



CRISIS, POLYDOXY, AND SURVIVAL

An invisible holocaust bringing silent death is consuming American Jewry. Yet no one mourns as the victims go softly into the night. For the death is quiet, and the victims seem not to know their fate. Bewildered and perplexed by their secret condition, they appear unconsciously guilty over their failure to fight for the life they have no right to surrender. In a seeming attempt to atone for the guilt over their own holocaust, American Jewry obsesses itself unproductively with a European holocaust whose spent fury is past, and with acts of charity for Jews everywhere else, giving to others the care and concern they cannot find in their hearts to give to themselves. Contemplating American Jewry objectively, but with compassionate sympathy, one can only say with the prophet Jeremiah, whose Judah likewise was set on a course of self-destruction:

"Oh that my head were waters,
And mine eyes a fountain of tears,
That I might weep day and night
For the slain of the daughter of my people."

Yet we did not gather together from all sections of the United States to mourn the decline of American Jewry. The first National Gathering of the Institute of Creative Judaism is a joyous occasion, an extraordinary sign of the historic Jewish will to live. Nevertheless, it is of highest importance to keep foremost in mind the perilous situation of American Jewry. This is so not only because the plight of American Jewry underscores the vital need for the Institute of Creative Judaism, but even more because it produces the state of mind we may term "crisis consciousness" that is absolutely essential if American Jewry is not to fall below the point of critical existence. Critical existence is defined as that point under which the strength of a community in numbers and resources is such that its decline becomes irreversible and its extinction a matter of time. The year 2000 C.E. provides a plausible approximate date at which to hypothesize that the point of critical existence will be reached. It is estimated that at this time American Jewry, despite the growth of the general American population, will diminish to perhaps five million persons, well below the six million mark at which it has remained stagnant for decades. It has been further estimated that if American Jewry continues on its present course, it will number by the end of the next century less than a million persons. Such a small number certainly would be below the point of critical existence. Sometime in the next millenium then, within a hundred years, the fate of American Jewry will be sealed.

There is every reason, consequently, for American Jewry to adopt a crisis mentality. The ICJ, since its inception, has been urging crisis consciousness on the American Jew. Crisis consciousness, however, does not mean accepting the view that

the extinction of the American Jew some time in the next century is inevitable. This destiny is as unnecessary as it would be untimely. Extinction of the American Jew would be an ultimate tragedy for world Jewry, and an irreplaceable loss for the spiritual life of humankind. Nevertheless, if we do not develop crisis consciousness, so that the urgency of our situation penetrates to the deepest recesses of our minds and hearts, we will not take the steps necessary to reverse the present trend, and we shall surely become extinct. For the steps that must be taken for survival are of necessity revolutionary in character. Simple logic tells us why this is so. If that which American Jewry is doing at present were competent and productive, would we now be facing extinction? Thus, fundamental and far-reaching changes are necessary for the survival of American Jewry, and it is difficult to see such measures being taken unless motivated by a profound sense of crisis.

Withal, a word of caution is in order. The word "crisis" means "a turning point for better or worse." While it is the case, therefore, that American Jewry is in crisis, it is also the case that the potentiality for "better," for survival, does exist. With a courageous and competent response to the crisis, we can realize the potentiality for survival that the future holds. Our immediate task, then, is to see that crisis consciousness leads to productive ends, to reevaluation and creative new action, not to paralysis and despair.

Yet notwithstanding their vital importance for American Jewish survival, crisis consciousness, and the accompanying awareness of the need for change, are too often blocked by a number of conceptions widely disseminated among American Jews that are in fact misconceptions, ill-founded beliefs that may be termed myths. Like all myths, those of American Jewry are given credence because some group wishes to believe them, and some other group's interest is served by having them believed. Freeing ourselves of these myths, consequently, can be painful. Yet free ourselves we must, for these myths largely control the direction in which the life-blood of American Jewry flows. So long as they are believed, the efforts and resources of American Jewry will continue in the same unproductive direction they have followed in the past, with unquestionably the same calamitous results. Accordingly, the step first to be taken for survival is to identify these myths, recognize them for the ill-founded notions they are, and discard them. In the enumeration of myths that follows, not all are held by all American Jews. Rather, the list includes notions subscribed to by a number of different groups. As such, certain of these myths are not necessarily consistent, and still others may overlap. All, however, have contributed to creating the mentality that has directed American Jewry on the ruinous course it has pursued.

Myth 1: All is well with American Jewry. Despite all evidence to the contrary, this myth remains widespread and influential. It enjoys particular currency among the national institutions

of Reform Judaism. Typical is an address delivered to a recent ordination class of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. The speaker, a specialist in American Jewish studies, solemnly assured the newly ordained rabbis that the future promised only the most brilliant possibilities for them since American Jewry constitutes the most illustrious, prosperous, and powerful Jewish community in history, far surpassing that of the Golden Age in Spain.

Myth 2: The State of Israel and Russian Jewry are the only endangered Jewish communities. American Jewry, by contrast, is indestructible.

Myth 3: The very existence of the State of Israel ensures the survival of American Jewry. A presupposition of this myth seems to be that American Jewry is not a separate entity from Israel, does not have its own unique problems, and requires, therefore, no special attention.

Myth 4: Only traditional, authoritarian, and legalistic forms of Judaism can enable American Jewry to survive. Orthodox Judaism, therefore, provides the model of a Jewish religion necessary for survival. Non-orthodox communities, such as Reform, should emulate Orthodoxy, and become as traditional, authoritarian, and legalistic as possible. Thus the Central Conference of American Rabbis (the Reform rabbinic association) has now published a new traditionoid prayerbook and Haggadah with the promise of more such servicebooks to come. The Central Conference of American Rabbis, in addition, has in recent years passed a highly restrictive resolution against intermarriage; and its publications program emphasizes works on "halachah" or ritual laws.

Myth 5: Indoctrinating and propagandizing Jewish children in religious schools, rather than educating them, will keep them loyal all their lives to the Jewish community. (The distinction between indoctrinating and propagandizing youngsters and educating them is this. Education provides the objective information and supportive environment necessary for youngsters to exercise free choice, and arrive at their own judgments and conclusions. Indoctrination and propagandizing provide a controlled environment in which youngsters are kept from exercising the free choice necessary to arrive at their own judgments and conclusions but are manipulated instead into acquiescing in the beliefs and values that the indoctrinating and propagandizing institution seeks to impose upon them.) Consequently the ideal form of religious school for Jewish children is the parochial or all-day religious school. Here, insulated from other points of view and general society, the indoctrination and propagandizing of Jewish children can be carried out effectively and thoroughly. Of late, the national Reform institutions have increasingly been calling for the establishment of all-day schools. In line with this thinking, the education office of a national Reform organization has recently issued a list of goals for Reform religious schools that generally dispenses with education and lays down instead a program primarily of indoctrination and propaganda.



Myth 6: The need of Jewish liberal religionists for a national organization is served by the national Reform Jewish institutions, which represent the liberals' interests, express their beliefs and values, and support their hopes and aspirations. (The source of this myth lies in the fact that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the early years of Reform, national Reform institutions did serve to a considerable degree the needs of the Jewish liberal religionist of the time. In a radical reversal that has greatly accelerated in the last two decades, the present national Reform Jewish institutions have repudiated this early liberalism for a newfound conservatism whose nature at this point may charitably best be described as confused, obscure, and self-contradictory.)

Myth 7: Non-religious Jewishness and non-religious Jewish organizations are adequate by themselves to perpetuate American Jewry. (As the internal weakness of American Jewry, particularly as regards its religious institutions, has become more apparent, the view has gained support that non-religious ethnic and cultural Jewishness, and organizations such as Jewish centers, are the true means of American Jewish survival.)

Myth 8: The impending extinction that threatens American Jewry is in no way the fault of the established American Jewish religious institutions, but is to be blamed entirely upon the Jewish laity. Specifically, Jewish laypersons are guilty of two acts of wrongdoing: intermarriage; and refusing to produce large numbers of children.

The myths enumerated above are of different kinds and their character as misconceptions, therefore, is exposed in different ways. Some are recognized as myths without further examination by taking an honest and realistic look at ourselves, our children, and our Jewish communities. Others are seen as myths by viewing the present Jewish scene from an historical perspective. Still others require philosophic analysis.

That all is not well with American Jewry, that it is in truth in crisis, is evident to any unbiased observer. More than just the abstract number projections for the future, cited earlier, testify to this fact. Great temples in the last decade have experienced not only the familiar decline in attendance at services, but in membership as well. Numbers of temples have been forced to merge or are contemplating such action. The average age of those participating in temple activities is rising; young adults are rarely to be seen. Religious schools have fallen precipitously in enrollment. This is not because there are fewer Jewish children; the numbers there are could fill religious schools to overflowing. Rather many parents see no reason to send their children to religious schools. Moreover, the youngsters who do attend generally stay only the minimum time necessary to meet social, not intellectual, requirements. The cost of the American Jewish decline is vividly seen when translated into human terms in just one area, the Reform rabbinate. Rabbis are increasingly unable to advance in their professions beyond the starting level at which they begin be-

cause fewer middle or higher level positions of greater responsibility exist. The Central Conference of American Rabbis has requested that the seminaries limit enrollment of new students because the rabbinate's ability to absorb new graduates is severely limited. The frustration produced by the lack of advancement opportunity has induced a number of rabbis to leave the rabbinate, and significant numbers of others are contemplating the same. The United States Labor Department in its latest Occupational Outlook Handbook evaluating career choices has described the rabbinate as continuing to present increasingly limited prospects. Viewed concretely, the realities of decline are not pleasant to behold.

With the crisis of American Jewry so visible all about, the real question is not what evidence there is for the crisis, but how did it happen that we have been so long in becoming aware of it? The answer, I believe, is ultimately to be found in the institutional and organizational structure of the American Jewish community. Information regarding American Jewry is controlled almost entirely by the very national institutions and organizations that dominate Jewish life and which claim responsibility for its well-being. These institutions and organizations also collect and control substantially the greatest part of all contributions made by American Jewry to Jewish causes. (On this score two points must be noted. There are no objective oversight agencies in the American Jewish community to evaluate how effective and productive the use of the community's funds by the national American Jewish institutions and organizations is. Moreover, there is no democratic structure to enable those who contribute the funds to have a voice in their use.) Thus the national Jewish institutions and organizations decide the allocation and use of the greatest part of American Jewry's financial resources, determining which policies shall receive funding and which shall not, which projects shall live and which shall die aborning. Since these institutions and organizations have set the course of American Jewish life, it is certainly they who are responsible and accountable for our present tragic situation. We can understand how institutions and organizations, dependent for their support on showing how well they are serving the American Jewish community, would be reluctant to make public how, under their leadership, policies, projects, and expenditure of financial resources, American Jewry is now approaching the point of critical existence.

Once the plight of American Jewry is recognized, then the mythical character of the notions that the State of Israel and Russian Jewry are the only endangered Jewish communities becomes self-evident. Similarly, the plight of American Jewry lays to rest the myth that the existence of Israel assures or strengthens the prospects of American Jewish survival. The truth is that the most noticeable decline of the American Jewish community has taken place during the period of time that Israel has been in existence. Clearly, it will not do to ignore American Jewry, as though it were indestructible, and focus all survival efforts on Jewries outside America. Amer-



ican Jewry is patently a separate organism from other Jewries, (as they are each distinct from one another,) and it must therefore receive individual attention. Failure to understand this point will deepen not only the distress of American Jewry, but of Jewries dependent upon America as well. What will happen to Israel if American Jewry no longer exists to help?

In the light of American Jewish historical experience, it is really quite remarkable that anyone could take seriously the fourth myth, the notion that traditional and authoritarian forms of Judaism will bring about the survival of American Jewry. The form of Judaism subscribed to by almost every Jew who came to America in the three great emigrations, Spanish, German, and East European was Orthodoxy. Yet the Spanish Jewish community, which remained uncompromisingly Orthodox, has all but disappeared from the American Jewish scene. The German Jews quickly developed Reform Judaism. Almost all the descendants of the East European emigration are now Reform or Conservative. It might be argued that Conservatism is technically very nearly as traditional and authoritarian as Orthodoxy. The truth, however, is that Conservatism is enjoying little success in convincing its members to obey the halachah, or authoritative religious law. Particularly is this true in the case of the younger generation. By its own admission, Conservatism states that it is hemorrhaging, with its youth draining away from the community. How then can Reform think to serve the survival hopes of American Jewry by a reversion to the traditionoidism and authoritarianism that is presently heavily subsidized and funded by the national Reform institutions?

Before turning to the remaining myths, a basic point must be made regarding the nature of loyalty to a Jewish community. What makes a Jew loyal to a Jewish community? What is the essential and ultimate ingredient of Jewish Allegiance? Analysis of Jewish historical experience reveals a principle of communal loyalty that provides the answer to this question. This principle is that Jewish communal loyalty is produced by belief in the religion or Judaism of the community. Jews who do not really believe in the religion of their particular Jewish communities will themselves ultimately abandon membership in those communities, or their children or grandchildren will. Religion is here used in its broad sense, and includes three basic elements: an ideology of existence that responds to the ultimate problems of the human condition; a doctrine of morality; and a system of observances that expresses and celebrates peak moments and occasions in human experience. Thus Jews for whom the Judaism of their community does not provide an ideology of existence they can believe, a morality they find valid, and observances that are meaningful, will, or their children or grandchildren will, leave that community. I propose to you that the principle of Jewish communal loyalty is the fundamental reason for the crisis of American Jewry. Great numbers of American Jews simply do not believe in any of the institutional Judaisms, neither in Orthodox Judaism, Conservative Judaism, nor the traditionoid Reform Judaism of the national Reform institutions.

Corroboration that the reason for the crisis of American Jewry is to be found in the principle of Jewish communal loyalty and the widespread rejection of the institutional Judaisms is seen by examining the decline of American Jewry. There is not a single negative factor in American Jewish experience that can account for the present crisis aside from the fact that great numbers of American Jews simply do not believe in any of the institutional Jewish religions. No Jewish community has ever had members more distinguished, respected, or prosperous; no Jewish community has experienced less discrimination or anti-semitism (which at present is virtually none); no Jewish community has enjoyed more religious freedom; no Jewish community has had available more opportunities of every kind. Yet American Jewry is in a desperate state of crisis, and approaching the point of critical existence. I submit to you that there is just one explanation for this seeming anomaly. No other Jewish community has ever had more members who believed less in the institutional Judaisms of its time.

Accordingly, it is a myth to think that the decline of the American Jewish community can be reversed by the indoctrination and propagandizing of children in religious or all-day schools. For the principle of Jewish communal loyalty asserts that loyalty to a Jewish community ultimately rests upon Jews believing the religion of their community to be true. It is futile to think that in a free and open society, such as we enjoy in America, lasting belief in the truth of a religion can be brought about by indoctrination and propaganda. Young people cannot be kept from independent and critical thought in American society. They have the necessary schools of higher learning available to them for critical study; they will search out and find the relevant facts; they will make their own independent judgments; and if the religious beliefs and values that have been imparted to them through indoctrination and propaganda do not stand up under such objective scrutiny, these beliefs and values will be rejected. It is a commonplace to see the religious beliefs with which a child is indoctrinated and propagandized in the Jewish religious or all-day grade schools be questioned and rejected at the high school level, and evaporate into hardly a memory in college and adulthood.

Similarly, the principle of Jewish communal loyalty reveals the fatal flaw in the effort to sustain Jewish survival by means of ethnic oriented non-religious Jewish institutions. For a special bond is created between the individual and the community with which he or she shares a religion. It is the enduring bond fashioned by holding in common with others one's fundamental principles, ultimate values, highest ideals, and most meaningful symbols. Compared to shared religion, the shared elements of ethnicity are derivative and trivial, and call for no special loyalty. To deny one's real religion is to deny one's own true self; to deny ethnicity is to deny non-essential patterns of behavior. This has been the opinion of Jewish philosophers through the ages and their insight remains a valid and instructive one. No one denies that shared cultural patterns and familiar phrases of patois can supplement and



enrich the communal life of those who share a religion, but in themselves they provide no basis, theoretical or pragmatic, for the continued existence of an American Jewish community.

The key to American Jewish survival, then, is a Jewish religion that can be believed in by the great numbers of American Jews who cannot accept the Judaisms of Orthodoxy, Conservatism, and national institutional Reform. We know there is such a Jewish religion. Moreover, I firmly believe that many Jews, particularly those of the younger generations, already subscribe to this religion without having identified it and given it a name. It is a silent Judaism that resides unspoken within them, in their minds and hearts. This silent Judaism is a religion of freedom, of individuality, and of creativity. It is Polydox Judaism.

The Institute of Creative Judaism was established to serve the needs of the polydox religionist. The ICJ has analyzed and set forth the fundamental principles of polydoxy, explored its values, developed polydox religious school curricula, and created rituals and services that express a polydoxy's free religiousness. Yet more than serving the philosophic, educational, and ritual needs of the polydox religionist, the ICJ has also come to be a focal point around which a community has evolved of persons who are committed to the principles and practice of Polydox Judaism. In this community, which has the name of the Polydox Jewish Confederation, the observance of polydoxy becomes real in the lives of human beings, and Jewish religious liberalism receives its mature expression. In view of the crisis that confronts American Jewry, the time has arrived to take cognizance of the PJC, become acquainted with its principles, and give formal and explicit acknowledgment to its existence. For if the hope of American Jewry lies in a vital Polydox Judaism, it is in the PJC that Polydox Judaism itself receives life. The following enumeration does not list all the principles intrinsic to the PJC, but it does serve to describe its basic nature:

1. The first and fundamental principle of the PJC is the Freedom Covenant. Every member of the PJC pledges to affirm the religious freedom of all other members in return for their pledges to affirm his or her own. Equally binding on the members of the PJC is the corollary of the Freedom Covenant: every person's freedom ends where the other person's freedom begins.

2. The second principle is that no member or group of members may present themselves as representing the PJC or otherwise speak for other members without the express permission of every member who is so represented or spoken for. The reason for this is that the Freedom Covenant guarantees autonomy to every member of the PJC, which in turn carries with it the full right to self-representation in all matters of belief and opinion. This second principle is of utmost importance to American Jewry in view of the rapidly accelerating tendency of Jewish religious institutional figures

to present themselves to the American government and public as representing all American Jewry, or all members of their religious communities, particularly in political matters. The result of such usurpation of the individual's right to self-representation is to force upon American Jews, especially religious liberals who are sensitive to such an infringement on their rights, one of two choices, neither of which is satisfactory: either to refuse to join a Jewish religious community or to lose their autonomy. The PJC resolves this dilemma by providing a Jewish community in which this freedom to self-representation is affirmed and protected. This does not mean, of course, that Polydox Jews do not or should not have political beliefs regarding America, Israel, or other countries. The point is that these beliefs are properly pursued by liberal religionists outside their religious community, either as individuals, or as members of organizations dedicated to political purposes.

3. The third principle is that the PJC is a sovereign Jewish religious community. Two significant consequences of sovereignty are these. First, the PJC is completely self-determining, and absolutely independent, therefore, of any other Jewish community. Accordingly, the PJC possesses the unconditional right to lay down for itself definitions of the name Jew and the term Judaism. Definitions of "Jew" and "Judaism" that are given by other Jewish communities are not relevant to the PJC, let alone binding or authoritative. The second consequence is that liberal religionists have for the first time a sovereign Jewish liberal religious community to which they can belong. For the only other sovereign Jewish religious community is Orthodox Judaism. Reform Judaism has never achieved sovereignty; and Conservative Judaism has from the start acknowledged the sovereignty of Orthodox Judaism. (See further on this point the "Credo" in **Polydoxy**, Vol. 3, Number 1, 1977.)

4. The fourth principle is that the definition of a Jew is the following: A Jew is a person who wishes to take the name Jew, and who is descended from a Jewish parent, grandparent, or ancestor; also a Jew is a person who wishes to take the name Jew, and is a member of a Jewish community. This is the first fundamentally new definition of the name Jew in some two thousand years. It is also the only definition of the name Jew that is neither Orthodox nor based upon the Orthodox definition. Reform, unfortunately, not having attained sovereignty, has no definition of the name Jew of its own. Reform rabbis, to fill this fundamental lack, generally and arbitrarily employ a definition modelled after that of Orthodoxy. Accordingly, the only community to which the liberal Jew can go for sovereign sanctioning and authorization of a liberal religious definition of the name Jew is the PJC.

5. The fifth principle is the right of the polydox religionist to the rhythmic harmonization of festivals and holidays. This principle gives the individual Polydox Jew the right to set the times of festivals according to rhythms that he or she finds



most meaningful. These rhythms may be natural, such as solstices and seasons; economic; cultural; or personal. An instance of rhythmic harmonization is changing the Chanukah celebration to eight days beginning at the winter solstice, December 21-22, rather than at Kislev 25. This change of date brings the Chanukah celebration into harmony with the great natural, economic, and social rhythms of the real world in which the American Jew actually lives.

6. The sixth principle is that the Jewish layperson in the Polydox Jewish Confederation has an equal right to that of clergy members in determining the principles of the Confederation. Not only is this principle logically necessary, but it is pragmatically wise. There can be little question that the chasm between the American Jewish institutional religions and the American Jews has been widened, if not brought about, by the failure to include laypersons in the decision-making processes of American Jewish religious communities.

One last point to be made regarding the PJC is to note how it differs from the ICJ. The ICJ is a research and development organization. Those who are members and friends of the ICJ are not necessarily polydox; they are contributors to research into the nature of polydoxy, and to the development of materials for an open religious community. Thus the ICJ enjoys the warm friendship of many who although they are not themselves polydox, believe nevertheless that a creative Judaism should be available for those Jews who want and need it, particularly for those of future generations, for their children and children's children. By contrast with the ICJ, the PJC is a religious community. Those who belong to the PJC believe in Polydox Judaism and are adherents of its principles. They are Polydox Jews.

Many reasons can be given why the PJC is urgently needed by American Jewry. The PJC satisfies the profound demand of great numbers of American Jews for a religious community whose principles they can with authenticity affirm. In addition, the PJC promises to make a basic contribution to American Jewish survival. Yet perhaps the most compelling reason for the PJC is that we Polydox Jews simply cannot fulfill adequately and responsibly our moral obligations without a sovereign liberal Jewish community. Let me conclude with one example that demonstrates this point.

According to the Polydox Jewish Confederation's definition of a Jew, a youngster whose father is Jewish and whose mother is not has the right to be recognized as a native Jew. This is, of course, in sharp disagreement with the general Jewish institutional position that the child of a Jewish father whose mother is not Jewish is not a Jew at all. When, as does happen, the Jewish child whose father is a Jew and whose mother is not is challenged by Jewish classmates as not being Jewish, the child has a right to maintain, according to polydox principles, that he or she is indeed a Jew. If, however, there were no Polydox Jewish Confederation, what would happen if the classmates further challenged, "By the authority

of which Jewish community are you a Jew?" The youngster would then have to remain silent and defeated. For neither the Orthodox, Conservative, nor Reform institutions will support the youngster's claim to be Jewish. Now that the Polydox Jewish Confederation is in existence, the youngster need simply say: "By the authority of the rabbis and laypersons of the Polydox Jewish Confederation, I am a Jew."

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