IN OUR FAST-MOVING world one must be inordinately clairvoyant or narrowly fanatical to risk any predictions concerning the future. The Jewish situation anywhere in the world is always sensitive to a variety of social pressures and to the shifting winds of the spiritual climate. There is scarcely a social phenomenon on the international scene that does not in some way affect the balance of forces determining the status and hopes of world Jewry. On any rational basis, it is possible for us to take account of presently visible factors only and to admit that all our conclusions are tentative, for if the past is any indication of the future, the even course of human events is likely to be interrupted by treacherous curves and hairpin turns.

If there is one prediction that we may hazard concerning the future of American Jewry, it is negative in character. We may assume with little fear of contradiction that the American Jewish community will not be monolithic, culturally or religiously, or even of relatively uniform texture. The free atmosphere of America makes it possible for any group of Jewish people, however small, to cultivate its own ideology and to build up institutions devoted to its perpetuation. Nor must we forget that ideologies are in the final analysis reflections of certain temperaments or character configurations, so that any way of thinking or living that is socially effective is probably embraced in response to certain psychic needs. The three major interpretations of the Jewish faith—Orthodoxy, Conservatism, and Reform—have endured long
enough for us to recognize that they correspond in many instances to specific character types. It is not difficult to discover the springs of character and blocks of experience that make for a militant Jewish nationalism, on the one hand, or a hysterically precipitous assimilationism, on the other hand.

But while American society allows for the profusion of variety in marginal areas and fringe situations, it also favors the emergence and dominance of certain standard types. A massive mainstream flows mightily in the center, while many interesting eddies form along the uneven banks. All students of American society, from Tocqueville to Commager, concur in the recognition of a distinctively American character and of a widely pervasive pressure to conform to that type. Assuming a similar development in the case of the Jewish community, we can foresee the eventual dominance of certain Jewish types and attitudes. While all kinds of exotic combinations may continue to flourish on the sidelines, the standard Jewish personality of the future is even now being fashioned by the intangible realities of American society.

By the standard Jew we mean not the typical Jew, who represents the statistical average of all measurable qualities, but the personality pattern that the typical Jew seeks to approximate. The community, in all its institutions and in its multifarious dynamism, is nothing but the shadow of the standard Jew, reflecting the contours of his values and the play of loyalties within his personality.

In this essay, I propose to show, first, that the dominant Jewish personality of the future will identify himself more intimately with the American people than Jews have ever before succeeded in doing, second, that this development is likely to eventuate in the paradoxical situation where both the currents away from and toward Judaism will be immensely accelerated; third, that in the foreseeable future Jewish faith and culture will attain unprecedented heights of achievement even as the floodwaters of assimilation rise menacingly.

To appreciate the play of forces within the Jewish community, we have to accord due weight to its comparative youthfulness. While twenty-three Jews landed in New Amsterdam three hundred years ago, the vast majority of American Jews are sons and daughters of recent immigrants. With a total population of only a quarter million in 1880, when the mass migration of Russian Jews was begun, we may readily calculate
that only 10 percent of our community can claim a residence of more than two generations. To be sure, the minority of early settlers did enjoy the hegemony of leadership down to the first half of the twentieth century by reason of its superior wealth and culture. But only the lingering remnants of this predominance are in evidence today, with the policies of the Jewish community reflecting ever more clearly the sentiments and convictions of the descendants of the East European immigrants. Here and there, especially in philanthropic circles, the impetus of the older type of leadership is still felt, but in the community as a whole, the prevailing spirit is that of a human mass that has but recently come into its own.

In every domain of activity within the Jewish community, traditions are still fluid and uncertain. In the sphere of religion, the Orthodox leaders are most painfully aware that their adherents have not yet fully absorbed the total impact of the American environment. Their greatest authorities are men who think and speak in Yiddish; their typical institutions are conceived in the ambition to slow down the ponderous processes of acculturation; their typical followers are still the men and women of the "old country" or their immediate descendants. The Conservative movement owes its very existence to the conviction that American Judaism is only now beginning to emerge; hence, its avid search for new patterns, its bold experimentalism, and its faith in the creative genius of the people. The Reform movement of today turns its back upon its own classical traditions in its eagerness to keep abreast of the surging currents in Jewish life.

In the community generally, there is hardly any activity that is not secretly questioned even by its most ardent supporters. The rising generation of community leaders is beginning to rethink first principles. Does the settlement-house kind of activity still make sense? Is a community center dedicated to the cultivation of "Jewish culture," apart from religion, either necessary or desirable in the ideal American community? What are the reasons for the investment of huge sums in "Jewish hospitals"? Would not the Jewish medical practitioner be better served if Jewish wealth were given in equally generous measure to the great general and university hospitals in every large city?

These and similar questions being raised ever more insistently in community forums throughout the nation are indicative of a soul-searching that is long overdue. In the past quarter century, the needs of Jews abroad were so overwhelming in scope and urgency that little
attention and energy were left for the consideration of basic issues at home. Federations and welfare funds are scarcely one generation old, and they are still largely nonideological mechanical fund-raising devices, held in line by the pull of the purse strings, the deft manipulation of professional managers, and the avidity of the *nouveaux riches* for the approval of the older financial aristocracy. Any way you look at it, the American Jewish community is still young, and its future shape undetermined.

Two approaches are available to us as we seek to comprehend the inner dynamism of the emergent Jewish community. We may begin with a definition of the Jewish people and descend to an understanding of the situation of its American portion, arriving ultimately at a representation of the individuals making up the chain of Jewish communities. In this path, we shall be dealing with controversial abstractions, long before we come to grips with reality, and face the danger of losing our way in such endless disputes as those raging round the following questions: What are we—a race, a nation, a religion, a "*kith,***" a “unique” blend of many elements, a “freak of history,” a “civilizational fossil”? And what is the legitimate goal of our group *vis-à-vis* the general community? Is it integration or assimilation? Or is it, perchance, a synthesis of cultural pluralism and global ethnicism?

The second approach is simpler by far and, in keeping with the inductive method of science, proceeds from the particular to the universal. We begin with the Jewish individual and then proceed to determine which loyalties and ideals, institutions and practices are likely to serve the growth of his personality, and which entanglements cannot but enchain him in a maze of contradictions and confusions. This approach is, moreover, in consonance with the emphasis on the worth of the individual, which was first projected into world affairs during the Renaissance, and which achieved its greatest triumphs here in the United States. If there is one quality of thought or sentiment that is “characteristically American,” it is precisely this insistence on seeing all things from the standpoint of the individual. As Professor Ralph Perry put it in his brilliant study of the American mind:

“At the same time there has emerged from all this variety of impacts a characteristic American response—a selective response which tries all things but assimilates or rejects; a resultant of many causes, which itself acts as a cause.
“The latest misleading name for this selective response, this American bias, is ‘collective individualism’! The term individualism signifies the irreducible reality, the genuine causal efficacy and the ultimate worth of the individual. . . . Collective individualism is the conscious philosophy, or fundamental belief, or unconscious presupposition, which credits such individuals, whether in competition or in concert, with a power to modify their environment and subject it to their ends; which endorses their claim to be masters and beneficiaries of social institutions; and which credits them with a hand in the making of history.”

We may expect, therefore, that the continuous pressure of American civilization will result in an increasing emphasis on the values of the Jewish individual. Indeed, this impact of the American vision happens to coincide in direction, if not in content, with the two most important movements in the history of modern Jewry—the emancipation and Herzlian Zionism. It was the chief ambition of the architects of Jewish emancipation to break down the isolation of the Jewish groups and to project the individual as the agent responsible both for the Jewish destiny and the Jewish faith. This ambition was perhaps best phrased in the famous slogan of Clermont-Tonnerre, “To the Jews as individuals, everything; to the Jews as a nation, nothing.” Whereas during the Middle Ages the Jews constituted a community, dealing with the powers that were on a group basis, the emancipation aimed at the abolition of any lingering traces of a Jewish “nation within a nation” so that the individual could stand or fall on his own merits. The inner acceptance of this philosophy was embraced in the ideology of classical Reform.

Herzlian Zionism, too, was a rebellion against the “uniqueness” of the Jewish status, resulting from the presumed failure of the emancipation. Only in a land of their own would Jews be completely free to be simply individuals, picking and choosing out of their heritage, and out of European culture generally, whatsoever might appeal to them, without feeling themselves any longer dogged by the pursuing shadow of the collective fate. Furthermore, Herzl and several of his associates argued that if Zionism draws away from European lands those who desire to preserve their Jewish national identity the path of perfect assimilation will be made smoother for those who choose to stay in the Diaspora. Thus, the “uniqueness” of the Jewish collective identity will be dissipated. Some Jews will become members of a “nation like other nations”; the rest of Jewry will no longer feel restrained from becoming in good conscience nationals of the land of their birth, Jewish Germans,
Jewish Frenchmen, and so on. In either case they will be free men and women. It was Herzl's ardent ambition to liberate the Jewish individual in Palestine, as well as in the Diaspora, from the crushing shadow of a "unique" form of group existence. In his vision of the "Old-New Land," there was to be no unitary Jewish culture, not even one prevailing language, but a heterogenous mass of many different individuals using a variety of languages and representing diverse national cultures, each finding a hospitable haven for the fullest assertion of his individuality.

Ahad Ha'am, living in the midst of a community that had not yet tasted the sweetness of the dream of assimilation and had not felt the subsequent bitterness, could only note the negative aspects of Herzl's vision; hence, his scathing critique of Herzl's book. The Russian Jews of Ahad Ha'am's generation could hardly have been expected to appreciate the poignant pathos of Herzl's yearning for the consummation of the individual's freedom. There can be no doubt, however, that Herzl's, not Ahad Ha'am's, milieu and experience correspond more closely to the mental and social atmosphere of the American Jew.

Here, the emancipation is a far more potent reality than anywhere in Herzl's Europe. Here, even the occasional failures of the promise of emancipation can not negate the dream itself, for the emancipation is to us not a revolution but an axiom of American civilization. Thus, the impetus of Jewish life and American culture combine to put the Jewish individual in the forefront, rather than the status of the group. There does not exist one basic instrument for identification with the Jewish group, though the synagogue is rapidly becoming such a unit, especially in the smaller communities and in Jewish suburbia. Every synagogue is free to reflect the ideas and sentiments of its members. The individual is the focus of all values; affiliation with Judaism is entirely voluntary and undetermined both in degree and in kind.

Self-evident as this approach may seem, we must linger a little at this point in order to deal with the objection that the group and not the individual is primary in matters of culture. The implications of an individualistic approach are indeed revolutionary, and it may well be urged that by beginning with the individual, we do not take account of the "uniqueness" of the group, in all its mystical depth, and thereby do violence to its nature.

Let us concede then at the outset that all forms of culture are group
phenomena. But let us also bear in mind that all advances in culture or religion were occasioned by individuals who successfully resisted the spell of group culture. For our purposes, we may define culture as the way people live, feel, and think, aspire and dream, and the way in which they articulate their inner life. In history, culture comes in plural and particularistic forms, as the cultures or subcultures of certain tribes, ethnic groups, nations, and races at different epochs in their development. Every individual is born and raised in a specific culture and even subculture, his personality being molded by the ideas and practices prevailing within the “closed society” of which he is part. But the growth of the individual and of the culture itself is achieved necessarily by resistance to the pressure of the “closed society,” whether this advance consists in the promulgation of more universal values than those of the limited group, or whether it consists of the deepening of the inherent values of the “closed society.” Invariably the exponents of each culture at its best constitute a small “creative minority” within it, to use a phrase of Toynbee’s, or “the remnant that returns,” to use an expression of Isaiah’s. Only when a group is devoid of power to control its own destiny does it sometimes appear that the “creative minority” represents the entire group, since in that case the artistic and literary production of the elite constitute the only expressions of the life of the collective body. In brief, culture is of the group, but creativity in culture is of the individual.

Since we are concerned with the emergence of the standard American Jewish personality, we deal not with a static cultural situation but with the dynamic play of forces at the intersection of diverse cultures and ethnic loyalties. To appraise affairs fundamentally, we have to begin with rock-bottom reality, the mass of Jewish individuals seeking happiness and fulfillment. For us, the spiritual growth of the Jewish individual and his well-being constitute together the measure of all things. Everything else is superstructure that is all too often compounded of the debris of hollow clichés and outdated slogans. The individual is the one firm focus by reference to which all claims of a material or spiritual nature are to be judged. “The Sabbath is given over to you, not you to the Sabbath.”

To allow for the progressive emergence of the empirical individual is to envision the future Jewish community as consisting of Jewish Americans, not American Jews. Abstract and subtle as this distinction may appear to be, the fundamental issues of Jewish life hinge upon it.
Although it has become fashionable in our day to ignore the subtleties of classical logic, it is nevertheless true that people assume the genus and differentia of definitions in all their thinking and even in their everyday speech. Talk to any thoughtful Jew regarding the shape of the future, and back of his earnest soul-searching you will encounter the question, What am I essentially—a Jew or an American? He knows that both designations apply to him, but he desires to know whether in the domain of civil and public affairs he is the one or the other, automatically, as it were, apart from any volition or action on his part. Compliance with the law of the land is never in question among our people, but there is considerable confusion regarding the ultimate source out of which our loyalties, sentiments, and judgments spring into being. All American Zionists agree that our people owe “political loyalty” to America alone, but some of our people sometimes stress the adjective “political” as if it bore the connotations ephemeral and superficial. Still unresolved for many people is the feeling of fraternal unity, the sense of mine and thine, the awareness of one’s identity. It is this core of identity, underlying all loyalties, that is basically in question whenever we discuss the shape of the future.

Generally, it is the realm of discourse that determines when any particular quality becomes substantive or adjectival. Thus, when the affairs of this world are in question, we speak of Methodist or Episcopalian or agnostic or fundamentalist Americans. If we move in the theological realm of dogmas, beliefs, and practices, then we may contrast American Protestants with British Protestants. The separation of Church and State became possible when religious differences were recognized to be matters of private conscience, relatively unimportant to the actual struggle of national or territorial groups for “a place in the sun.” Thus, in the modern world, geographical and national bonds become substantive, with religious affiliations being recognized as adjectival in character. If the same situation is presumed to apply to Jews, then we may conclude that in all matters relating to the struggle of nations, we are on the way to becoming Jewish Americans.

Our point may be clarified by the following analogy. We may think of people as being subject to both horizontal loyalties, relating them to their fellow men, and vertical loyalties, relating them to universal human ideals. There is always tension and sometimes conflict between different horizontal loyalties, but none between horizontal and vertical loyalties. Of course, vertical ideals may lead indirectly to horizontal loyalties, but
then they are subject to many qualifications, varying in accord with the intellectual climate prevailing in different parts of the world. Thus, Christians of one or another denomination, because of their loyalty to their faith, may establish a “mission” in a specific portion of the globe, acquiring, in a remote people, horizontal friendly interests that derive ultimately from a vertical, heaven-directed loyalty.

If now we allow for the increasing emphasis on individualism to run its course, we cannot see any reason for believing that the Jew will hold on to those horizontal loyalties that the rest of the American people have discarded. His vertical loyalties to Judaism will cause him to entertain horizontal loyalties to the bearers of Judaism wherever they may be, but such loyalties will be variable quantities, dependent upon many factors. There are probably three million Jews in Soviet Russia and in its satellites, men and women who are closer to us, in point of ethnic kinship and cultural background, than any other branch of world Jewry. But in terms of faith and political realities, the bonds between them and us are becoming ever more tenuous. Hence, looking into the future, we cannot but envisage the virtually complete severance of these bonds. On the other hand, the brown Jews of North Africa and the black Jews of Africa and Asia, much as they differ from us in race, are likely to be the objects of our enduring concern. If our hopes for the revival of Judaism in Israel are fulfilled, American Jews of the future will look to Israel as their spiritual center. If, on the other hand, the “Canaanite” mentality should gain ascendancy in the land of Israel, the bonds of loyalty between them and our children will become vestigial and minimal.

Basically, we assume that in the future American Jews will come to enjoy in their own mind and heart that status which the nineteenth-century Jews of Germany and France strove to achieve with might and main. It was a pathetic and stultifying experience for our people to imagine that they could become overnight Germans or Frenchmen “of the Mosaic faith.” The term “German” or “French” included a profound strand of meaning which Jews could never make their own. They could become the best of all possible citizens, but they could not become part of those mystical biological entities that the European nations thought they were.

Between the state, as a political entity, and the nation, as a biological phenomenon, there flows unevenly the stream of cultural tradition,
now swelling into a mighty tide, now ebbing into a shallow mud flat. But identifying themselves wholeheartedly with this cultural stream, the European Jews believed that they could ignore the bedrock of popular biology. However, the course of events in certain countries, though not in all the lands of Europe, proved them to be wrong. Modern nationalism became infected with the virus of biological romanticism ever more deeply, with catastrophic results for Jewish hopes on the European continent, save in England, France, the Low Countries, the Scandinavian countries, and Italy.

In contrast to the European situation, the term “American” does not contain any specific biological connotations, nor is it likely to acquire them in the foreseeable future. It is in the full light of history that the American people is emerging, and Jews have always been part of it. Hence, the ideal of Americanism cannot be so defined as to exclude Jewish Americans, and it is this ideal that carries potentially the greatest momentum. Of course, there is the term “Gentile,” the last holdout of the underworld of prejudice, but it is so vacuous and all-inclusive a word as to be devoid of any serious possibilities for romantic aggrandizement. Only the imagination of a maniac could concoct out of the qualities of all nations on earth a unique Aryan essence that is presumably lacking among Jews. The “national origin” immigration laws were not ethnically exclusive in nature. Their aim was not the attainment of racial purity but rather the maintenance of racial balance. Although they were until recently discriminatory, these laws reflect the implicit recognition of the rights of all groups, albeit in the heavy-handed, rough-and-ready way of demagogues and of the untutored masses that follow them. Of decisive importance is the fact that the term “American” cannot serve the foul purposes of ethnic anti-Semitism.

Hence, it is altogether possible for the American Jew to achieve that fullness of integration with “the people of the land” that was denied to the Jews of Central Europe. Here the Jewish immigrant may well strive to become part not only of the “political” state that is America, but of that popular matrix of sentiments, ideals, memories and dreams, traditions, and even prejudices that constitute the American nation. If to be at home is not only to be in the possession of “rights” but also to be part of the people to whose service the political machinery of the state is dedicated, then the Jew can be here utterly at home, thinking of himself as an American of the Jewish faith, as “normal” in the civil sense of the term as any other citizen of the great country. This
consummation, so ardently desired by the Jews of Western Europe for a century and a half, is here embraced in the cherished tradition of the country and in its basic social structure.

Ever since the brilliant essay of Ahad Ha’am on this theme was published, Jewish thinkers were familiar with the distinction between two kinds of assimilation—the healthy kind, in which a people digests and absorbs into itself whatever in the culture of the environment is suited to its nature, and the unhealthy kind, in which a people loses its own identity, dissolving completely within the “melting pot.” This analysis is indeed extremely cogent in the consideration of certain cultural issues, but it is not relevant to the basic question of identification. Basically, the Jewish individual, not the group, is the subject of the integrating, or the assimilating, process. When he asks, “What should I know myself to be?” the healthy answer is the one that takes account of his particular position on the historical scene, his spiritual welfare, and his happiness. The historical position of the American Jew is the same as that of other descendants of immigrants; his spiritual welfare and his happiness both dictate a conception of Jewish loyalties that assigns them to the domain of vertical values where they supplement his American horizontal loyalties. For a century and a half, Jewish people in the Western world have been yearning and battling for “normality.” This goal is now definitely on the horizon.

But so new is this possibility to the historical experience of our people that it appears to carry the overtones of treachery or desertion. Is there any moral backsliding in the notion of Jews considering themselves part of the American nation, with their Jewish loyalties falling in the adjectival category of faith and tradition? Let us hold up to analysis the varied meanings of the term “Jewish” in order that we might see exactly what is involved in the emergence of the Jewish American. Insofar as the term “Jewish” denotes our religious heritage, there is manifestly nothing narrowing or cramping in our conception, providing this heritage is taken seriously. In the mouth of marginal Jews this conception is tantamount to the avowal of total assimilation. What is at fault, however, is not their conception, but the virtual nonexistence in the Jewish consciousness of those people of any vertical loyalties. Loyalty to the Jews of Israel and other lands will depend upon the strength of the shared vertical Jewish loyalties both here and there. If then any objection is raised to this concept, it can only be on the ground of
elements in our heritage that are neither national nor religious, but
ethnic and quasi-metaphysical.

Indeed, there flows in the heritage of both Jews and Christians a
current of thought and sentiment that would set the Jew apart from the
rest of mankind by a mystical, metaphysical “iron curtain.” On the
Christian side of the curtain, this semiconscious penumbra accounts for
the deeper layers of the miasma of anti-Semitism, out of which there
issues the ghostly stereotype of the Jew as nonhuman, hence, a subhu-
man creature. These layers have been subjected to careful scrutiny in
our own day. On the Jewish side, the notions deriving from the power-
ful undertow are difficult to identify. Yet, they are by no means unim-
portant in a study of the integration of the American Jew. Let us recall
that the import of Napoleon’s questions to the Assembly of the Elders
was not whether Jews were willing to be “politically loyal” to the new
state, but whether they were willing to consider Frenchmen as their
“brothers.” In his own rough dictatorial way, he sought to probe the
scope and depth of the “ethnic exclusiveness” of Jewish people, which
the reactionaries of his day did their best to exaggerate.

It would be idle to deny the occasional occurrence in Jewish writings
of statements reflecting an isolationist ethnicism that is truly incompati-
ble with the concept of an emergent American nation. But we maintain
that Judaism also contains a stream of thought and feeling disavowing
any such attitudes. In the tension between ethnicism and religion in
Judaism, the healthy equilibrium was disturbed not infrequently by one
tendency or the other. Because of the balance of contending forces
within it, Judaism was able to assume in every age a form suitable to the
noblest challenges of that age and its social realities. But such a synthesis
cannot be achieved without a clear understanding of the elements that
are rejected, as well as those that are embraced, in our interpretation of
Judaism.

The mystical and extremely powerful feeling of “difference” between
Jew and Gentile is an inescapable factor that cannot be ignored in any
discussion of the future of the American Jewish community. The nature
of this feeling on the part of Gentiles has been examined by psycholo-
gists and sociologists. There is unanimous agreement that this feeling is
not due to any instinctive reaction against the Jewish “race.” We must
now inquire whether on the Jewish side this feeling is a psychosomatic
reaction or an intuitive perception of the “peculiar” nature of our
being, the fact that we are indeed “different.”
At the outset, we must learn to distinguish between the sense of difference that is derived from vertical loyalties and the feelings of difference that are postulated on the horizontal plane. Vertical loyalties are altogether natural, healthy, and nonaggressive. In a sense, every culture and national tradition is a unique phenomenon, and there are several respects in which the vertical values of Judaism may be legitimately contrasted with the values of all other European groups, taken as a unit. On the vertical plane, there is no antagonism between the unique values of different groups. On the contrary, all cultured people feel enriched by whatever wealth may be produced by any national group. We Jews, victims though we were only recently of German hysteria and fury, nevertheless feel enriched by the music of a Beethoven, the philosophy of a Kant, the poetic maturity of a Goethe. On the other hand, any claims of difference on the horizontal plane cannot but result in hatred and arrogance, antagonism and aggression.

In normative Judaism, the claim of Israel to be an Am Segulah was always conceived in terms of vertical values. Thus, the berakhah over the Torah asserts that we are “chosen” because we are the bearers of Torah. The prophets were especially determined to elevate the Jewish sense of difference into the realm of spiritual loyalties. But if the psychology of Jewish people in all its facets is to be understood, we must bring up from the shadowy limbo the feelings of racial pride and arrogance that were associated at various times with the conception of a “treasured people.” Slumbering in the collective subconscious of our people and recorded in a multitude of dusty tomes, this assertion of the superiority of the Jewish race would long ago have disappeared from the realm of practical affairs were it not for the new lease on life bestowed upon it by the Hitlerite madness. If Jewish people are attacked persistently as a “race,” set apart by a mythical chasm from the rest of humanity, then it is natural for Jews to react in the same terms. We are still suffering from the aftereffects of the Hitlerite “shocks,” which in many cases have brought the negative phases of ethnicism to dominance. In the psychoanalysis of an individual, forgotten memories have to be exposed to view if the patient is to be cured. Similarly, if we are to distinguish between healthy and sickly forms in which our “uniqueness” and “difference” are asserted, we must recall that the sickly forms always hovered on the fringe of normative Judaism, becoming predominant in the minds of Jewish people from time to time.
No widely held idea can be entertained by any group over a long period of time in absolute sameness and with perfect equilibrium among its varying facets and emphases. How then can we expect the notion of a “treasured people” to have been held at all times in the stillness of its prophetic perfection? Thus, Ezra’s banishment of the Gentile wives and their children could not have been justified by the standards of a man like Rabbi Joshua ben Hananiah. We read in the Talmud that Rabbi Joshua insisted on the right of an Ammonite to marry a Jewess on the ground that “Sennacherib came and mixed up the nations.” The decrees concerning the “uncleanliness” of Gentiles and the interdiction of their oil, milk, and bread were similarly motivated by the excessive growth of ethnic zealotry. Rabbi Eliezer’s insistence that the “pious of the nations do not share in the World to Come” was certainly due to his nationalistic bias, as the contrary view of Rabbi Joshua ben Hananiah was a reflection of his consistent liberalism. Let us savor the taste of such passages as the following, without succumbing to the fascination of an all-reconciling and all-misunderstanding pilpulistic mentality: “For a holy people art thou to the Lord, Thy God . . . Hence we learn that everyone in Israel is accounted by the Holy One, Blessed be He, to be like all the nations of the world.”

“You are called ‘man,’ but the nations of the world are not called ‘man.’”

“All Israelites are sons of kings.”

“When the serpent cohabited with Eve, he threw corruption into her. Israel, having been at Sinai, its flow of corruption was stopped. The nations, not having stood at Sinai, their corruption did not cease.”

“When the Messiah comes, all people will be servants unto Israel.”

A highly esteemed author of a very popular pietistic work even dealt seriously with the question of why the nations have the same appearance as Jews, though the souls of the Israelites derive from the spirit of holiness, while the souls of the nations issue out of the spirit of uncleanliness.

We need hardly explore this shadowy underworld of Judaism any further in order to realize that the seeming axioms of Jewish ethnic “uniqueness” were based upon ideas that our people today reject with the utmost vehemence. As the full depth of anti-Semitism cannot be understood apart from the myths of the ancient and medieval world, the pathos of racial “uniqueness” cannot be seen in its true nature apart
from the acrimonious context in which it was conceived and nurtured. It is the same tradition that contains those noble teachings which have always counterbalanced the impact of glorified ethnicism.

Thus, many authors of the Talmud loved to imagine that some of the greatest rabbis were descended from Gentiles. One rabbi declared that a “Gentile who studies the Torah is like unto a high priest.”11 Another insisted that the special status of Jews as “sons” of the Lord is dependent upon their good conduct. One sage was so all-embracing in his breadth of view as to confer the name Jew on all who deny the validity of idolatry.12 While the discriminations in Jewish Law against pagans are well-known, few are aware that the Talmud teaches the principle of universal philanthropy—“We are in duty bound to feed the poor of the nations together with the Jewish poor.”13 By the same token, the ambiguous attitude of Jewish Law toward Christians furnished inexhaustible material for renegades and hate merchants, but the views of a philosophic codifier like Rabbi Menahem Meiri, who specifically and systematically reinstated the category of monotheists in Jewish Law, did not become known until our own day.14

Indeed, our tradition is just as capable of furnishing aid and comfort to a humane liberalism as to a zealous ethnicism. Since the fury of ethnic zeal is sustained by the twin-headed Hydra of dogmatism and bitterness, we may look forward to the steady decline of the isolationist component of ethnicism within the pattern of contemporary Judaism. Thus, the aura of plausibility that clung to the dogma of racial “uniqueness” for so many decades is due to fade away along with the associated ideas and exotic phantasies of the twilight realm of Qabbalah.

The enduring interest of American Jewry in Jews of all lands, especially of Israel, is likely to accelerate this development, rather than to retard it. As time goes on, Israel will come to occupy in the consciousness of American Jews the same place as do the other lands in the hearts of the immigrants to these shores. Before the rise of the State of Israel, Jewish immigrants differed from all others in that there was no specific geographical focus for their sentiments. Jews were loyal to the world fellowship of Israel and its tradition, rather than to any specific country. Insofar as this universal fellowship is progressively being narrowed to one place on the map, Jewish people too will have a place “whence” in spirit they had come. Their national feelings will thus tend to follow the pattern of the steadily weakening national sentiments of other
immigrant groups. The progressive preponderance of Oriental and African elements within the population of Israel might also serve as an additional demonstration that world Jewry is a fellowship of the spirit, not of blood or civilization.

Does the transformation of the genus "Jew living in America" to the genus "Jewish American" involve the progressive lessening of Jewish religious-cultural loyalties? The answer to this question is both Yes and No. On the one hand, the consciousness of "normality" will encourage those who have no feeling for the values of our tradition to drift into the anonymity of the general community. The Jewishly ignorant and the embittered, the eager opportunists and the dust-dry rationalists, the rootless intellectuals and the witless hangers-on will be likely to desert our ranks in a steady procession. On the other hand, the contrary tendency will also be intensified. Since the Jewish quality of one's being can no longer be regarded as an automatic category into which people fall with or without their will, it must necessarily find expression in positive acts of identification. Precisely because it fits into the American pattern of a unitary nation with multiple faiths, Jewish loyalty will derive accessions of strength from both the pervasive atmosphere of American culture and the momentum of Jewish tradition.

Political loyalties, social ties, and cultural-religious ideals constitute, respectively, the three dimensions of social life. If Jewishness is regarded as falling into the fundamental dimensions of our nature, like length and breadth, then it need not find expression in the cultural-religious dimension of height at all. Thus, in Israel, Jewish loyalty is preempted by all the ordinary tasks and concerns of citizenship and is not impelled to flow in religious channels, while, in the Diaspora, it tends even now to be felt in the dimension of height and asserted in humanitarian cultural and religious terms. This instructive contrast will become ever more apparent as Jews in America liberate themselves from the lingering social pressures that hemmed in the Jewish community of the past like an iron ring. Already, American Jews are beginning to act on an instinctive assumption of their status as Jewish Americans. The Central Conference of American Rabbis has adopted a program of proselytization among Gentiles, demonstrating by an action-symbol that Judaism is essentially a faith. Could it have launched this program earlier without provoking a storm of protests?

Already it is clear that Judaism in America, revolving around a typical modern congregation, is more likely to endure than Orthodoxy in
Israel. In spite of its virtual state monopoly, Orthodoxy in Israel is gradually withdrawing into a ghetto of its own making, becoming desiccated and fossilized. In contrast, Judaism in America is constantly challenged to prove its worth, hence, its vitality and vibrancy. Whatever is lost through the defection of Jews whose sole claim to the name is that of ethnic descent is likely to be more than made up by the enhanced determination of the three-dimensional Jews to respond affirmatively to the inescapable challenge of the American environment.

In sum, the complex strands of Jewish loyalty were always woven out of the rugged and earthy feelings of blood-kinship, as well as out of the fine and ethereal ideals of faith. The proportion and relative potency of these elements varied in accord with the liberalism and breadth of view of individual Jews and the fluctuation of fortune in our long history. During the past century, two causes combined to reduce the potency and relevance of faith—the growing secularization of life and the tightening of the vise of hatred directed against all Jews. Thus, the bonds of Jewish loyalty consisted, for many of our contemporaries, of the dark and mystical threads of “blood and soil,” reinforced by the feelings of resentment against the outside world and enveloped in the fluffy clouds of nostalgic affection for ancient “ways of life.” The resulting complex of emotions was unsatisfactory and, hence, dynamic in character, issuing in a longing for the “normalization” of feeling, either in the attainment of the fullness of emancipation or in the radical solution of the “in gathering of the exiles.” The glowing promise of emancipation could not be realized in those lands where the national loyalty of Gentiles was conceived predominantly in ethnic and mystical terms. Standing at the threshold of the fourth century of Jewish life in America, we can foresee the progressive “normalization” of Jewish feeling; hence, the shrinking of the ethnic strands of loyalty, the forging of ever stronger bonds of fraternity with the American people, and the steady growth of the ideal and religious components of Judaism.

NOTES

2. Mechilta, Yithro.
4. Shabbat 17a and 153.
7. Shabbat 128a.
8. Shabbat 146a.