

Understanding Jewish Liberalism: Religion, Ideology or Syndrome?

by [Ardie Geldman](#) (November 2022)



After Titian, Ben Shahn, 1959

I, the Lord, have called to you in righteousness, and have taken hold of your hand, and submitted you as the people's covenant, as a light unto the nations. –[Isaiah 42:6](#)

I live here in the UK 'cause my family fled pogroms in Eastern Europe before the first world war. Our kids now are fifth generation, the fifth generation of my family to be born in this country. Our family has served in the armed forces, built doctors' surgeries, dental practices, helped design parks in town centres, taught children to read and write English, develop products to save the British countryside from environmental damage, given our flesh-and-blood literally to those on death's door in this country ... I put it to you that if ... you posted #BlackLivesMatter or #FreePalestine or #Transrights ... but did or say nothing ... when people drove through our streets, the streets of Britain waving Palestinian flags calling "Fuck the Jews," "Rape their daughters," and beat the shit out of local rabbis for the crime of walking while Jewish, that just know that we, an ethnic group who isn't worthy of your concern, hear your silence like a fucking thunderclap.

[\[1\]](#)

It has now been more than two years. A strong critical response by America's Jews to the May 25th 2020 protracted and cruel public killing of George Floyd was predictable. Jews, as other Americans, were appalled by the image on their screens of a physically restrained black man pinned to the sidewalk and suffocating as a white Minneapolis police officer embedded his knee in his neck. Less predictable, however, was how

exceptionally intense and widespread would be the Jewish reaction. Within just days of this event American Jewish groups quickly took steps, almost mechanically, to demonstrate compliance with new standards of social diversity and inclusivity. The Jewish Federations of North America established “Moed,” an association for Jews of color, as well as “Kamocha,” an organization for Black Orthodox Jews. Numerous other Jewish organizations, both national and local, extended impassioned expressions of support for the African-American community.

On May 30th Anti-Defamation League CEO and National Director Jonathan A. Greenblatt issued a statement that included the following: “We stand in solidarity with the Black community as they yet again are subject to pain and suffering at the hands of a racist and unjust system.” The Union for Reform Judaism likewise issued an extended and passionate declaration of affirmation of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement.^[2] A letter signed by over 600 Jewish organizations and synagogues purporting to represent over half of the Jewish population of the United States and that appeared as a full-page ad in the N.Y. Times on August 28th, declared: “We speak with one voice when we say, unequivocally: Black Lives Matter.” So dedicated was the response of American Jews that in late November an art exhibit honoring George Floyd was installed in a Miami museum dedicated to the Holocaust.^[3] In addition to the protest activities of synagogues and other Jewish groups throughout the country, many individual Jews responded philanthropically, resulting in a significant increase of Jewish giving to causes assisting the African American community.^[4]

In the wake of Floyd’s death, the Black Lives Matter movement was immediately propelled into being the most populist cause in recent American memory. Throughout that summer untold numbers of Jews took to the streets in American cities to join in pro-BLM protest marches and demonstrations. Their activism

on behalf of the African-American community was reminiscent of nothing less than the fervent support shown by a previous generation of American Jews for the State of Israel and for the Jews once trapped behind the Iron Curtain.

The exceptionally robust championing for BLM expressed by America's Jews may well have raised eyebrows and justifiably so. For how many of the Jews who marched in the streets, carrying placards and chanting slogans in support of this cause were aware of the organization's anti-Zionism, its support for the Palestinian terrorist organization Hamas and its endorsement of the anti-Israel Boycott, Delegitimization and Sanctions (BDS) campaign? How many were aware of the antisemitic voices coming from within the organization, voices that were tolerated even if they did not represent the movement as a whole? And how many American Jews were bothered when hearing that during BLM-led demonstrations in Los Angeles—demonstrations that turned violent—synagogues, Jewish schools and memorial sites were smeared with antisemitic and anti-Israel graffiti? “Jews We’re Coming For You” was spray-painted in a local park. Jewish-owned businesses in the largely Jewish Fairfax district were vandalized.^[5] Were Jewish supporters of BLM aware of the organization's “Day of Rage” demonstration in Washington, D.C. on July 1st that linked BLM to Palestinian nationalism, where marchers chanted “Israel, we know you, you murder children, too”?^[6]

But it is not just this one organization's open antipathy towards Israel and Zionism that renders ironic the disproportionate championing of Jews for the African-American community. The point is not only is this support not reciprocal, it is largely discounted. And why does Jewish support for black Americans go unheralded? Most likely it is because of a longstanding resentment towards Jews among many African-Americans, a condition that is hardly a marginal phenomenon. In 2016, a survey taken by the Anti-Defamation League revealed that 23 percent of black respondents expressed

antisemitic attitudes.^[7] More recent data from a 2020 YouGovk survey commissioned by Tufts University political science professor Eitan Hersh and Harvard doctoral candidate Laura Royden, a student of American government and politics, reveal that as high as 42% of the respondents who self-identified as “black liberals” accepted as true at least one out of three negative Jewish stereotypes.^[8] In a 2021 issue of the Sapir journal dedicated to the past and future of black-Jewish relations, Joshua Muravchik asks: “What accounts for the frequency—and unashamed boldness—of these (antisemitic) expressions, or the comparatively greater currency of antisemitism among black Americans?”^[9]

And in a recent Jerusalem Post opinion piece, Dr. Tre Pennie, a retired Dallas Police Sergeant writes: “In 2022 ... New York City reported having a 300% increase in antisemitic attacks and found that nearly all of the attacks were committed by Blacks against the Jewish community. Unfortunately, this is not an anomaly, considering that the rise of antisemitism and attacks on Jewish interests have been steadily increasing since 2015, corresponding with the Black Lives Matter (BLM) Ferguson riots.”^[10]

If one takes into full account the history of relations between America’s Jews and African-Americans, ignoring the saccharin speeches offered at brotherhood dinners and Rabbi Abraham Yehoshua Heschel’s much celebrated 1965 march alongside Dr. Martin Luther King from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, it would be understandable if Jews preferred to remain stoic and sit out matters concerning the welfare of the black community. But the fawning over BLM by so many American Jews throughout the summer of 2020, complemented by their generous philanthropic support, was only in keeping with their longstanding broader reputation for promoting liberal values.

On every current major hot button issue roiling American

society, birth control and abortion, gun control, voting rights, the environment, open immigration, LGBTQ rights, recognition of gender fluidity, the choice for Supreme Court candidates, feminism, and the extent of government oversight and regulation, the majority of American Jews may be counted upon to opt for the more liberal position. This characteristic of most American Jews is axiomatic. The oft-asked question is "Why?"

Historian Edward Shapiro summarizes the theories that have been offered in response to this question.^[11] He begins with, though quickly dismisses, Lawrence Fuchs' argument "that American Jewish liberalism emerges from the emphasis of the Jewish religion upon the values of charity and social justice."^[12] The problem with Fuchs, he points out, is that he ignores the lack of a positive correlation between Jewish religious piety and political and social liberalism; in fact, the very opposite is the case. American Orthodox Jews are typically politically and socially conservative while less religiously observant, non-Orthodox Jews typically belong to the liberal camp.

Others see an association between 19th century xenophobic European nationalism and antisemitism. The sufferings endured under autocratic and antisemitic European regimes were internalized by the collective Jewish psyche. The resultant group trauma crossed the Atlantic onto the shores of the New World among the waves of Jewish immigrants. In the United States this led to an instinctive aversion to politicians who seemingly took it for granted that white Protestants, the "true Americans," were the "first among equals."

Throughout most of the 20th century, this referred to the Republican party and its supporters. Accordingly, in 1928 America's Jews gave 78 per cent of their vote to the failed Democratic presidential candidate, Al Smith, a Catholic. The

success of the Democrats' post-Depression national economic recovery program combined with the United States' victory over the Nazis in World War II under President Franklin D. Roosevelt further vouch safe American Jewish support for the Democratic Party, a voting pattern that continues until today.^[13] Jews, writes Shapiro, saw in an America under Democratic leadership "a society that provided good housing, jobs, unemployment insurance, health care, and educational opportunities (that) would, they believed, be more immune to anti-Semitic demagogues. Liberalism was seen as a bulwark against anti-Semitism."

Shapiro concludes with the view of academic, publisher and social critic Leonard Fein. Fein contends that more than just reflecting certain aspects of Judaism, liberalism is its very essence.^[14] Fein's elevation of liberalism echoes the influence of the movement of Reform Judaism with which he affiliated. For most of its history the Reform movement tendered the phrase "Prophetic Judaism," asserting that in the modern era loyalty to the Jewish religion requires only emulating the moral and ethical behavior exemplified by Israel's ancient prophets; there is no longer the need for religious ritual.

In the closing decades of the twentieth century Prophetic Judaism was rebranded as *tikkun olam*, "repair of the world." Denuded of its full liturgical context linking it to the "Kingship of God," Tikkun olam became so popular within secular liberal circles that it was adopted by many non-Jews, including pop star Madonna and President Barack Obama who used it at a 2015 White House Passover Seder. For many, even the majority of non-Orthodox American Jews, Judaism and *tikkun olam*, the pursuit of social justice, have become synonymous.

American Jews' steadfast liberalism prompted social critic Milton Himmelfarb to coin his classic epigram, "Jews earn like Episcopalians and vote like Puerto Ricans." Jews of Ashkenazi background, who by far constitute the bulk of the American

Jewish community, are conventionally regarded as caucasian and self-identify as such. Why, therefore, are putative white American Jews notably far more liberal than other ethnic communities of European origin, such as Italians, Greeks or Poles, whose ancestors arrived in America within more or less the same time period and who underwent a similar process of acculturation? What makes American Jews different?

Former *Commentary* Magazine editor-in-chief Norman Podhoretz literally wrote the book on American Jewish liberalism. *His Why Are Jews Liberals?*^[15] provides an extensive chronological and in-depth investigation into this question. Towards the conclusion of the volume Podhoretz cites a series of factors suggested by others “to account for the stubborn persistence of Jewish liberalism.”

The first has Jews leaning to the liberal left since for most of their history as a diaspora minority their persecutors have emerged from the nationalistic right. Another is the strengthening during their college years of liberal values that Jewish students initially absorbed in their homes. Still another is the fear factor; a fear of being rejected from one’s liberal social circle if one dissents politically. Podhoretz also takes note of political scientist James Q. Wilson’s seemingly left-field suggestion of a possible genetic predisposition to developing certain attitudes during one’s life, i.e., liberal or conservative.^[16] And finally, Podhoretz takes note of the popular “Jewish values” argument, that liberalism is inherent in Jewish tradition.

None of these explanations is satisfactory on its own, argues Podhoretz. None offers a full accounting of why American Jews continue to remain liberal in the face of the dramatic political changes that have taken place in American society over the last half century. More antisemitism now emanates from the political left than has ever in the past, an empirical observation that is not open to dispute. Still, the

majority of American Jews obstinately cling to their traditional voting patterns.

Podhoretz's conclusion is that as an outcome of some random *mélange* of these different factors liberalism has succeeded, *de facto*, in usurping the Jewish religion. Liberalism, he argues, has become the ersatz faith of America's Jews through a combination of historical, sociological and theological influences. And Podhoretz is not alone in interpretation of this evolution. A similar understanding has been expressed by leading Jewish thinkers, including socialist literary critic Irving Howe,^[17] Conservative Rabbi Seymour Siegel,^[18] and American-Israeli author and translator Hillel Halkin.^[19]

But the transformation that led from Judaism to liberalism was elusive. It was expedited by a virtual marketing effort of the phrase "*tikkun olam*." This Hebraic nomenclature facilitated a rhetorical facelift and pretext making it possible to retain ownership of the venerable title of "Judaism" even as liberal Jews continued to distance themselves from anything resembling the Judaism practiced by any Jewish community over the last two-thousand years. Although they had lost faith in, as Podhoretz has it, "the old-time religion," ... (they) felt it would be dishonorable (if they were) to desert it altogether."^[20]

Podhoretz concludes that "because liberalism has become the religion of American Jews ... they can remain loyal to it even though it conflicts in substance with the Torah of Judaism at so many points, and even though it is also at variance with the most basic of all Jewish interests—the survival of the Jewish people."^[21] In other words, the piety expressed by traditional Jews over the centuries through their prayers and rituals, America's Jews now claim to find in the activities that go along with liberal politics. They believe that by being liberal they are being good Jews, that by voting

Democratic, supporting LGBTQ rights, abortion, and open borders, they are practicing Judaism, even though these commitments are bereft of Jewish content and some are even at odds with age-old Jewish values and Jewish law. So, is liberalism a religion?

Understanding Jewish liberalism, and not just among today's American Jews, but across both time and borders, requires taking a long view of the Jewish diasporic experience. Jewish liberalism cannot be explained as only the reaction to 19th century European antisemitism or the antisemitism of Muslim countries. Its origins lie with the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in the year 70 C.E. and it is the manifestation of the countless calamities borne by Jewish communities since that time. Accordingly, this characteristic behavior, this shared Jewish world view, is an ingrained, virtually instinctive, cultural response to multi-generational collective trauma.

Following the almost total expulsion of Jews by the Roman Legion from their homeland, the legacy of Jewish history became that of an ever-vulnerable diasporic community, sans protection of army and borders. Over the centuries, regardless of where Jews settled, they lived on the sufferance and the benevolent surety of their gentile hosts, their fate never certain.

Israel's first prime minister David Ben-Gurion saw in this condition a perpetual threat to Jewish security and the cause of endless Jewish suffering. It is "a general human phenomenon" he wrote, that "Whenever you have two groups, one a strong group, powerful, and the other weak and helpless ... The strong group will always take advantage of the weaker group..."^[22] The last nearly two thousand years of Jewish history clearly bear this out.

The long, grim diaspora experience took a toll upon the Jewish

collective mindset. Although Jews succeeded in surviving as a distinct people, their lowly image, the disdain of their non-Jewish neighbors, the laws enacted to limit their rights and freedom, the physical torments and persecution they suffered up to and including the genocidal program of the Nazi regime in the middle of the last century, all of these eventuated in a condition known as “intergenerational trauma.” This syndrome, according to psychologist Fabiana Franco, is the effect of the “traumatic experiences or events that are shared by a group of people within a society, or even by an entire community, ethnic, or national group ... [Intergenerational trauma](#) (sometimes referred to as trans or multigenerational trauma), is defined as trauma that gets passed down from those who directly experience an incident to subsequent generations.”[\[23\]](#) The formal study of this phenomenon, “epigenetics,” is based on research that indicates that “an individual’s genes can be altered as the result of life experiences and that those changes can be passed on to future generations.”[\[24\]](#) Epigenetics lends credence to Wilson’s notion that a particular political predisposition and world view might be detectable through more sophisticated methods of neurobiological research.[\[25\]](#)

More familiar today is post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a condition associated with individuals who have experienced one or more traumatic events. Intergenerational trauma is a collective form of PTSD that crosses time, passing from one generation to the next. That such trauma was present in Jewish life throughout centuries of derision and harassment, the imposition of harsh economic restrictions, onerous taxation, forced conversion, imprisonment in ghettos, physical torture, and arbitrary attacks on individuals and communities, is understandable. And while there is no way to determine when this syndrome began to spread, there is evidence of it as far back as the first millennium.

Collective psychological damage is so deeply ingrained within

Jewish culture that it finds expression in the text of the Haggadah, compiled during the first millennium, and since that time read aloud at the Passover seder by Jews throughout the world: "For not only one (enemy) has risen up against us to destroy us, but in every generation they rise up to destroy us ..."

Considering this morbid historical experience, it is understandable that security became the number one objective of diaspora Jewish communities. This recurrent challenge involved various strategies and arrangements with the gentile hegemon. When possible, chief among these throughout the centuries, was providing utility. A second, but one existing for approximately only the last one hundred years, is demonstrating charm. Under various historical settings both these means have served Jewish interests, albeit neither with total nor permanent success.

Utility refers to the skills or talents among Jews that gentiles recognize as useful. During the Middle Ages Jews in Europe were valued by the Catholic Church and by landowners for their financial acumen, even as they were reviled for their religion. Jews were thought to be good at handling money, so the local gentry often imposed upon them the management of their holdings and the disagreeable task of collecting taxes from among the peasant farmers. Since the Catholic Church forbade Christians from charging interest to fellow Christians, Jews conveniently serviced them as money lenders, usurers. Not that Jews were offered much of a choice. It was understood by Jewish communities whose protection was at the behest of the Church, that their ability to accommodate the needs of their non-Jewish hosts was the price of their security. So, accommodate they did. Still, compliance with the demands of the Church could not guarantee protection from all danger at all times, to wit, the indiscriminate pillaging of Jewish communities by gentile peasants and brigands. Ultimately, the Church itself turned against the Jews with the

Spanish Inquisition beginning in the late 15th century.

Another example of Jewish utility is observed much later, during the 19th century, and lasting into the first decades of the 20th century. This involved the numerous notable contributions made by the Jews of Prussia and Austria-Hungary^[26] In his magisterial account of the tragic legacy of Jews of the Germanic lands poignantly entitled *The Pity of It All: A Portrait of the German-Jewish Epoch 1743-1933*, Amos Elon tells how “a persecuted clan of cattle dealers and wandering peddlers was transformed into a stunningly successful community of writers, philosophers, scientists, tycoons, and activists.”^[27]

In 1933, in a futile effort to convince German society of the importance of its Jews, even their essentiality, the Central Union of German Citizens of the Jewish Faith (*Centralverein*) published a catalogue of Jewish “achievers” and “achievements” in all fields. Entitled *Jews in the Realm of German Culture*, it “was a vast, meticulously detailed encyclopedia of Jewish contributions to German life and culture during the past two centuries ... The oversized book ran to 1,060 pages and comprised thousands of entries and names.”^[28] The message to their non-Jewish neighbors could hardly have been more implicit: We Jews have been good for you, we have helped you, we have strengthened you. Look at all we have done for Germany! Alas, it was for naught.

These two examples taken from different historical periods illustrate how Jewish abilities recognized as useful by their gentile hosts could serve as a form of currency in exchange for security. But whenever Jews were tolerated for their usefulness, the arrangement eventually proved undependable. Ultimately, antisemitism won out, proving to be more powerful, more resilient, than the benefits derived from the work of Jews.

The other method of attaining security, through the use of charm, refers to the appeal or likeability of Jews to non-Jews due to their talent for entertaining and raising one's spirits. This idea was expressed by satirist Lenny Bruce, alias Leonard Schneider, in an early 1960s comedy routine that retroactively projects 20th century sensibilities unto an imaginary Biblical scenario:

Egyptian: "We got the pyramids to build, and that's where it's at. Gonna get it up, takes your generation, next generation ..."

Jew: "Thank you, thank you."

Egyptian: "Get outta here with that horseshit! Now stop it now!"

But the Jew kept working at it, working at being charming. And he got so slick at it—he never carried it off—but he honed his arguments so good, he got so good at it, that that was his expertise."

Egyptian: "C'mon. Let's go watch a Jew be charming. Hey! Jew! Do that charming bit for us, there ... you do it so good we get a kick out of it. Do it for us, will ya please?"

See? That was it, and he (the Jew) was on his way. [\[29\]](#)

The circumstances that enabled charm to become a means for finding favor among gentiles only became possible following the political reforms enacted in Western Europe, mainly in the Germanic states, France and England, beginning with the post-Enlightenment period at the end of the 18th century. Ghetto walls came down and doors that had been closed to Jews, particularly the university and the traditional professions, began to open. These changes resulted in an unprecedented level of inter-communal contact and the forging of new types

of relationships between Jews and non-Jews. Increased social fluidity enabled many gentiles to come to know Jews as individuals and to form acquaintanceships based on amity unrelated to practical utility. Such was the special friendship between Rabbi Moses Mendelsohn and the noted German writer, philosopher and dramatist, Gotthold Lessing. Another post-Enlightenment example is the extended Rothschild family whose enormous wealth enabled its members to mix socially, and even intermarry, among the elite of Europe. The social changes taking place within Western Europe made it possible for Benjamin Disraeli, of Jewish parentage, to become prime minister of England and Alfred Dreyfus to reach the rank of French army captain. Nonetheless, antisemitism, so ingrained within the social fabric of Europe, continued to loom in the background, a fact never lost on Jews. Case in point, the antisemitic-fueled arrest, trial and imprisonment later suffered by Dreyfus.

Across the ocean the American experiment allowed for even greater and more natural social intercourse than that of 19th century western Europe. The United States in that period was still a work in progress; demographically it was a hodge-podge of immigrant groups that had come to its shores, each with its respective language and culture. Some settled in the country's growing urban districts. Others chose to make their way to the hinterlands. America had its social boundaries, but these were more perforated than those of Europe. This relative openness facilitated greater interaction among different immigrant ethnic groups and between non-Jews and Jews.

Still, even young America was not free of antisemitism. Neither as pervasive nor as deadly as was the antisemitism of Europe, American antisemitism more typically was expressed through forms of exclusion and generally limited to the private sector, not government sanctioned.[\[30\]](#) It restricted where Jews could live, where they receive an education, where they might find employment, the clubs and associations they

could join, and even where they could vacation.

Consequently, during the first half of the twentieth century, Jews along with other minorities were regularly denied employment by large and prestigious American corporations and entry to the higher professions. This discrimination goaded many resourceful Jews into establishing their own small businesses, many of which later grew into highly successful commercial enterprises. But another alternative open to Jews was the world of entertainment. Here there were few obstacles standing in the way of talented and persistent individuals. Consequently, many gifted first- and second-generation American Jews were drawn to the world of stagecraft, if not as performers than in many ancillary roles.

An important sector of the American entertainment enterprise is comedy. In the twentieth century Jewish comedians came to dominate this field, from the Marx Brothers and The Three Stooges to Jackie Mason and Jerry Seinfeld, along with dozens more.

The psychological and cultural impact of this particular Jewish competence on American society was recognized by English language scholar Lawrence J. Epstein:

Beyond being extremely talented entertainers, however, Jewish comedians have fulfilled a special mission in American life, serving as the most important mediators between Jews and American culture. They exemplified two great themes of American Jewish life: assimilation and the search for an American Jewish identity. The comedians gave Jews strategies to survive entering and adapting to American culture and reduced anxiety about that adaptation. *They gained for Jews acceptance from an alien gentile culture and did so in a way that was not threatening to middle America.*" (my italics) ... [Jews] drew on their

heritage in ways that they themselves didn't always understand. As they used that heritage to find ways to express truths about America, they transformed American culture, making Jews and Jewishness acceptable, even enviable.^[31]

Americans of all backgrounds were able to appreciate the sharp, ironic and sarcastic humor of Jewish comedians because it served as a palliative; it simply made them feel good. In the post-World War II era, with the proliferation of television in most homes, the celebrity of Jewish comedians served to elevate the image and popularity of Jews in America. As Lenny Bruce might have it, America became charmed by its Jews. And not only because of Jewish comedians, though they seemed to have led the way. Popular Jewish entertainers appeared to be everywhere. Playing off of this popularity, the local "You Don't have to be Jewish to Love Levy's Real Jewish Rye" ad campaign that began on subway cars of New York in 1961 proved so successful that its iconic posters spread throughout the country, lasting into the 1970s.

By the second half of the 20th century, American Jews could be found in virtually every sector of the economy and living in communities from which they were previously excluded. Surveys taken during this period confirmed the ebbing of antisemitism, doubtlessly due in part to a general post-Holocaust guilt. As a corollary, mixed- or inter-marriage, a reliable indicator of social integration, grew to 50%, later to climb to 70%. "Although pockets of discrimination remain(ed) ... virtually every occupation and almost every position in American society (was) now open to American Jews ..." ^[32] America's Jews had reached a level of social acceptance and integration that surpassed all other diaspora communities, including that of late 19th century Germany.

The contributions of so many Jews to the fabric of American life, in science and technology, education, jurisprudence, medicine, economics and culture, were impossible to ignore. All of these from a group that never managed to grow to beyond roughly 2% of the country's population. The obvious practical value to the society of Jews, almost their essentialness, was one factor contributing to their high level of integration and acceptance. The other was that America at large recognized and was drawn to the special Jewish talent for entertaining. These two factors coalesced and resonated well with the zeitgeist of twentieth century America.

But missing in these two methods was the ability to effect the more fundamental social change necessary to alter the atmosphere that sustains antisemitism. Such change could have come about with the 1789 French Revolution and its promise of "Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité," as well as the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in Russia and its chimera of a classless, egalitarian society. In spite of the hope of many Jews that these two historic upheavals, respectively, would offer them equality and security, both failed in this and antisemitism in these countries persisted; under Communism it grew significantly worse.

However, an earlier revolution that took place 1776 did result in establishing a society whose fundamental values eschewed antisemitism. Jews immigrating to its shores discovered that the United States was mostly free of the historically entrenched antisemitic prejudices of Europe. Even if it did not live up to the lofty ideals expressed by its founders, America was still more open than the tradition-bound societies from which Jews emigrated. Moreover, its foundational creed, codified in the Constitution of the United States of America, guaranteed that antisemitism could never officially, legally, take root.

However, this did not prevent the prejudices of individuals and private institutions from denying Jews access to schools,

employment, housing and even recreational establishments. It was under these circumstances, the conflict between a society that, *de jure*, is open and democratic but, *de facto*, harbors pockets of discrimination and prejudice, that modern Jewish political liberalism was born.

Once Jews were liberated from their ghettos, once they were permitted to enter the mainstream as individuals to engage and mix with non-Jews, once Jews had agency, they carried a message of liberalism, of tolerance of the minority, of acceptance of the other. Through this they became unofficial role models of political liberalism. Jewish utility, their achievements, and Jewish charm, a talent for entertaining, continued to remain factors in relations with non-Jews, but parallel to these was now the opportunity to fundamentally transform society and effect social change through the promotion of liberalism. While the former could elicit security on the basis of the value that Jews offered, the latter reasoned that a liberal society better serves all.

The opportunity for this is only possible within a society already open enough for Jews to express themselves without fear of sanctions. Paradoxically, the same open and democratic society must also tolerate a certain level of intolerance and prejudice. Democracy and freedom of speech, the hallmarks of an open society, constitute a double-edged sword, offering both Jews and antisemites the liberty of expression. This irony necessitated developing a strategy to combat pockets of antisemitism in America where due to limitations within the law they remained ineradicable.

By serving as role models of political liberalism, by being active in promoting the liberal position on domestic social issues, even on matters of war and peace, Jews conveyed the message: "See how we are? See what we do? You should be like this. Everybody should be like this."

This message was by no means limited to self-interest. But nor

was it altruistic. It was based on the rationale that in a truly liberal society all are safe, all are treated fairly. Such a world is good for Jews as it is good for all groups. It establishes the classic win-win situation.

Something more about this message. Through their reputation as role models of liberalism, Jews, whether consciously or not, find themselves fulfilling the mission assigned to them in the Book of Isaiah, 42:6: *"I the LORD have called unto you in righteousness, and have taken hold of your hand, and submitted you as the people's covenant, as a light unto the nations."*

But human nature being what it is, and people being people, not everybody, to use an understatement, understood this message, took it to heart and began to self-reflect. Something more assertive than role modeling was called for.

Out of a desire to truly "secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity ..." in a country "dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal," but still populated by individuals who are self-satisfied with their own interpretation of these verses, Jews also found it necessary to establish advocacy, or defense, organizations to proactively fight discrimination and acts of antisemitism.^[33] The activities of these agencies also included educating the American public about Jews, Judaism, and the evils of antisemitism. But if not from the beginning, than in more recent years, each agency clearly defined its mission to include advocating on behalf of all groups, not just Jews; fighting all expressions of prejudice and discrimination, not just antisemitism.

For example, this statement currently found on the website of the Anti-Defamation league:

(In 1910 the) Jewish community in the United States faces

rampant antisemitism and overt discrimination. Newspapers, books and plays frequently depict Jews with crude stereotypes. Against this backdrop of bigotry and intolerance, Chicago attorney Sigmund Livingston puts forward a bold idea—to create an organization with a mission to stop the defamation of the Jewish people, and to secure justice and fair treatment to all ... ADL is founded with the clear understanding that the fight against one form of prejudice cannot succeed without battling prejudice in all forms.”^{[\[34\]](#)}

The same ethos of offering succor to all who are in need, irrespective of background, is expressed by The Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), founded in 1881 “(specifically) to assist Jews fleeing the pogroms in tsarist Russia, (but which) today (serves) persecuted refugees of all faiths and nationalities ... We assist refugees today not because *they* are Jewish, but because *we* are Jewish (Italics in the original).”^{[\[35\]](#)}

Is there something intrinsic to being Jewish that is responsible for this behavior? Is it, as some contend, due to the Jewish religion? But most Jews today are insufficiently familiar with the tenets of Judaism to be so inspired by it. And those who are intimate with Jewish tradition recognize that there is nothing within suggesting the modern mode of liberalism that is favored by Jews. It is, rather, intergenerational trauma, the catalyst for Jewish liberal role modeling, that offers the strongest single explanation for the persistence of Jewish liberalism.

Recognizing intergenerational trauma as the psychological force behind Jewish liberal role modeling explains why so many Jews, even those with little or no commitment to Judaism, seek to “repair the world” through their liberalism. That this

trait describes most modern Jews, and not only American Jews, is evidenced by the strong electoral support historically given by Jewish voters to the liberal parties and candidates in Australia,^[36] Canada,^[37] and Great Britain.^[38]

An even stronger example is the State of Israel. Founded by Jews who were ideologically committed to secularism and socialism, with religion relegated to the sidelines, the Jewish state's "Light unto the Nations" role became apparent just ten years after its founding. From the late 1950s until the early 1970s, thousands of Israeli experts were sent to 33 African states offering aid and technical knowledge in fields such as military training, regional planning, agriculture, medicine, legal work and community services.^[39] It cannot be denied that Israel's commitment to providing foreign assistance was and remains intended to win friends and influence countries; it is in Israel's legitimate interest, as it is in the interest of every nation, to cultivate allies. But this political objective has always complemented the country's altruistic inclinations, as stated by former Israeli Foreign Minister and Prime Minister Golda Meir:

Let me at once anticipate the cynics. Did we go into Africa because we wanted votes at the United Nations? Yes, of course ... But it was far from being the most important motive ... The main reason for our African "Adventure" was that we had something we wanted to pass on to nations that were even younger and less experienced than ourselves.^[40]

Since the 1950s, even after having developed strong ties with many other countries and having significantly improved its level of national security, Israel has continued a policy of assisting underdeveloped nations in multiple ways; more so

today than in the past.^[41] Israel is also often the first on the scene with humanitarian aid in response to some distant natural disaster. But, once again, this behavior is not mere shrewd politicking. This is one way the Jewish state contributes to the family of nations and in doing so serves as a role model for other countries. Even acting through the state, intergenerational trauma plays upon the Jewish collective psyche. It is responsible for Israel's political leaders and for sundry Israeli non-profit organizations providing long-term assistance and educational programs to many underdeveloped countries or to providing emergency aid and rescue services to countries in the wake of a natural disaster.

But whether it is the Jews of Israel, of Europe or the United States, what are the boundaries of Jewish liberalism; how inclusive is it? There is no reason to believe that the horror expressed by so many American Jews, like so many other Americans, at the murder of George Floyd was inauthentic. But the death of George Floyd in May 2020 was hardly the first case of a black American citizen who died in a confrontation with police. And it wasn't the last. Was the unusually demonstrative response of America's Jews to this death appropriate?

Were past statements by Black Lives Matter on Israel and the antisemitic epithets attributed to some of its members, overlooked because of Jewish group virtue signaling? And might the same question be raised concerning the establishment by American Jews of anti-Zionist organizations like "Jews for Justice in Palestine," "Jewish Voice for Peace," as well as asked of individual Jews who support the BDS movement?

Surely it is difficult to measure the earnestness of an individual's support on behalf of any one cause. How is one to judge if self-defined progressive Jews sincerely believe their activism to be solely for the sake of "tikkun olam," activism

whose objective is improving the condition of humanity? And does this objective include the welfare of Jews? Or was the zeal oft times displayed by Jews in support of Black Lives Matter during the summer of 2020, or by other Jews at anti-Zionist rallies, more likely an expression of moral posturing being performed out of “the need to be perceived as good people. (Is this what) explains the prominence of Jews in so many movements that are primarily forms of virtue signaling,” asks Yonason Rosenblum.^[42] Journalist and social commentator Bari Weiss observes that behavior demonstrated by Jews in support of progressive causes can involve a “witting self-abnegation, self-erasure, that if we play down ideas of Jewish particularism, somehow we will come to be accepted.”^[43] How can this be good for the Jewish community?

What distinguishes virtue signaling from liberal role modeling is that the former represents a calculated effort whose objective is to solicit social acceptance or praise, either by a certain individual or within a particular group. In addition, the professions one makes, or one’s actions, are largely disingenuous. They are intended to benefit the actor, more than the cause.

By contrast, liberal role modeling among Jews is less purposeful in the sense that it is an expression of subliminal behavior that is inherited by virtue of Jewish group membership.^[44] Furthermore, liberal role modeling is not about seeking acceptance. The support it conveys is more sincere, even in the absence of the activism that can accompany virtue signaling.

To be sure, virtue signaling is not emblematic of the majority of American Jews whose politics lie to the left of center. They prefer to express their political views at the ballot box, through financial donations and perhaps occasional attendance at a rally. In these ways they express their liberalism and they will continue to defend it even in the

face of the undeniable growing hostility towards Jews and Israel now emanating from the political left. They will continue to express compassion for African Americans and other people of color. They will continue to support abortion rights, the legitimacy of gender fluidity, and any policy or program that claims to promote social justice or protect the environment. Above all, they will continue to support the Democratic Party in large numbers, liberalism being the way in which Jews sublimate intergenerational trauma.

The last one hundred years are seen by some as the "American Jewish Century." But considering the surge of antisemitism during this last decade and the seeming inability of the authorities to contain it, this storied era appears to have run its course. Contrary to many people's hopes, expectations and efforts, antisemitism in America has not succeeded over time in declining to the level where it is no longer an issue on the American Jewish agenda. Today it is high on the agenda. But to those familiar with Jewish history, this comes as no surprise.

"Since biblical days," writes journalist Gary Rosenblatt, "Jews have been seen as 'the other,' outsiders, victims of conspiracy theories and myths that have no rational source. The pages of Jewish history are bloodstained from countless persecutions and pogroms." [\[45\]](#) Ben-Gurion's sobering insight regarding the imbalance of power still pertains; every minority has a right to expect, even fear, the unexpected.

Perhaps in another hundred years or so the darker echoes of the Jewish past will have sufficiently faded, allowing later generations of Israeli Jews, knowing only sovereignty and no longer facing an existential threat, to realize the Zionist ideal of being emotionally secure and fully self-confident. Perhaps. As for Jews in the diaspora, they will continue to suffer the affect of intergenerational trauma, experiencing the impulse to ensure their acceptance and security among gentiles by way of their skills, through their charm and

especially by acting as liberal role models.

Secular liberalism has indeed replaced Judaism as the fount out of which emerge the values that inform the behavior of the majority of modern Jews, particularly in America. But liberalism itself does not meet the criteria of a religion; it lacks any deity or other supernatural focus, it proffers no specific creed, nor is it associated with even the most minimal institutional structure.

While not a religion, nevertheless, liberalism is an ideology; in the simplest sense, a set of beliefs about the world and the way a society works or should work, particularly with regard to its political system and management of its economy. But in the case of Jews there is reason to suspect that more is at work here. The broad acquisition of this ideology by American Jews appears not be a random phenomenon nor a strictly personal decision as it more generally is for others. Rather, it is a choice that seems predetermined.

Liberalism among Jews is more than ideology; it is a syndrome, the sublimation of intergenerational trauma. It is what motivates "tikkun olam," activities for "fixing the world," a role model for social justice. It is attempting to be a light unto the nations in order to bring about acceptance and security, not just for Jews, but for everyone.

[\[1\]](#) *The Sod's Law Podcast Episode #75 with Daniel M. Rosenberg.*

[\[2\]](#)

<https://urj.org/press-room/reform-jewish-leadership-statement-black-lives-matter-jewish-value>

[\[3\]](#)

<https://www.jpost.com/opinion/a-new-exhibit-uses-george-floyd-to-universalize-the-holocaust-650404>

[\[4\]](#) <https://www.ncjwny.org/takeaction/>

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<https://www.timesofisrael.com/la-jews-take-stock-after-george->

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<https://www.timesofisrael.com/dc-protesters-link-race-rallies-to-palestinians-chant-israel-murders-children/>

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https://www.adl.org/sites/default/files/documents/ADL_MS_Survey_Pres_1_25_17.pdf

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<https://sapirjournal.org/social-justice/2021/05/the-past-and-future-of-black-jewish-relations/>

[10] <https://www.jpost.com/opinion/article-713864>

[11] Edward Shapiro, *A Time for Healing: American Jewry Since World War II*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995.

[12] Lawrence Fuchs, *The Political Behavior of American Jews*, Free Press, 1956.

[13]

<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jewish-voting-record-in-u-s-presidential-elections>

[14] Leonard Fein, *Where Are We? The Inner Life of America's Jews*, Harper and Row, 1989.

[15] Norman Podhoretz, *Why Are Jews Liberal*, Doubleday, 2009.

[16] Also in James Q. Wilson, <https://www.nationalaffairs.com/publications/detail/the-future-of-blame>

[17] Irving Howe, "Liberalism and the Jews," *Commentary*, 1980.

[18] Seymour Siegel, "Liberalism and the Jews," *Commentary*, 1980.

[19] Hillel Halkin, "How Not to Repair the World," *Commentary*, July/August, 2008.

[20] Podhoretz, *ibid*, p. 281.

[21] Podhoretz, *ibid*, p. 291.

[22] Tom Segev, *A State at Any Cost: The Life of David Ben-Gurion*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux; Illustrated edition, 2019.

[23] See Dr. Fabiano Franco,

[https://www.goodtherapy.org/blog/Understanding_Intergenerational_Trauma#:~:text=Intergenerational%20trauma%20\(sometimes%20referred%20to,an%20incident%20to%20subsequent%20generations](https://www.goodtherapy.org/blog/Understanding_Intergenerational_Trauma#:~:text=Intergenerational%20trauma%20(sometimes%20referred%20to,an%20incident%20to%20subsequent%20generations)

[24] See Christine Rosen, "How Trauma Became a Political Tool," Commentary, Vol. 154, No. 1

[25] Wilson, *ibid.*

[26] On a lesser scale, the Jews living in Moslem Spain around the turn of the first millennium had a comparable experience, the "Golden Age of Jewish Culture."

[27] Amos Elon, *The Pity of It All: A Portrait of the German-Jewish Epoch 1743-1933*, Picador, 2002.

[28] Elon, p. 9.

[29] *The Essential Lenny Bruce*, edited by John Cohen, Ballantine Books, 1967.

[30] A notable exception to this was General Ulysses S. Grant's expulsion of Jews from his military district in 1862. <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/grant-expels-the-jews-from-his-department>.

[31] *The Haunted Smile: The Story of Jewish Comedians in America*, Public Affairs, 2001.

[32] Charles E. Silberman, *A Certain People: American Jews and Their Lives Today*, Summit Books, New York, 1985.

[33] Among these are B'nai B'rith (1843), The Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) (1881), The American Jewish Committee (1906) and the Anti-Defamation League of the B'nai B'rith (1913), and The American Jewish Congress (1918).

[34] <https://www.adl.org/about/mission-and-history>

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<https://www.aclu.org/blog/immigrants-rights/why-jewish-organization-suing-stop-muslim-ban>

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[37] <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3228897>

[38]

<https://www.jpr.org.uk/documents/The%20political%20leanings%20of%20British%20Jews.pdf>. This 2010 survey show British Jews

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[40] Ibid.

[41]

<https://www.gov.il/en/departments/mashav-office/govil-landing-page>

[42] <https://mishpacha.com/the-dangers-of-virtue-signaling/>

[43]

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aXbz4BDw44o&t=10s&ab_channel=AmericanJewishCommittee

[44] Outside of most Orthodox circles

[45] Gary Rosenblatt, "Is It Still Safe to Be a Jew in America?" *The Atlantic*, March 15, 2020.

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Ardie Goldman is a writer and public speaker who lives in Efrat, Israel. His articles on Jewish life and Israel and book reviews have appeared in the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, the *Journal of Jewish Communal Studies*, the *Jerusalem Post* and *The Times of Israel*.

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