**Reflections on the State of the Jewish Community:**

**Our Place in the American Story**

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For many of us the prophetic tradition provided us with the framework and inspiration for promoting a more progressive society.

We envisioned our Judaism and our Americanism in consort with one another.

We believed that each generation saw itself building upon the next.

Finally, we held to the belief that anti-Semitism, especially in the United States, was relegated to another era.

Today, the question may be whether any of these four assumptions are valid.

This past century may well have been our most significant one, the Jewish people’s most essential timeframe in our long history. Indeed, at one moment in time we would both be witness to the extremes of terror and death directed against our people, as we would see the blessings of the birth of the Jewish State. Our creativity and contributions in science and medicine, literature and the arts, political philosophy and social activism, religious thought and spiritual inquiry would be extensive and profound. As I have written, 1918-2018 may reflect the most significant period in our long and arduous journey, as it embodied all of the elements that defined the Jewish experiment, just as the 20th Century symbolized the centrality of the American story.

In this century of the Jewish people, we would create a new and significant relationship with Christianity, only to uncover that the battleground of the 21st century would be centered on Islam, and not the Catholic Church.

Technology, we believed, would unite us, only to discover that it could and would be employed to divide us. And in some instances, we have seen it being used as part of a social media war against the values and institutions we affirm. In this time frame we awakened to the reality that technology can be readily activated against us as Jews, take as examples cyber hate and political targeting.

As we look back covering our tenure of service, we can observe these particular realities:

Over these past fifty years, America’s Jews have had a profound impact on this nation. And in some interesting measure, what has unfolded within our community created the impetus for changing America itself. Because of their economic and social standing and their individual and collective achievements, Jewish Americans have disproportionately contributed to this nation’s cultural messaging, imprinted its social behaviors, and helped frame its political conversations. We had come to an understanding that nothing happens in America that does not impact American Judaism. Simultaneously, we could argue that Jewish ideas and values would penetrate the public stage in ways that we could never have imagined.

American Jewish political culture is deeply linked to American history. Jews were here from the outset and as such would enjoy a unique place in how this nation embraced western religion. “Protestant, Catholic and Jew” must be understood more than just a tripartite religious equation. It would symbolize the equal status of Judaism with their sister religious communities, something unknown previously in western societies.

We would begin to observe how collective action and globalism transformed our society and reinvented our economy. Internally, patriotism and civic engagement would be central ingredients to this, the American century.

During the post war era, the United States would be a central player in promoting regional models of collective action, whether through military alliances or economic trade arrangements. The genius of the Marshall Plan and the success of NATO have come to symbolize the American model of global engagement.

Media, but more directly, television would bring the world into our living rooms. And in the process, many of us would become globalists.

The human rights revolution would allow us to speak out not only for Soviet Jews but for others denied their religious and civil liberties.

These were the forces and ideas that united us and provided us with a common framework. Globalism, human rights, and progressive values would define and shape our understanding of society, and more directly our place in the world. Yet, within these past several years, each of these value propositions has begun to unravel.

As Harvard’s Robert Putnam would suggest , Americans began to disconnect from the civic arena. In his masterful work, Bowling Alone, Dr. Putnam documents the rapid demise of PTA groups, Hadassah chapters, and Rotary Club memberships, and most certainly Bowling Leagues.

During the 1990’s we would begin to see the collectivist orientation of the Jewish communal agenda begin to collapse, as well. Just as our vision of globalism would diminish, we would move from this communal character of our identity to a personalized Jewish model. The sovereign self would replace a unified sense of Jewish destiny. We would awaken to the reality that we no longer could speak of a shared Jewish vision.

Today, we are a people in search of itself. The idea of peoplehood seems distant, if not totally displaced. The ability to engage fellow Jews in a civil discourse on Israel or carry forward a conversation on America and its politics has all but been lost.

How will we define ourselves as Jews in the generation ahead? My sense is that we as liberal Jews will operate in the coming decades through a series of defused, distinctive yet separated communities of faith, no longer held together by the power of history or the bounds of denominational loyalties. Absent a sense of common purpose and removed from a shared historical journey, we will be seen as religious wanders and seekers. The greatest Jewish generation has seemingly given way to a leadership cohort that at best might be described as functionaries in service to a class of self-centered Jewish aristocrats, who rule by money and by intimidation.

The central ideas around which we constructed our lives and careers are being challenged. Themes, such as multi-culturalism and pluralism that once bound us together are now under attack, while our commitment to immigrants, to the environment, and to social justice is being undermined.

As we move forward into the 21st century, these and other trends are redefining our society and reshaping American Judaism:

* With the rise of an aristocratic class, the economic divide has contributed to a deepening of cultural and political tensions.
* Consumer preferences are reshaping how individuals understand and relate to institutions and to the idea of community.
* Demographically, Islam will replace Judaism in twenty years as America’s third great religious tradition.
* The Anglo-Saxon whiteness that defined much of American history will give way within three decades to a multi-racial majority, and more directly, our Jewish claims to being identified as white are now being challenged by the alt-right as well as forces on the political left, who reject our Zionist credentials. Many of our enemies accuse us of being a part of the white power structure, thereby forfeiting our claims as petitioners or social activists. Others describe us as “deceptive” whites, seeking to impose our agenda on America.
* The rise of the religious “nones” is remaking the American church and synagogue as the role of religion undergoes profound change.
* The unifying forces of citizenship and community that framed our lives and identity are similarly coming undone.

What keeps me up at night is the growing reality that we are unprepared as a community or as a people for what may be ahead. The loss of confidence in civic institutions is reflected in the down turn in voter participation. Nothing is more dangerous to a minority community, such as ours, when a society gives up on its public square. When Americans no longer believe that our civic story or political system is responsive, then the institutions of our republic will become the solely owned province of special interests.

The attack on a synagogue this past October in Pittsburgh and the events in Charlottesville, last year, dramatically and tragically call our attention to the presence of hate within our society. The seeds of these violent expressions lay in part at the feet of our President and the environment that this administration has constructed.

Sadly, this moment in American politics may take decades to fully repair. This administration’s lack of a moral compass, its disregard for the tenets of American democracy, its shameful abuse of power and its desire to reframe the American story in white nationalist terms have contributed to the undoing of the established principles and practices that we understood to be the core to this democracy.

Yet, within the past two years we have seen a striking uptake in the number of Jews running for public office in all levels of government. The subtext here is really about the impact of the women’s movement and its specific affect on Jewish women to access the political playing field. There are literally hundreds of Jews today who have entered the political arena. One quarter of the new class of the 116th Congress, some 34 members, are Jewish Americans.

We need to remind ourselves that historically Jews do not do well in political regimes built around radical nationalism. Identity politics, which has become the mantra for some, may produce some short-term victories for Israel but ultimately may be highly problematic for the North American Jewish community.

This nation has experienced other problematic administrations in its 240-year history, but few have been as destructive to the institutions of government or have contributed to the undermining of the values and norms of American democracy. As we know radical movements thrive in a political setting of distrust and in the absence of political accountability.

In every society in which Jews have lived, when the social order is altered, what has historically followed is the onset of a new set of political actors and an alternative value base that undermines the status and security of minority communities. Jews have been particularly vulnerable to such disruptive conditions. As historian David Biale observed, Judaism was seen as a political defense for Jews, in some measure giving to our people a form of psychological protection, when external political forces were seen as hostile and destructive. In such settings Jews would turn inward, celebrating and observing the tradition, in anticipation of God’s imprint on their condition. By contrast, in periods of liberation and freedom, Jews would employ Judaism as a political ideology, giving them inspiration and direction.

In connection with the later, as historian Marc Dollinger has observed, Jewish liberal behavior was seen as a moveable expression, as Jews adjusted their politics to the environment in which they would find themselves. Today, Jews are in search of their political identity, as certain external movements and ideas are creating a disruptive state to their traditional thinking and behavior.

Many American Jews have an increased sense of discomfort in connection with the political options that our now before them.  A Republican Party aligned with the alt right and a Democratic Party witnessing the rise within its progressive wing of anti-Israel activists both contribute to this state of anxiety that is beginning to redefine how Jews see themselves in America.

What will be the impact of these new threats on how Jewish Americans understand and redefine their place in this society?

Even on the edges of our politics, we need to be vigilant. The intersectionality movement, in my view, is highly problematic for the Jewish community, as Jews are no longer identified as victims or petitioners of history but as part of the power establishment. In reality, we are thankfully no longer un-empowered but for certain our claims to power must be seen as tentative and limited. It would be foolish, if not dangerous, for Jews to believe or play the roles associated with the entrenched power class. We need to remind ourselves how elusive power can be.

Similarly, we must not believe that social justice is the extent and content of our significant and historic tradition. For many, their engagement with Tikkun Olam has become their religious definition and political orientation. As Jack Wertheimer writes in his latest book, more is demanded, and required.

For younger Jews the very politics with which many of us have grave disagreements serves in some cases as their political home. Take for example the BDS effort, Black Lives Matter, or the aforementioned politics of intersectionality. These causes represent ideas within the American political culture that are committed to the redistribution of power and influence. These political realities will have a profound influence on our children’s generation and more directly, on our grandchildren’s American experience.

If these then are some of the external threats, American Jews are living with three internal challenges that separate Diaspora Jewry and the Jewish state:

* The political walls that divide us,
* Israel’s religious policies and practices that separate us, and
* The growing disconnects between Diaspora Jewry and the Jewish State over Israeli settlements and the debate over a “greater Israel” state model that marginalizes us.

The Israel that we envisioned has left us behind. The proposition that Israel would be seen as both a focus of our constant attention and our uncompromised loyalty may no longer hold value.

In the course of these disagreements, the critics of our movement both within Israel and here accuse us of a level of shallowness to our Judaism. They label liberal Judaism as merely an extension of the Democratic Party. The broader attack on liberalism in America is today mimicked through the assault on Jewish progressive ideas.

A side note here, I for one do not believe that the criticisms being directed against our movement’s leaders or institutions is taking place in a vacuum. There is a concerted war on American liberal Judaism, in part orchestrated from Jerusalem but carried out here in North America.

What we have uncovered is that aspects of the very liberalism that some of us helped to forge is itself undergoing a radicalized reinvention. Further, the Trump brand of Republicanism is fundamentally in opposition to many of the civic principles or social value propositions that have historically defined our nation’s politics and more directly the Republican Party.

Here, I would add that no other American ethnic or religious community has invested its identity, resources and commitment to the political process, as have America’s Jews. Our communal DNA is singularly aligned with the practice of politics. Indeed, whether as Democrats or Republicans, we have totally embraced this political system. Both parties saw Jews as essential builders to their respective political messages.

We find ourselves today in a different place. We require the types of conversations that defined our identity, direction and focus in the 20th century. Internally, we are bereft at this moment of Jewish ideologies that might inspire and guide us into the future. Nor do we seem to have the visionary leaders and necessary institutions to carry us forward? Our communal discourse, at this time, is deeply imperiled by the Jewish wars taking place around us and by the political divide that exists both within and beyond our community.

Yet despite these current existential challenges, many of the most momentous changes in Jewish history have taken place in our lifetime:

* We have helped to create and nurture a democratic, Jewish state.
* We have been a part of the most successful Jewish Diaspora experiment in history.
* Unlike at any other time in our history, Jews are living in freedom, generally secure and unencumbered.
* Jews have achieved success and acclaim in a wide array of fields and disciplines, never before believed possible.
* Jewish intellectual exploration has achieved extraordinary new depths.

Yet, our work is not done. I have identified below eight organizing principles designed to reframe our agenda in an age and at a time where I voice must be present:

1. **Finding the common ground and capturing the central space**: There are Americans from all walks of life, deeply uncomfortable with this current political condition. Some folks are already at work on a third party model as a way to recapture the middle ground of American politics, while others are busy seeking to reclaim the political machinery of this nation, proposing controls on campaign financing and refocusing on bipartisanship legislation and collective action.
2. **Re-energizing our institutions and our partners**: We must begin to reexamine the American Jewish religious and communal system that is in place. There is no room today for religious triumphalism or political intimidation; we need a communal system that nurtures and promotes dialogue and breaks down divisions and differences.

Just as we require political partners as an essential ingredient to secure our place in this society, so do we require our religious and Israeli partners to revisit the collective Jewish experience.

1. **Preparing a new generation of activists:** I believe we have a role to play in inspiring and preparing a cadre of community organizers. It would be destructive to our community and a loss for our society if America’s Jews withdrew from the public square or stepped away from the Jewish conversations that must unfold.
2. **We must affirm truth.** The assault on “facts” cannot be allowed to define who we are or what we represent. We may differ over the meaning and intent of these truths, but we are governed by reason, making thoughtful and responsible decisions as a nation and as a community.
3. **We must defend and protect civil liberties for all.**  This represents an inherent American value; prejudice and violence have no place in our political discourse, and the free exercise of speech, assembly and religious expression must be affirmed, yet again.

**We must repudiate racism, sexism, anti-Semitism and more directly, those who would attack their fellow Jews.** Collectively, we must push back against the politics of hate.

1. **We need to be committed to hearing and understanding those who differ with our vision of America and the Jewish agenda**. A passionate society is built on empathy. We must pursue connections to our political opponents as we seek to learn about their stories and their dreams for this country, just as we would expect that they would hear our vision for this society. To negatively dismiss or to label “the other” is simply a prescription for promoting an environment filled with further discord and separation. We are dedicated to finding “the common ground,” turning anger into constructive engagement.
2. **We are invested in the Public Square and civic engagement, just as we are committed to the Jewish enterprise.** We know that our democracy works best when all are participating as voters and civic activists, knowledgeable about the issues that consume our cities, states, and this nation. We need to encourage the involvement of all citizens in the tasks of nation building. Simultaneously, we remain prepared to engage our fellow Jews across the religious and political divide. What we have learned from our historic journey is that whenever the Jewish community is fractured, its political wellbeing is fraught with danger.
3. **Focusing on selected issues**: There will be the tendency to “right the whole ship” at once. What I think is more productive and far more likely to succeed will be a measured, more targeted framework of action.

We need to continue to inspire those who have replaced us and those who look to us for guidance and insight. In some measure each of you is a sacred repository of the second half of the 20th century, our journey is not complete; it continues. Your journey is your story and your passions define your values. You are needed even now on the stage of change.

The beliefs that were set out at the beginning of this paper, namely that our Americanism and Judaism were in alignment, that generations built upon one another, and that anti-Semitism was relegated to another era, may all prove to be false premises. Yet, we have an opportunity, if not an obligation, to work again to affirm these principles, even as these ideas come under attack.

Many of us may see ourselves as living outside of the fight. We may no longer be at the centerpiece of the Jewish enterprise, but nonetheless, I believe, we have much to contribute. Memory and experience are our most extraordinary resources. May our journey continue and our voices be heard.