The Anomalous Liberalism of American Jews

Nathan Glazer

A recent study of religion in America tells us what we all know: that Jews are the most liberal religious group in the country. They have the smallest number of persons declaring themselves Republicans and the largest number declaring themselves Democrats. More detailed analysis would undoubtedly also reveal the great anomaly of Jewish liberalism, one that has been evident in studies for forty years: political allegiance in the United States is affected most strongly by economic status—but Jews break the pattern. The most prosperous of all religious groups, they are also the most liberal, by the use of the crude measure of how many vote Democratic and how many vote Republican, or indeed by any other measure one can think of. As Milton Himmelfarb once said, they are like Episcopalians in income, but vote as if they were Puerto Ricans. We are not surprised that when New York elected its first black mayor by a hair's-breadth majority, the only white group that gave him a substantial part of its vote was Jews.

This anomaly raises three questions: why does it exist, is it changing, and, as the complex of political and social attitudes that we know as liberalism breaks up, where will the Jews stand? I argue that this complex is breaking up, and it raises difficult questions as to the political orientation of Jews in the future.

American liberalism has been an odd mix based in part on political
philosophy, in part on self-interest, in part on the particular and peculiar historical circumstances of the United States. Liberalism as a political philosophy defines itself in contrast to conservatism. While it had different elements in the various countries of Europe, it was uniformly a philosophy committed to a rational, indeed a scientific, approach to political questions. It was critical of established churches, of purely traditional and unthought-through commitments. Politics is of course more than philosophy: it is also interest. Liberalism was based on the business classes, which, in country after country in Europe, were opposed to the landed classes. It was based on new men making their money in new ways through industry and trade, as against those who inherited wealth and whose fortune was based on land. In England, the interest of those who employed their talents in industry and trade led them to support free trade in order to lower the cost of labor and to help the industrial and trading interests in a nation that was at the forefront of industry and trade. In countries that industrialized after England, the philosophy of free trade and a free market was often in competition with the interests of industrialists who wanted a protected market at home, but liberalism everywhere was associated predominantly with the philosophy of Adam Smith and classical economics: the narrow interests of those who called for protection would harm the larger national interest in trade and economic growth.

Whatever the fate of classic liberalism in Europe, in the United States liberalism was different, though there were continuities. As a political philosophy, liberalism continued to mean commitment to the rational rather than to the traditional; preference for experiments and new departures rather than cautious adherence to the established order; greater freedom in action for the individual rather than greater state restraint; rights for minority religions, minority political views, and minority social groups rather than acceptance of a traditional order that gave preference to a previously established religion or to charter social groups.

European liberalism was quite different from that American liberalism that we identify with Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal and its heirs: European liberalism opposed government direction and regulation of the economy. Indeed, Frederick Hayek and Milton
Friedman, who upheld these positions today, while called conservatives in the United States, would identify themselves as liberals in Europe. American liberalism became identified with activist government, protecting the workers, redistributing income to low-income groups, increasing regulation of business for the benefit of employees and consumers, guiding the economy through some kind of planning. To Hayek, this was the “road to serfdom”: freedom in economic life was indissolubly linked to freedom in political and social life; to engage in restricting the first meant, in time, restricting the second. The Hayekian argument was that social democracy led to socialism, which led to communism. This aspect of liberalism was decisively rejected by American liberalism. It was rejected by American Jews, even though they are overwhelmingly in business and the professions—and as professionals in medicine, law, accounting, and a variety of other professions they are, for the most part, small businessmen. The anomaly of American Jewish liberalism was that American Jews were enthusiastic adherents to the American view of liberalism in the economic sphere, that is, they were for activist government and for regulation and redistribution as against the free play of economic forces, but their economic interests should have led them to become adherents of that other and earlier liberalism of Hayek and Friedman.

Yet Jewish interests did play a role in their adherence to American liberalism. I date the American liberal complex to the days of Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, now sixty years in the past. At that time, American Jews were for the most part workers. Progressive taxation, redistribution, and protection of organized labor were public policies that defended the interests of workers. As American Jews rapidly moved out of working-class status—and by the fifties this move was in large measure accomplished—they nevertheless stuck with the American liberal complex. Predictions heard as early as Eisenhower’s victories in the 1950s that American Jews would bring their political attitudes into alignment with their economic interests remained unfulfilled. And they are still unfulfilled today.

Interest did play a role in their adherence to the Democratic party. In the North it was an immigrant party, a Catholic party, a big-city party, opposed to the native American and Protestant and
small-town and rural party, the Republican. Like all American parties, the Democratic party has always been an amalgam of interests. The party of immigrants, it also included the fiercest opponents of immigrants: southern whites. But it stood to reason that Jews, as immigrant workers, would find it the most congenial party. For very many Jews, the Socialist party was even more congenial, but, with Roosevelt’s victories, American socialism was reduced to a remnant. The Socialist Jewish workers and their children, one way or another, found their way to the Democratic party.

Aside from pure economic interest based on class, there is the interest of minorities in protecting their rights. As immigrants and the children of immigrants, Jews found the Democratic party comfortable. As a religious minority, they also found the Democratic party more congenial—the Republicans were too small-town, too Protestant, too distant from Jewish urban experience. Despite the strains of antisemitism among Catholic urban groups in the 1930s (the time of Father Coughlin) and despite anti-immigrant (and antisemitic) tendencies among southern whites, the Democratic party, in its northern big-city form, remained the preferred setting for them.

There is an anomaly in the continuing Jewish adherence to the immigrant party and the minority party, just as there is in their adherence to the working-class party. Jews are not immigrants anymore and do not have many relatives left abroad to bring into this country. To most Americans, they are no longer a “minority”—that is, an underprivileged group. Ninety percent of immigrants today are non-Europeans. It is the Asians, Hispanics, and Caribbeans whose interests are most affected by immigration policy. Yet immigrant issues still play a major role in the American Jewish political outlook. They were immigrants once; they were discriminated against once, not only as Jews. In the 1930s and 1940s the fate of the Jewish people was decisively shaped by restrictive American immigration legislation. For decades, Jews fought for the opening up of American immigration. In 1965, when this fight was finally won, it was clear that opening up American immigration was primarily for the benefit of others. As Jews and Jewish organizations supported freer immigration through the 1970s and 1980s, it became clearer that freer immigration was no longer a policy that primarily
benefited Jews. Their commitment to these policies was more an act of sentiment, of honoring old commitments and old values, than of interest.

There is a third strand, perhaps the most distinctive, in American liberalism and one that one would think would weaken Jewish adherence to liberalism. This is the strand of race.

Liberalism meant equal rights for Blacks and the advancement of Black political and economic interests. Jews were happy to support that strand of liberalism too. (Other Democrats were not.) For a time, it was support out of common interest. Laws banning discrimination on grounds of race, color, and religion would help Jews as well as Blacks. By the 1960s these laws were clearly primarily designed for Blacks—Jews had already escaped most forms of damaging discrimination. By the 1970s, these laws had indeed shifted, in their implementation and administration, from being bulwarks of color blindness to being supports for color preference. Conflicts, including some grave ones, emerged between Jews and Blacks. Many Jews opposed the rise of a statistically based affirmative action on principle and on the basis of self-interest. They had always favored treatment of individuals strictly as individuals in order to escape from discrimination on the basis of religion. They did well themselves on tests of individual merit. I will not try to separate out the various strands of principle and self-interest that explained the Jewish reaction to affirmative action. Suffice it to say that the feelings that affirmative action aroused among Jews in the 1970s have become moderate in the 1990s. The strongest opponents of affirmative action today are to be found among policemen, firemen, and employees of some large corporations such as A T & T, who have been subjected to strict quota provisions in employment and promotion. There are not, however, many Jewish policemen and firemen, or telephone workers.

Self-interest, I would argue, no longer explains Jewish adherence to liberalism. The Jewish businessman and professional, if he were following his self-interest, would by now have become a Republican, as his Catholic and Protestant business and professional colleagues have become. The Jewish suburbanite, if she were following her self-interest, would have joined her Catholic neighbors in moving from the Democratic to the Republican party. There are a sub-
stantial number of Jewish neoconservative—and conservative—in-
tellectuals who argue that the United States is not helped by the
economic policies of liberalism (and business is certainly not helped
by it), but they find few followers among American Jews. Jewish
self-interest is no longer served by the civil rights agenda as it has
moved from color blindness to color preference. But that too does
not trouble Jews much. Their traditional commitment to liberalism
is such that they are willing to go along with it. Jewish organiza-
tions supported the civil rights restoration act that sought to reverse
recent Supreme Court decisions weakening the ability of lawyers to
demonstrate discrimination on the basis of evidence from statistical
disparity. As a markedly “overrepresented” group, one would think
Jews would have a strong interest in reducing the weight of statisti-
cal arguments as a basis of finding discrimination, with a resultant
imposition of quotas as restitution, and would favor greater weight
on tests of individual merit.

Despite the lack of fit between Jewish interests and the three
aspects of liberalism just discussed, Jewish attachment to liberalism
has not declined much. Jews will side with a government active in
the economic sphere in support of labor as against business, of
consumers as against producers, of low-income groups as against
upper-income groups. Jews are inclined to back an open immigra-
tion policy, even though there is now no urgent Jewish need to
which it is responsive. Jews support the civil rights organizations in
their push to make it more difficult for employers to use discretion
in judging competence, to force them to take account of the repre-
sentativeness of their labor force, and to consider race and sex in
making promotions. In this case, shoring up relations with the civil
rights organizations is more important to Jewish defense organiza-
tions than protecting the interests of individual Jews affected by
these policies. Jewish organizations were more concerned when, in
the 1970s, cases concerning quotas in law and medical schools came
up. They are less interested in the rights of workers to opportunities
for training and for promotions.

There is one element, however, in the complex of policies that
make up liberalism that does agitate Jews and that has split many
Jews away from liberalism. This is foreign and military policy. In
foreign policy the issue of Israel arises, and attachment to Israel, for
most Jews, is more important than defending their liberal credentials, allegiances, and alliances. It is an agonizing problem how to fit the defense of Israel into what they conceive of as a liberal foreign policy.

Just what a "liberal foreign policy" is, and whether the term "liberal" can be attached to foreign policy, is questionable. Fifty years ago, it was rather clear what a liberal foreign policy was: opposition to fascism. Less clear was whether this opposition should be military (many isolationists were liberal, or even farther to the left) or simply rhetorical. After the war, it was not quite so clear what a liberal foreign policy was, but there was general agreement that it meant creating a world safe for democracy by supporting the United Nations (half of whose founding members in those halcyon days were democracies) and by providing aid both to our democratic allies abroad and to the emerging Third World, which we hoped would become democratic through Western aid and influence. Liberalism had a more difficult problem with communism. Most liberals unhesitatingly opposed leftist totalitarian dictatorship; others, influenced by its historical origins in socialism and its rhetoric of defending the interests of workers and poor people, were more equivocal or even supportive of communism. But one could argue that the dominant strand of liberal foreign policy in the age of Truman and Kennedy was activist abroad in defense of democracy and in opposition to communism (which often meant supporting authoritarian but not Communist regimes). This strand of liberalism frayed badly during the Vietnam War, and has continued to unravel through the 1980s as a result of our policies in El Salvador, Nicaragua, Panama, and Grenada. One can see the division continuing in the background to the Iraqi war to the point where one would be hard put to say what is a "liberal" stance in foreign policy.

Eugene Rostow of the Committee on the Present Danger and Max Kampelman would call themselves liberal, I believe: they see themselves as in the line of Roosevelt, Truman, and Kennedy, as the heirs of senators Humphrey and Jackson. The problem of liberalism in foreign policy is best illuminated when we ask whether those who consider themselves liberals consider Rostow and Kampelman liberals. In large part, the split over what is liberal in foreign policy was determined by the attitude to communism. Should it be op-
posed militarily, and if so, with what kinds of arms and how big a buildup? Should one support nondemocratic states fighting communism? How suspicious should one be of movements using leftist and democratic rhetoric that are fighting for independence or autonomy or a change of regime? Should the democratic language of some of these groups be discounted as propaganda and disguise for Communist control or intentions? One might then think that the split would come to an end with the collapse of communism. But it has not been so. What is liberal in foreign policy still divides the Democratic party and liberals in general.

Should a "liberal" foreign policy be the policy of Jesse Jackson and the Democratic left wing, which holds the Third World, particularly in its more militant and anti-American manifestations, as worthy of support? Or should it be the by-now-old liberalism of Democratic Cold War warriors, the Eugene Rostows and the Max Kampelmans, the heirs of senators Jackson and Humphrey, who vigorously supported the buildup of American arms, the countering of Communist movements everywhere, a strong alliance of the wealthy developed nations? From their point of view, this alliance was the chief protector of democracy and freedom and the chief force for its expansion; from the perspective of the left wing of the party, it was an alliance of the rich against the poor, the white against the colored, the exploitative consumers of raw materials against the poor producers.

Underlying liberal opposition to the Gulf War was undoubtedly the scenario of rich, economically sophisticated nations overwhelming a poorer, economically more backward nation, of the power of modern Western technology brought overwhelmingly down on the heads of Third World people. Whatever the division caused in liberal ranks by the Gulf War, it was made even more painful among Jews. Jews have always, it seems, wanted it both ways: they wanted a weak military establishment but strong support of Israel. The contradiction came home most sharply in the conflict with Iraq when the arms whose development Jewish liberals had opposed, and the military force whose deployment they wanted to delay, served to protect Israel and to half-demolish its most dangerous military opponent. And it was the Democrats, the
party in which the great majority of Jews feel most comfortable, that opposed military buildups and the early use of force.

If Jews become divided from the liberalism to which they have been attached for two-thirds of this century, it is because of the way Israel introduces complex cross-currents in liberal positions and in Jewish positions. When Israel was founded, these cross-currents were ignored. Israel was a country of refuge for survivors of Nazism; its founding was supported by the victorious powers in World War II; it was a democratic nation in a part of the world where democracy was rare or nonexistent and a social-democratic nation in a part of the world in which the rich and powerful dominated and exploited the poor. Why should not liberals have been supporters of Israel? And they were, pushing aside a fatal flaw—the dispossession of the Arabs of Palestine—a flaw that has grown to giant proportions, making almost impossible the effort to bridge the growing gap between the support of Israel and liberal positions on a host of issues.

I need not rehearse all the inconsistencies brought into classic American liberal positions by support of Israel. Liberals want to spend money on schools and housing rather than arms; but American sophisticated arms may defend Israel. They want to give aid to poor nations; but Israel, not a poor nation, engrosses a huge share of the American aid budget. They want to support democracies, and Israel is a democracy, but one in which the rights of a very large part of the population, Arabs within Israel and the occupied territories, are scarcely models of the rights people expect to have in a democratic society. Arabs in Israel have lesser rights than Jews, in the occupied territories even less rights. Liberals in this country support the strict separation of church and state and the equality of religions before the law, but they support a state in which one religion holds primacy and is backed by state power. They are against the conquest of territory by force but support a state that has doubled its size through force and over time has shown less and less inclination to give up its conquests. The measures Israel uses to put down the intifada, when resorted to by other democracies (for example, India), raise an outcry among liberals; in the Israeli case, the outcry is muted.
Each of the policies I have described, policies that liberals oppose, could be defended, to some extent even within a liberal framework. But whatever the justification, liberals are not comfortable with the use of force to support state power and solve internal problems. They believe there always should be an alternative. Those alternatives are not evident in Israel, and Israeli liberals have become weaker over time. Do American Jewish liberals weaken year by year in the face of the imperatives set afoot by the very decision to create a Jewish state in an Arab and Muslim world? I believe they do. Jewish neoconservatives have in large measure been created by the Israel issue: military power, force, the differential treatment of people of different ethnic origin, intrusive police work, a ruthless intelligence agency, all seem to some degree justified in Israel, while the same policies would be, and have been, denounced and opposed in the United States. Of course Israel's situation is different, and one can reconcile justification of Israel's necessitous resort to such measures with opposition to such measures in the United States. They needed to do it, we did not—leading one, therefore, to support the military establishment and tough measures in Israel on the one hand and to oppose the military establishment and tough measures by the United States on the other.

To some extent this works in the United States: liberals can reconcile support of Israel with their general liberalism. It works only because so many American Jews are liberals, so many American liberals are Jews, so much of the money and power that liberalism deploys in the United States is Jewish. Thus doubts and questions about Israel must be stilled. It works much less effectively in Europe, where the Jewish component of liberalism is minuscule compared with that in the United States; in Europe, the outcry in favor of Arab national rights, of the maintenance of civil liberties even during an insurrection, has been much stronger.

My discussion is analytical rather than prescriptive. The analysis suggests that Israel introduces a fatal contradiction in the overall liberal outlook of American Jews. The contradiction existed but was scarcely evident when Israel had social-democratic governments, did not hold occupied territories inhabited by Arabs, did not require huge quantities of military aid from the United States, did
not have extreme right-wing parties demanding the expulsion of the Arabs, was not enthusiastically greeting hundreds of thousands of Russian Jews who it hoped would replace Arabs in Israel and in the occupied territories. These are realities, and one does not see how the attachment to Israel, which affects almost all Jews, can be reconciled with a liberalism that is still the faith of a great majority of Jews. For many American Jews, there is no longer need for such a reconciliation. They see no alternative to a policy of blood, soil, arms, force; and they adopt more and more the political perspective in which such policies are at home.

One wonders how much longer American Jews can defend such policies in Israel and deny their justice anywhere else, how much longer they can defend the national rights of the Jewish people and the measures that defense makes necessary, without affecting their attitudes on a host of other issues that make up the complex of American liberalism. Israel and its needs may be the entering wedge that ends the anomaly of American Jewish liberalism, of a people supporting policies that reflect old sentiments and attachments but that hardly reflect current interests.