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The Case for “Assimilation” and Diaspora

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IT'S HARD TO BELIEVE, reading Gerson Cohen's brilliant, provocative essay “The Blessing of Assimilation in Jewish History,” that fifty years have passed since its delivery as a commencement address at the Hebrew Teachers College in Brookline, Massachusetts.¹ Cohen's challenge to widespread assumptions remains as relevant as ever in 2016; the communal dilemmas that he identified continue to engage and divide Jewish leaders; and the agenda that he implicitly and explicitly set for American Jewry is still largely unfulfilled. “I do not feel that our values should in any way interfere with our sense of objectivity,” Cohen asserted in blatant understatement, on the way to marshaling the considerable authority of his historical scholarship, in “Blessing” and a number of essays that followed, to challenge a variety of contemporary orthodoxies. If only Jews paid more attention to history, Cohen lamented time and again; if only they would allow the lessons of the past to bridge “the chasm that exists between Jewish assessments and what should long have been recognized as the real state of affairs.”² The historical case for assimilation's indubitable blessings seems ever stronger, fifty years after Cohen presented it, even as the evidence for the high cost that assimilation exacts from Jews, likewise a prominent theme in Cohen's work, seems ever more irrefutable.

The argument for blessing was straightforward. Contrary to the well-known saying that attributes Jewish survival over the centuries to the fact that our ancestors did not change their names, their language, or their distinctive dress, Cohen notes that Jacob's grandchildren in Egypt, according to the Torah's own account, took Egyptian names such as Aaron and Moses. Hellenized Jews later adopted Greek names like

1. Gerson D. Cohen, “The Blessing of Assimilation in Jewish History,” in his *Jewish History and Jewish Destiny* (New York, 1997), 145–56. I will cite this version in the body of the text going forward.

2. Gerson D. Cohen, “From Altneuland to Altneuvolk,” in *Jewish History and Jewish Destiny*, 33–34.

Jason and Eupolemos. Nor did Jews over the ages refrain from writing, speaking, giving sermons, and praying in languages other than Hebrew. When permitted to do so, they dressed like their gentile neighbors. It is clear, then, that Jews have not survived and thrived over many centuries and diasporas by remaining utterly distinct from the cultures that surrounded them. Rather, "a frank appraisal of the periods in which Judaism flourished will indicate that not only did a certain amount of assimilation and acculturation not impede Jewish continuity, but that in a profound sense, this assimilation and acculturation was a stimulus to original thinking and expression, a source of renewed vitality" (p. 151).

I should note at the outset that Cohen used the terms "assimilation" and "acculturation" synonymously, and that he was of course aware of the threat that assimilation has always posed to "the Jewish group," and still did in late twentieth-century America. But, as Cohen immediately reiterated after one such avowal, Jews "have always been, and will doubtless continue to be, a minority group," meaning that if they do not want to "ghettoize" or "fossilize" themselves, they will have to adapt to their surroundings. Changes in form will inevitably bring with them changes in content. The assimilatory process, he added, was "not the consequence of a desire to make things easier, but the result of a need to continue to make the tradition relevant" (pp. 152–53). Cohen concluded the essay with a message that was at once lesson, admonition, and plea: "The great ages of Jewish creativity were born out of a response to the challenge of assimilation, and there is no reason why our age should not respond to this challenge with equal vigor" (p. 155).

Several distinct arguments, all of them adumbrated in these brief excerpts from Cohen's essay, were spelled out in subsequent pieces that, like "Blessing," drew on Cohen's own scholarship and that of others to engage in forceful polemics against positions that he believed at odds with proper understanding of the Jewish past and obstacles to effective building of the Jewish future.

Note, first, the stipulation that "we Jews have always been, and will doubtless continue to be, a minority group" (p. 152). That claim, which at first glance seems utterly uncontroversial, flies in the face of oft-heard Zionist arguments that, with the creation of the State, *galut* (in the sense of the exilic state of Jewish life) and *golah* (the existence of substantial diaspora communities) have come to an end, or will soon do so.³ Cohen

3. For classical Zionist assertions on this point, see Arnold Eisen, *Galut: Modern Jewish Reflection on Homelessness and Homecoming* (Bloomington, Ind., 1986), chap. 5.

had little patience for either argument and took pains on a number of occasions to contest them. He was particularly galled by claims on the part of Ben-Gurion, Scholem, and many others that Zionism marked the Jews' reentry into history after two millennia of absence. "I do not limit participation in the orbit of history to those who possess a land and an army," Cohen wrote in 1982. Jews in every age have "affected the world's culture, values, and economy."⁴ A year earlier he told Conservative rabbis that "we Jews have always been close to the center of history, certainly of Western history." The idea that "the Jews have not been a part of history or of world culture since the destruction of the Second Commonwealth is an invidious depiction" borrowed from modern secular humanists and nineteenth-century German Protestant theologians and scholars of religion.⁵

Cohen was not simply fighting for recognition of what he considered indubitable historical truth. He believed that matters of contemporary urgency were at stake. For one, the well-being of the State of Israel depended on its recognition of interdependence with the diaspora rather than independence from it and from Jewish history. Boldly setting forth "an Agenda for Interaction between Israel and American Jewry" several years after the Yom Kippur War, Cohen asserted that "Israel's political crisis has revealed to the full light of day that the dynamics of Jewish history, particularly with respect to Jewish physical security, are as operative with respect to the State of Israel as they have always been with respect to Diaspora communities."⁶

The claim is striking, especially when considered in the context of Israeli arguments routinely offered then as now that Israel represents a break from the patterns of all previous Jewish history, and that diaspora communities are doomed to disappear through assimilation or anti-Semitism or both.⁷ Cohen argues, to the contrary, that in October 1973 the United States, its president perhaps swayed by his Jewish secretary of state, stood in the traditional diaspora role of "strong central authority" that had shown willingness to "use its power in defense of its Jewish

4. Cohen, "The State of the Jews, 1982," in *Jewish History and Jewish Destiny*, 17.

5. Cohen, "Modern Jewish Scholarship," in *Jewish History and Jewish Destiny*, 232–33.

6. Cohen, "Altneuvolk," 32.

7. See, for example, Gershon Shaked, *No Other Place* (Hebrew; Tel Aviv, 1988), and Arnold Eisen, "Zionism, American Jewry, and the 'Negation of Diaspora,'" in *Between Jewish Tradition and Modernity*, ed. M. M. Meyer and D. N. Myers, (Detroit, 2014), 175–91.

clients." In so doing, America had demonstrated as well that Jewish safety and security now as always depended on the largesse of such an "overlord." The differences between Israel's power to inflict harm on its enemies and that of diaspora communities over the centuries, Cohen argued, should not "obscure the similarities with pre-State history . . . Then, as now, it was often in the interest and capacity of the overlords of the Jews to protect their wards against total destruction; but then, as now, this interest in no way constituted a flat surety of . . . immutable allegiance."⁸ Israel should not count on continued American support. It remained vulnerable—a condition well known to diaspora Jews.⁹

What is more, Cohen pointedly reminded Israelis, they could not hope to secure continued American assistance, in a world hostile to Israel's interests and survival, without the active support of American Jews.¹⁰ The warning took on added urgency in Cohen's view because of the dangers posed by the Begin government's decision to invade Lebanon, which Cohen called (I think ironically) "the ultimate expression of [Israel's] normality and its control of its own destiny."¹¹ Cohen also observed widespread disillusionment among Jews around the world with "the new eschatology" linked to "Israeli messianism,"¹² an apparent reference to claims by Ben-Gurion and his heirs that Israel was the fulfillment of Jewish destiny.¹³ The vast majority of world Jewry had elected not to emigrate to Israel, and most who did come lacked any alternative to poverty or persecution.

The other issue at stake for Cohen in this polemic against "negation of the Diaspora" was the need for better relations between a "healthy and creative Diaspora" and a "healthy Israel" in the name of ends higher than both: "the centrality of the Jewish people" and the "higher mandate, namely, the Torah," that the people of Israel served.¹⁴ This for Cohen was a bedrock commitment. He, like all other Jews, "stand[s] under the command of a covenant with God that has made them members of a unique people." As a result, he accepted duties to the Land of Israel and "even to the State," just as every Israeli Jew had duties to Judaism and to Jews everywhere. Performance of those duties is impeded when Israelis denigrate the value and future prospects of diaspora communities, even

8. Cohen, "Altneuvolk," 32–33.

9. *Ibid.*, 34.

10. *Ibid.*, 43.

11. Cohen, "State of the Jews," 4–5.

12. *Ibid.*, 18.

13. *Ibid.*, 7.

14. Cohen, "Altneuvolk," 47.

if Cohen—here as elsewhere echoing Schechter’s 1906 endorsement of Zionism¹⁵—agreed with Israeli critics. American Jewry was far from a rousing success story. Given the resources at its disposal, “American Jewry may fairly be said to have achieved precious little . . . its Jewish ignorance is abysmal.”¹⁶ Indeed, much Jewish achievement in America was owed to the existence and accomplishments of Israel—but Israelis had to recognize that American Jewry too “has a life and legitimate drives of its own.” The state of the Jewish people was determined by far more than what happened in the Jewish state.¹⁷ If the “centrality of Israel” meant that the diaspora was less important than the state, that idea was “repugnant and unspeakable.”¹⁸

The “Blessing” essay contains a second major polemical thrust that was carried forward in future essays: defense of the legitimacy and vitality of Conservative Judaism against Orthodox attacks on the movement’s authenticity and prospects. Recall the pointed assertion that Jewish adaptation was “not the consequence of a desire to make things easier, but the result of a need to continue to make the tradition relevant.” That claim was followed by the assertions that, as “every student of rabbinism knows” (but the midrash about not altering names, language, or dress fails to recognize), the Hebrew language itself had altered under the influence of Greek culture. Saadia had not only written his classic defense of rabbinic Judaism in Arabic but had “appealed to reason and philosophy,” thereby “appropriating the intellectual tools of the surrounding Arabic world.” Moses Maimonides and his son Abraham had “unabashedly changed a number of practices within the synagogue to conform to patently Arabic tastes.”¹⁹

These points have long been standard in Jewish historical writing—and in arguments on behalf of Conservative Judaism. On this point too, Cohen’s essays seem to draw particularly on Schechter, for example the stipulation in the oft-cited 1895 introduction to the *Studies in Judaism* that “the interpretation of Scripture . . . is mainly a product of changing historical influences.”²⁰ Cohen on countless occasions cited specific examples of modern scholarship that simultaneously refuted the claim that Judaism

15. Solomon Schechter, “Zionism: A Statement,” in *Seminary Addresses and Other Papers* (New York, 1959), 91–104.

16. Cohen, “Altneuvolk,” 49, and Schechter, “Zionism.”

17. Cohen, “State of the Jews,” 9.

18. Cohen, “Altneuvolk,” 37.

19. Cohen, “Blessing,” 153.

20. Excerpted in Mordecai Waxman, *Tradition and Change* (New York, 1958), 94.

had not undergone serious transformation over the centuries; demonstrated that scholarship could further the Jewish people's devotion to Judaism and so should be considered a mode of Talmud Torah;²¹ attributed change in content and form to the impact of larger cultural and societal forces; and conferred legitimacy on similar change in our own day, as represented by Conservative Judaism and the Jewish Theological Seminary.²² In contradiction of the argument against modernity advanced by Orthodox thinkers since the Hatam Sofer, Cohen testified to "the great and, to a considerable extent, salutary transformation that overtook the Jews during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries." Such changes, he added pointedly, "have likewise been in large measure the products of assimilation."²³

"I believe in the theological and ritual posture of the movement with which I am associated," Cohen proclaimed soon after assuming the role of JTS chancellor, "but I am in the first instance an American Jew."²⁴ The Judaism of that American Jew was at its core that of a historian whose learning guided his "theological and ritual posture" at every juncture. Just as Cohen argued in a 1981 lecture on Jewish messianism that there had never been only one messianic idea in Jewish history but rather many such ideas, including some that did not include the personal messiah affirmed repeatedly in Jewish liturgy, so he demonstrated in multiple essays, on the basis of irrefutable evidence, that Judaism had always been a "civilization" as Mordecai Kaplan had claimed and not merely a religion, and that experience of God had never been limited to the synagogue. That was true for him personally, he testified, and he wanted it to be so for the Jewish community of his day.²⁵ History set a demanding agenda for contemporary Jews, for it taught that "every mature Jewish community has generated for itself—in its own image, so to speak, for every great Jewish community has created its own distinctive lifestyle—four cornerstones of Jewish life" that included but went beyond religion alone. Each had produced a new formulation of Jewish law; a vision of Jewish eschatology; a body of liturgical literature; and a "curriculum that

21. See, for example, p. 284.

22. Cohen, "Blessing," 154. See also *Jewish History and Jewish Destiny*, 231–96 and 323–34.

23. Cohen, "Blessing," 154. Cohen was highly critical of "institutionally organized Orthodoxy" in both Israel and America, calling it at one point "intellectually and religiously sterile." Cohen, "Altneuland," 53.

24. Cohen, "Jewish Identity and Jewish Collective Will in America," in *Jewish History and Jewish Destiny*, 75.

25. Cohen, "Modern Jewish Scholarship," 240.

bespoke the ideal Jew as that culture or community understood it," along with a pedagogy that taught the proper Jewish response to the contemporary world.²⁶

The historian in Cohen could not abide what Schechter had called "artificial ignorance" on the part of Orthodox Jews who denied development and change.²⁷ Cohen as Conservative Jew and JTS chancellor bristled at constant accusations that the movement and the institution represented heretical breaks from Jewish authenticity. He explicitly argued in addresses to Conservative audiences that "translating the tradition" had preserved the vitality of Judaism in every age and that this was the essential task and distinction of Conservative Judaism more than any other group.²⁸ Cohen urged his audience to "affirm more aggressively" that Conservative Judaism might well be "a new phenomenon in contemporary Jewish life" but was nonetheless "an authentic product of a millennium and more of Jewish religious development."²⁹ Indeed, Cohen argued the legitimacy of continuing change in *Conservative* belief and practice themselves by noting that he did not live in nineteenth-century Breslau but on the shoulders of great American teachers. He bemoaned the "widespread manifestation of self-doubt that permeates broad segments of the Conservative Jewish community, rabbinic and lay alike . . . [that] we are essentially a deviant group."³⁰ Jewish authenticity, he proclaimed, "does not reside solely in Orthodoxy."³¹

Cohen's frustration on this score is evident. The historical record was so clear and yet Conservative self-doubt ran so deep (and, in my view, still does). A still greater frustration, I believe, was that American Jewry and Conservative Jews in particular refused to act on the clear lesson of the historical record and make the changes, and the commitments, that were required. The four "cornerstones" had yet to be laid. American Jews had not formulated a new law-code, let alone (except for the Orthodox) committed themselves to any code of observance whatsoever. They had not

26. Cohen, "Translating the Tradition," in *Jewish History and Jewish Destiny*, 246–47.

27. Schechter, "The Charter of the Seminary," in *Seminary Addresses*, 15.

28. See, for example, Cohen, "Translating the Tradition," 270.

29. Cohen, "Conservative Judaism and the Modern World," in *Jewish History and Jewish Destiny*, 261.

30. Cohen, "Conservative Judaism and the Problem of Legitimacy," in *Jewish History and Jewish Destiny*, 273.

31. Cohen, "Conservative Judaism and the Modern World," 272.

articulated cogent visions of the Jewish future, settling instead for outdated Orthodox dogmas and pretentious claims by Israeli secularists that the state itself fulfilled Jewish destiny. They had not developed new liturgies to guide revitalized forms of worship and practice. Nor was there a "new curriculum that bespoke the ideal Jew." Cohen's "State of the Jews" address in 1982 flatly declared "the failure of modern Jewish education both here and in Israel." The mark of failure was that Jews had not been provided "with a sense of the supreme, the transcendent importance" of their Jewishness. Jewish education, he said sadly, was "not oriented to . . . a Jewish collective dream."³²

Cohen was a dreamer. That is unmistakable in "Blessing" and subsequent calls to arms. The Jewish situation demanded bold action—and Jews temporized. Instead of seizing opportunity to meet the challenge, they bickered and relied on tired slogans. Exclusive focus on the political interests of the "Altneuland" had led Jews both in Israel and in America to neglect the needs and duties of the "Altneuvolk." Cohen had no doubt about the stakes: "The world stands at the brink of moral collapse. We can survive as a people only if we have our own spiritual well-springs." That meant a "new common vocabulary" among Jews. "Can we formulate one, and if so, how?"³³

Nowhere in Cohen's collected writings do we find systematic exposition of the practical requirements needed for the sort of Judaism, and the kind of Jewish community, for which he called. How could one turn federations and synagogues into face-to-face communities marked by serious learning and observance? How should liturgy and theology change to reflect and inspire contemporary sensibilities? How could American Jews be convinced that English alone, in the absence of Hebrew literacy, could not power Jewish vitality? What would enable them to experience God, as Cohen did, "in every ramification of our lives," and particularly in study of the Jewish past? How could any of this be accomplished outside the framework of distinctive Jewish times and spaces, providing the degree of assimilation required for Jewish creativity without going too far in the direction of disappearance? Cohen to my knowledge never provided a list, as Schechter did in "The Seminary as Witness" (1903), of what was needed to unite Jews across denominational and generational divides: common feasts and fasts, shared symbols, prayer in Hebrew, reverence for the Jewish past and hope for the Jewish

32. Cohen, "State of the Jews," 18–19.

33. Cohen, "Altneuvolk," 52.

future; “in one word,” the study and practice of Torah.³⁴ I suspect Cohen would have agreed with Schechter’s list, adding to it devotion to the Land and State of Israel and the quest to “experience the presence of God.” The challenge was and remains the mechanics of getting from here to there, whether among Conservative Jews or the American and Israeli Jewish communities as a whole.

“Blessing” did offer one guideline for change, as provocative and challenging as any Cohen proposed: that Jews pay less attention to how the Judaism of today will serve future generations and more to how it serves Jews here and now. “I would question the propriety of judging a culture by the extent to which it survives for future generations: a teacher’s first duty is not to posterity, but to his or her immediate students and contemporaries.”³⁵ Cohen went on to give examples of Jewish authors who, by serving their own era, had left a legacy for the ages—but then reminded his audience once again that this outcome could not be guaranteed. “Whether one becomes a classic or not must be left to God and future audiences.”³⁶ I rank this among Cohen’s most profound and relevant teachings. Jews in my experience have a valuable tendency to look backward (whether to a mythic past or to the horrors of the Holocaust) and with equal measure to look forward (generally with great anxiety about the perils on the horizon). Except for protection of the State of Israel, however, Jewish needs in the present, whether in education or other spheres, do not arouse comparable passion or secure comparable attention. Cohen insistently urged a different path. I believe we would do well to embark on it.

34. Solomon Schechter, “The Seminary as a Witness,” in *Seminary Addresses*, 51–52.

35. Cohen, “Blessing,” 149.

36. *Ibid.*, 150.