The Cognitive Dissonance of American Jews

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Cognitive dissonance, the ability to believe in two diametrically opposite ideas at the same time, has interested psychologists and other social scientists for over half a century. How do people rationalize smoking when they want to live a long and healthy life? How do they justify adultery when they know it is wrong? How do they excuse cutting checks to philanderers espousing “family values” who are running for public office? The pioneering work in the study of cognitive dissonance is *When Prophecy Fails: A Social and Psychological Study of a Modern Group That Predicted the Destruction of the World*, published in 1956 by psychologists Leon Festinger, Henry W. Riecken, and Stanley Schachter of the University of Minnesota. Festinger et al. examined a group of two dozen or so individuals called the Seekers who were convinced that the Earth would soon be destroyed by a flood, and that they would be saved by flying saucers sent from the planet Clarion. The Seekers had been informed of this by several residents of Clarion whom they called the Guardians. One of these was named Sananda, who was actually Jesus. Once the Earth was cleansed, the Seekers would be returned to Earth. So certain was the Seekers’ leader in the imminent flood that she gave a precise date, December 21, 1955, when this would occur. The true believers were certain of the coming apocalypse. “I’ve given up just about everything. I’ve cut every tie: I’ve burned every bridge. I’ve turned my back on the world. I can’t afford to doubt. I have to believe,” said one, a physician.

But what happened to the group when December 21st came and went without the world’s destruction? A minority was disillusioned and left the group, but the majority became even more committed. As Festinger et al. noted, “Although there is a limit beyond which belief will not

withstand disconfirmation, it is clear that the introduction of contrary evidence can serve to increase the conviction and enthusiasm of a believer.” This would occur when the belief was held with deep conviction; when the person holding this belief had taken some important action for the sake of this belief such as joining an organization or contributing money; when other events such as floods and earthquakes indicated that something was in the works; and when the individual was surrounded by other like-minded persons. In such a setting, the individual would reject clear disconfirming evidence and even attempt to convince others of the truth of the belief. This increased proselytizing is necessary if the pain resulting from disconfirmation is to be reduced to a tolerable level. In the case of the Seekers, its leader argued that the fact that the earth had not been destroyed actually confirmed the truth of the belief in its imminent destruction since it demonstrated God’s mercy. “For from the mouth of death have ye been delivered and at no time has there been such a force loosed upon the Earth,” she told her followers. Helping making acceptable the pain of disconfirmation was the social support that individual Seekers received from other true-believers. Without the continual encouragement from others, it is unlikely that most of the members of the groups would have remained in their state of cognitive dissonance. “The presence of supporting co-believers,” Festinger et al. wrote, “would seem to be an indispensable requirement of recovery from such extreme disconfirmation.”

The Seekers were not the first or the last group to predict the Earth’s destruction or the coming of the messianic era. The Millerites and the Jehovah’s Witnesses had also made similar predictions. The most prominent contemporary group making such prophecies is the quasi-religious environmental movement, but there are others. When Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the leader of the messianic Lubavitch movement, an Orthodox Jewish group, died in 1994, some of his followers danced in the street because they assumed the messianic era was imminent. Some even purchased second homes

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near the cemetery in the New York City borough of Queens where he was buried so that they would be on the scene when he returned from the dead. The movement has flourished since 1994 even though Schneerson has not risen and the messianic era seemingly remains as distant as ever. The Lubavitchers are, however, not the only group of American Jews exhibiting cognitive dissonance.¹

Public opinion surveys indicate that American Jews believe, contrary to all evidence, that anti-Semitism in the United States is pervasive, and some Jews even think it is growing. The Bernard Madoff financial scandal was just one of many events in the past several decades which Jews feared would bring to the surface latent and widespread anti-Semitic feelings. That this has not occurred did not prevent Jews from fearing the imminent appearance of a strong anti-Semitic movement. The fact that it has not yet surfaced so far is proof of the insidiousness of anti-Semites who are waiting for just the right moment to strike. It is not surprising that American Jews have exaggerated the threat of anti-Semitism. What the historian Salo Baron has termed the “lachrymose” interpretation of Jewish history was based on historical events, most notably the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492 and the Holocaust. The Holocaust was planned and carried out by a well-educated and culturally advanced population and took place in a modern industrial society. Those who deny that something similar to this could not occur in America, Jewish alarmists declare, are blind to the lessons of history.

Jewish liturgy and the Jewish calendar are replete with prayers and fast days commemorating catastrophes which have befallen Jews. Modern Jewish historiography, as Michael Brenner emphasized in his recent book *Prophets of the Past: Interpreters of Jewish History* (2010), has reinforced this pessimism. Most prominent nineteenth and early twentieth century Jewish historians, with the notable exceptions of Salo Baron and Cecil Roth, residents of the United States and Great Britain respectively, have offered a bleak view of Jewish history. This is hardly surprising since they lived at a time of heightened anti-Semitism culminating in the Holocaust and the Soviet campaign to destroy all remnants of Judaism and Jewish identity in eastern Europe. Zionist historians had an additional reason to stress the more dismal aspects of Jewish history in the Diaspora. These, they argued, demonstrated the need for a Jewish state. Even in the United States, where anti-Semitism has been a private and peripheral matter, and where anti-Semitism has been notable for its absence from politics

and governing, it is *de rigueur* for histories of American Jews to include lengthy chapters on anti-Semitism.

Dozens of Holocaust museums, memorials, research institutes, and archives located throughout America reinforce this message. Since its founding in 1977, one of the most successful, if not the most successful, American Jewish domestic organization in terms of fund-raising has been the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles. The Holocaust Museum in Washington, D. C. has been able to secure generous funding from American Jewish benefactors since its opening in April, 1993, despite the doubts of some observers who wonder whether the Mall in Washington is an appropriate place to locate a museum dedicated to the memory of events which took place in Europe. The fact that the Holocaust Museum is located close to the Washington Monument and on the sacred space of the Mall in Washington shows the extent to which Jews have become part of the American mainstream. The museum’s location also raised questions about its appropriateness since the Holocaust did not occur in America and American authorities were not complicit in its execution. When it came time to name a new Jewish museum in New York City, which opened in 1997, its founders decided to capitalize on the memory of the Holocaust by calling it the Museum of Jewish Heritage—A Living Memorial to the Holocaust. Besides these three major institutions, there is hardly a major American city which does not have a Holocaust museum or at least a memorial of some sort. Holocaust memory has also been disseminated by the many American colleges which offer courses in the Holocaust. These are among the most popular offerings of Jewish Studies departments.

American Jews have also pressed for the mandatory teaching of the Holocaust in public schools in New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Ohio, California and other states with a significant Jewish population. This has been justified on the grounds that secondary students must learn the “lessons” of the Holocaust so that nothing like it will ever appear again. But it is not clear what these lessons are. Certainly Jews were not the only victims of World War II. Around six million Jews were murdered during the war by the Nazis, but somewhere between an additional fifty to sixty-five million persons were killed during the conflict. And who were the bad guys? Many more Chinese died at the hands of Chinese Communists after the war than Jews who were murdered in the Holocaust, and until 1942 the Soviet Union killed more people than did the Nazis.

Holocaust education has had other difficulties besides the question of whether Jews should be singled for special attention. One has been the not unexpected demands of other groups—blacks, Hispanics, Armenians, Indians, homosexuals—to be included in the status of victims of their own Holocaust and thus worthy of public recognition

¹ See especially Joel M. Cooper, *Cognitive Dissonance: 50 Years of a Classic Theory* (London: Sage Publications, 2007) and Simon Dein, *Lubavitcher Messianism: What Really Happens When Prophecy Fails?* (London: Continuum, 2011).

and government aid. Another problem has been supplying secondary schools with personnel sufficiently versed in the history of the Holocaust who are able to teach more than platitudes, particularly at a time when the teaching of history itself on the secondary level has become a national scandal. And finally there is the question of what precisely are the “lessons” of the Holocaust. On this, of course, there will be disagreements stemming from religious, political, and ideological differences. Despite these caveats, Holocaust education has become one of the sacred cows of the American Jewish agenda.

The fears of American Jews regarding domestic anti-Semitism are continually being stoked by organizations whose very survival is at stake should American Jews come to believe that American anti-Semitism has become a marginal phenomenon. Without the existence of domestic anti-Semitism, much of the *raison d’être* of organizations such as the Anti-Defamation League of B’nai B’rith would be called into question. This is not to say that these organizations have outlived their usefulness. Anti-Semitism is a growing phenomenon in Great Britain, Italy, Norway, France, and other European countries, encouraged mainly by immigration from Arab countries, Pakistan, and Turkey. And Jewish “defense” organizations also do valuable work in fostering better relations among America’s many ethnic, religious, and racial groups. But certainly these same organizations have inflated the reality of American anti-Semitism.

A curious example of the status of contemporary American anti-Semitism is Eric Alterman’s article in the February 27, 2012 issue of *The Nation* titled “Sheldon Adelson and the End of American Anti-Semitism.” Alterman, a professor of English at Brooklyn College and a left-wing blogger, while grateful for the demise of anti-Semitism was also, strangely enough, wistful for the time when anti-Semitism, “this once wholly respectable American prejudice,” was not so somnolent. The source of Alterman’s pique was Newt Gingrich’s seeming change of heart regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict after his campaign for the Republican nomination for Presidency had received generous funding from Sheldon Adelson. Adelson, an enormously wealthy gambling magnate, strongly supported Israel’s tough policies regarding the question of Palestine and the Palestinians. Alterman believed Gingrich’s metamorphosis was a pay-off. Alterman noted that there was a time when Adelson’s generosity would have been properly attacked by anti-Semites as evidence of “dual loyalty” and an “Israel-first” mentality, and he wondered how “the self-proclaimed ‘richest Jew in the world’ can buy the foreign policy of a major party’s potential presidential candidate on behalf of a vision of endless Israeli aggression—up to and including US support for yet another potentially disastrous pre-emptive attack—and the historically abused entity of ‘the Jews’ has somehow escaped the blame?” Surely the

status of anti-Semitism has reached its nadir when as Jew can utter such words in order that Israel can be put in its proper place.

A final reason for the exaggeration of American anti-Semitism has been the changing nature of American Jewish identity. The future of American Jewry is dependent in part on how American Jews define their identity as Jews. America’s Jews are one of the most secular segments of American society, and a Jewish identity exclusively focusing on religion has little appeal to most Jews. Other forms of Jewish identity, including radical politics, Yiddish culture, and ethnicity, have also dissipated as Jews have acculturated into American culture. This acculturation has encouraged some Jews to argue that Jews must instead emphasize “Jewish values.” But this is problematic since there is no agreement among Jews as to what these values precisely are. There is in addition the question of how Jewish values differ from the values of other Americans. The mantra of Jewish values is most often voiced by liberals who argue that universal health care, abortion rights, and other liberal pieties are mandated by Jewish values. But to argue that Jewish values are somehow intertwined with such causes is ethnocentric since one does not have to be Jewish to favor such causes. Gentiles certainly don’t believe they are expressing Jewish values when they support ObamaCare, homosexual marriage, or abortion rights. The emphasis on Jewish values takes an instrumental view of Jewish identity. From this perspective, Jewish identity is to be valued only because of its compatibility with causes which seem to have only a tangential relationship to the distinctive needs of Jews.

With the attenuation of alternative definitions of Jewish identity, the struggle against anti-Semitism has become more important in defining Jewish identity. One can express his or her commitment to Jewish identity by supporting organizations fighting anti-Semitism. To acknowledge that anti-Semitism has become a peripheral and minor irritant in America would deprive many Jews of an important, if not the sole, factor in their Jewish identity. Jews thus hold on tightly to the vision of American Jewry as an oppressed group. This is particularly true among Jews on the Left who identify with other oppressed groups such as blacks, Hispanics, and homosexuals by emphasizing that they also are members of an oppressed group, even though the statistics on Jewish economic and social mobility and surveys of attitudes of American Gentiles toward Jews, including their willingness to vote for Jewish political candidates, would indicate otherwise. The message that American Jews should remain Jews and become involved in Jewish organizational life because others dislike them is not an idea that will prove attractive to Jews who have grown up during the open and tolerant post-war years. But it is a message that appeals to Jews who are otherwise alienated from Jewish life.

The elevated status of American Jews is one of the themes of Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell's recent book, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010). Putnam, a professor at Harvard and the author of *Bowling Alone*, and Campbell, who teaches at Notre Dame, have written what is arguably the most important volume on contemporary American religion to appear during the past quarter of a century. Their conclusions, based on a close examination of voluminous American public opinion surveys, will undoubtedly surprise many American Jews who are skeptical of their findings regarding the widespread admiration for America's Jews throughout the United States. Doubters will wonder whether these polls really reveal what people believe, or do they merely reveal what people are comfortable in telling outsiders. But even if there is a disparity between what people believe and what they say to others, it does say something about the state of American public opinion when negative views regarding Jews cannot be expressed openly for fear of violating community norms.

Skeptics will also question the Putnam/Campbell image of America's Jews. For Putnam and Campbell, America's Jews, despite their widespread indifference to Judaism and their low level of religious observance, comprise a "clearly" demarcated religious group. Jews are anything but a "clearly" demarcated religious group. The minority of American Jews who are serious about religion are, in fact, members of a host of competing groups, all of which claim to be authentically Jewish. There are the Modern Orthodox, the "black hat" Orthodox, the Hassidim, Conservative Jews, Reform Jews, and Reconstructionist Jews. There are even synagogues for gays and for humanistic Jews who deny the existence of God and reject virtually all of the fundamental tenets of traditional Judaism. The diversity of American Judaism is accentuated by the different languages and customs of America's Jews. There are American synagogues in which the predominant language of the congregants is Spanish, Hebrew, Farsi, and Russian.

Putnam and Campbell compare Jews to Mainline Protestants, Evangelical Protestants, Catholics, Mormons, Hindus, and other American religious groups, but this comparison is problematic. Religion is highly respected in America, and it is not surprising that Americans give high marks to Jews when they are viewed mainly as members of a religion. But Jews comprise not a religious but an ethnic group with a strong religious component and with strong ties to Jews in other parts of the world irrespective of their religious practices (or non-practices). Whether Americans would give such high marks to Jews if they were viewed as a religio-ethnic group is another matter. The figures are also skewed by the fact that *American Grace* asked large

religious groups such as Evangelical Protestants and Roman Catholics how warmly they felt about other religions. Had Evangelical Protestantism and Roman Catholicism been evaluated by a cross-section of the population, which would include large numbers of Evangelical Protestants and Roman Catholics, then these religions would undoubtedly have ranked higher on the "warmth" index. But these reservations about the methodology used in *American Grace* cannot refute its major point regarding the now elevated status of American Judaism.

One noteworthy aspect of the recent poll figures examined by Putnam and Campbell is how they compare with public opinion polls of the 1930s and 1940s. One wartime survey indicated that Jews were more distrusted than any other American ethnic group with the exception of Italian-Americans. (Presumably attitudes toward Japanese-Americans were not surveyed.) The shared nationalism experienced by all ethnic groups during the war and the close wartime interactions of Americans with diverse ethnic, geographical, and economic backgrounds did much to lay the foundation for the rapid decline of prejudice after 1945.

According to the survey literature cited by Putnam and Campbell, Jews are not only a widely admired religious group, but they are "the best liked religious group in the country." (Not surprisingly, the least popular are Muslims.) They are supposedly more popular than mainline Protestants and Roman Catholics, and far more popular than Evangelical Protestants, Mormons, Buddhists, and, of course, Muslims. But as Putnam and Campbell note, Jews are reluctant to accept such astounding news. They are, in fact, "one of the groups most likely to report being exposed to critical comments about their religion," and twelve percent of Jews say they "often" hear negative comments about their religion. Putnam, a convert to Judaism from Protestantism, has professed surprise by the gap between the reality of American anti-Jews and American Jews' perception of this reality. "A man with a conviction is a hard man to change," Festinger et al. wrote. When presented with undeniable evidence that his belief is wrong, the person "will frequently emerge, not only unshaken, but even more convinced of the truth of his beliefs than ever before. Indeed, he may even show a new fervor about convincing and converting other people to his view." As Abba Eban once remarked, American Jews can't take "yes" for an answer.

One of the key questions asked by pollsters regarding the acceptance of minority groups by Americans is whether you would vote for a member of these groups to be President. According to a Quinnipiac University poll released in the spring of 2011, 60% of Americans said they would be "somewhat or entirely uncomfortable" voting for an atheist;

59% for a Muslim; 36% for a Mormon; 26% for an Evangelical Christian; and only 15% for a Jew. Conversely, 80% said they would be “somewhat or entirely comfortable” voting for a Jew, while 67% said they would be comfortable voting for an Evangelical Christian and 60% would be comfortable voting for a Mormon. These figures are more striking when compared to polling figures regarding Roman Catholics. The same Quinnipiac University poll revealed that 83% of the respondents would be comfortable having a President who is Roman Catholic, and only 13% would be uncomfortable, this despite the country’s long history of anti-Catholicism. Based on these figures, Roman Catholics and Jews are more accepted in America today than are Evangelical Christians.

Along with these polling statistics there are the statistics regarding the acceptance of Jews in a much more important and intimate setting—marriage. The intermarriage rate has skyrocketed over the past half a century, so much so that well over 40% of recent marriages involving Jews have been intermarriages. Except for the Orthodox world where barriers to intermarriage remain high and impermeable, American Jews have come to view intermarriage as inevitable, with the emphasis being “out-reach” to the non-Jewish spouses in the hope that they will convert or at least agree to raise their children as Jews.

A parallel phenomenon has been the dramatic increase in the rate of acceptance of the prospective Jewish spouse by his future in-laws. The growing intermarriage rate is both a cause and a result of the decline in anti-Semitism. It is very difficult to remain an anti-Semite when a Jew might now be a member of your immediate family. (The same phenomenon has also taken place regarding homosexuals. One of the reasons for the rising acceptance of homosexual marriage is the increasing number of gays who have gone public. It is difficult to ostracize homosexuals when they might be close relatives.)

For the overwhelming majority of Americans, a Jewish background is no longer a stigma, and the rejection of intermarriage in today’s America is viewed as intolerant and a violation of the nation’s civic religion. This is reflected in the many television shows featuring intermarriages. Indeed, what is uncommon on television is an endogamous marriage involving Jews. American Jews, except members of the Orthodox community, have largely given up the battle against intermarriage. It is common today within the Reform movement for Gentiles to sit on the board of trustees of Reform synagogues and even to serve as presidents of such congregations.

The ability of American Jews to believe in the saliency of domestic anti-Semitism has been immune not only to polling numbers and the rise in intermarriage, but it has also

been immune to the great changes in their own status that they have personally experienced or witnessed since World War II. During these seven decades Jews became one of the most highly educated, prosperous, and influential groups in American society. It would have been incomprehensible even a couple of decades ago for Jews to believe that anyone with a Jewish background could be appointed a president of Princeton, Yale, and Harvard, America’s three most prestigious universities, but this is precisely what took place. In an age when a direct descendant of Franklin D. Roosevelt and a relative of Barack Obama are rabbis, when Hillary Clinton, Wesley Clark, and Madeline Albright reveal their Jewish connections, when Jews have filled the most important positions in Washington, including Secretary of State, Secretary of the Treasury, and Chairman of the Federal Reserve System, and when well over a quarter of the names on the annual *Forbes* listing of America’s wealthiest four hundred individuals are Jews, anything is possible. But what is difficult to argue is that these could have occurred while anti-Semitism remained an important phenomenon.

That American Jews are not completely comfortable with their new status partially explains their exotic politics. By all social and economic indices, they should comprise one of the most conservative political groups, but the exact opposite is true. Jews dependably vote for liberal Democratic candidates and are a financial mainstay of the Democratic Party, in part because they believe that the Democrats are the party of the have-nots and the defenders of the oppressed. It is also because many Jews view Republicans as members of the country-club set with which they have little in common, even though many Jews are members of Jewish country clubs and have the same economic and social profile of their Gentile counterparts.

The liberalism of American Jews is particularly evident when it comes to such social issues as gay marriage and abortion. The fact that Christian religious groups have opposed gay marriage and abortion evokes in Jews memories of Christian anti-Semitism in Europe. Indeed, the maintenance of the high wall of separation between church and state against incursions from Christians has been, along with support for Israel, the political default position of most Jews. The claim that in crucial respects Christians and Jews might be natural allies is discounted in Jewish circles where a reflexive suspicion of Christians and Christianity is palpable. Jewish fears of anti-Semitism are continually being stoked by Republican politicians playing the Christian card. The enthusiastic support for Israel by certain American Christian groups has not allayed these qualms, and Jews suspect that Christians might have ulterior motives, including the conversion of Jews to Christianity.

It is unlikely that in the near future American Jews will modify their cognitive dissonance since this would require a

fundamental rethinking of their identity as Jews. For decades Jewish conservatives have been predicting an imminent Jewish political transformation which would align their political choices with their class interests and their support for the state of Israel. And for decades these conservatives have been disappointed by Jewish voting patterns and by the choices Jews make when dispensing contributions to political candi-

dates. As Festinger et al. noted over a half century ago, it is difficult for people to renounce deeply held opinions.

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