very fact that such a debate is even taking place over issues like ritual, liturgy, and religious belief speaks volumes about the profound change that has set in among the progressive Jewish spiritual leaders of America.

## Continuity and Survival – The Issues of the Future

In earlier decades such a discussion would have focused on increased participation in social justice concerns and perhaps attempts to accommodate to the perceived general American



religious ethos. On the other hand, today's debate does not mean that the Reform movement has abandoned social justice concerns. Not at all. It simply means that the struggle to survive as a viable Jewish community in America is now seen as the decisive issue of the next century. We are witnessing a robust debate about the future of American Jewry, and for that we should all rejoice.

American Jews will, of course, continue to hold different beliefs about theology, ritual, observance, and liturgy. Although they may disagree, I believe they will do so secure in the knowledge that Jewish life will continue and be strengthened in the United States. Debates and arguments mean Jews take their beliefs seriously and do take their future continuity as a community for granted. The Jewish religious renaissance that is currently taking place in the United States is grounds for hope. The task ahead is a crucial one.

The fountains of European Jewish learning and life were physically destroyed during the Holocaust and cannot be re created. It took nearly a thousand years of history to create that kind of community. American Jewry may wistfully look to the European "shtetl" for nostalgic warmth, but the great centers of learning are gone.

American Jewry may look to the extraordinary Jewish intellectual centers of pre-World War II Germany for enlightenment and inspiration. And it may look to modern Israel for hope and pride.

But ultimately American Jewry must look to itself for its continuity and survival. In reality, American Jewry is increasingly on its own. I remain confident that it has both the will and the ability to survive in a meaningful way in a pluralistic America that itself is asking its own set of difficult questions about its own national identity and purpose. Perhaps in that unique symbiosis, both Jews and the general American society will benefit from each other's struggle to survive. At least I hope so.

