The Impact of the Presidency of Donald Trump on American Jewry and Israel

Windmueller, Steven F.

Published by Purdue University Press

Windmueller, Steven F.  
The Impact of the Presidency of Donald Trump on American Jewry and Israel.  
Purdue University Press, 2021.  
Project MUSE.  muse.jhu.edu/book/94360.

For additional information about this book  
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/94360
Consonance or Dissonance: American Jewry in a Post-Trump Era

by Gary Phillip Zola

Nearly twenty-five years ago Jonathan D. Sarna, the prominent American Jewish historian, asserted that a “cult of synthesis” constituted a “central theme in American Jewish culture.” The “cult of synthesis,” Sarna explained, describes the long-standing and widespread conviction among American Jews that the ideologies of Judaism and Americanism reinforce one another. In short, the vast majority of American Jews believe that there is nothing in Judaism that runs contrary to Americanism and, conversely, America’s democratic values and ideals are completely consonant with Judaism’s ethical and spiritual teachings. If it is Jewish, it is American—and vice versa. For most American Jews, this belief has long been axiomatic.¹

According to sociologist Sylvia Barack Fishman, this fusing of Jewishness to Americanness served as an effective “adaptation technique” by which Jews unconsciously ignored the boundaries that separate Jewish and non-Jewish life in America. Fishman referred to this ideological permeability as “coalescence”—a blend of Jewishness and Americanness that results in a “united Jewish whole,” i.e., American Jewish ethnicity.²

Over the course of American history, however, there have been times when Jews have been forced to confront manifestations of ideological dissonance that disrupt the coalescence impulse and cause Jews to worry that the American-Jewish alloy might ultimately be nothing more than a chimera. These events understandably correspond to periods in American history that have witnessed an upsurge in Judeophobia and/or antisemitism. On such
occasions, American Jews experience a crisis of confidence in the aspirational consonances of Judaism and Americanism.

In 1815, for example, Secretary of State James Monroe informed Mordecai Manuel Noah that his commission to serve as consul of Tunis had been revoked. Monroe justified the recall by informing Noah that when he had been appointed, “it was not known that the Religion which you profess would form any obstacle to the exercise of your Consular functions. Recent information, however, on which entire reliance may be placed, proves that it would produce a very unfavourable effect. In consequence of which, the President has deemed it expedient to revoke your commission.”

Monroe’s explanation greatly distressed journalist and educator Isaac Harby, a friend of Noah’s from Charleston. In a passionate letter to Monroe, Harby chastised the secretary for blaming the president’s decision to recall on Noah’s religion. Harby urged Monroe “to erase the sentence in [his] letter” that justifies the recall based on Noah’s Jewishness. “Strike it from the records of your office!” Harby fumed. He feared that Monroe’s “dictum” would become a “precedent,” which could then result in such justification becoming the law of the land. Were that to happen, Harby warned Monroe, America would have defaulted on the Constitution’s guarantee of “free exercise” of religion for every US citizen. Should that occur, Harby concluded, American Jews would have no alternative but to “abandon their country forever, and seek an asylum on some foreign shore, among rocks and deserts, if liberty there holds her residence.”

A similar fear arose during the Civil War, when the National Reform Association spearheaded an attempt to amend the Constitution so that America would formally declare itself a Christian nation. As this Christian Amendment Movement gained traction, many Jewish leaders expressed fear that such an amendment would be disastrous for the future of American Jewry. If the Constitution made Christianity the state religion, then American Jews would once again be forced to wear “the shackles” that characterized their lives in an “enslaved Europe.” The publisher of The Israelite, Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, warned his readers to “look out!” for fear that those advocating a Christian nation amendment could actually “give us trouble.” Wise’s journalistic competitor, Isaac Leeser, editor of The Occident, similarly assailed the advocates of the amendment who, he wrote, were “digging the grave of religious liberty and social equality” in America.

Examples such as these pepper the overwhelmingly happy history of Jewish life in America. Whenever incidents that challenge the synthesis of
Americanism and Judaism occur, Jews strive to meliorate the dissonance to ensure that America remains faithful to the lofty ideals enshrined in its founding documents.

Philip Roth’s alternative history, *The Plot Against America* (2004), constitutes a fictional illustration of this phenomenon. In this novel, Roth takes his readers back to the decade leading up to World War II, a period that many historians characterize as the highwater mark for antisemitism in America, when the anti-Jewish rhetoric emanating from the likes of Henry Ford, Father Charles Coughlin, and Charles Lindbergh unnerved American Jewry. Roth’s concept accurately reflects the fears that gripped the American Jewish community during those turbulent years. Although many Jews defiantly counterattacked in public, others quietly worried that America might decide to embrace Hitler’s frightful ideology. Could America become a fascist state that would depredate its Jewish citizens?

In 1934, the US House of Representatives established the McCormack-Dickstein Committee (1934–37) to investigate the ways that “foreign subversive propaganda entered the U.S. and the organizations that were spreading it.” The fear that American democracy was being subverted intensified with the publication of Arthur Derounian’s (a.k.a. John Roy Carlson) 1943 bestseller, *Under Cover: My Four Years in the Nazi Underworld of America—The Amazing Revelation of How Axis Agents and Our Enemies Within Are Now Plotting to Destroy the United States*. Those who read this book wondered if the array of underground Nazi agents and antisemitic plots that Derounian documented might succeed in toppling American democracy and replacing it with a system of government that would make America inhospitable to the Jews. *The Plot Against America* imagines just such a development.

Roth’s fictional account envisages how America might have looked had Charles Lindbergh defeated Franklin Roosevelt to become America’s thirty-third president. In discussing his work, Roth later claimed he tried to remain “as close to factual truth” as possible, with one major alteration—a Lindbergh presidency. *The Plot Against America* enables “America’s Jews to feel the pressure of a genuine anti-Semitic threat.” Readers enter a dystopian America where Jews experience religious oppression and government-sponsored programs aimed at coercing them away from Jewish identification and practice.

There is a misty familiarity between the alternative history Roth imagines and the real-life events that America has experienced since June 16, 2015, when Donald Trump declared himself a candidate for the presidency. The Trump years have been riddled with “America First” populist rhetoric that highlighted
themes of ultra-nationalism, nativism, authoritarianism, denigration of empirical fact, and messaging that spurs fear and distrust. This ideological brew is commonly referred to as “Trumpism,” a sociocultural phenomenon that has provoked bitter partisan divisions throughout American society.

One of Roth’s fictional characters, Rabbi Lionel Bengelsdorf, becomes an enthusiastic supporter of Lindbergh and, much to the dismay of many in the Jewish community, the rabbi plays a prominent role in helping the aviator capture the presidency. Although Roth imagined a character of Bengelsdorf more than a decade before Trump’s ascendancy, the idea that a Jewish leader might campaign for the real Lindbergh back in the 1930s might strike some as incredulous. Yet for Jews who consider Trump and “Trumpism” an anathema, Bengelsdorf serves as a fictional incarnation of American Jews who have enthusiastically embraced ideas that most American Jews find odious.

Even if we have no record of Jews defending the real Lindbergh in the 1930s, there was a cadre of prominent Jews who championed the Red Scare movement, which rose to prominence after World War II. Although the major Jewish organizations in the United States made their opposition to communism unmistakable, they simultaneously distanced themselves from the tactics of Senator Joe McCarthy and his high-profile investigations and hearings concerning communist infiltration in the American government. 8

In addition to the well-known role Roy Cohn and G. David Schine played in the Army-McCarthy hearings in 1954, McCarthy’s Jewish supporters organized the American Jewish League Against Communism in 1948. Rabbi Benjamin Schultz, an ordinand of the Jewish Institute of Religion in New York, served as the League’s executive director. In August of 1954, nearly two thousand of the League’s supporters gathered at the Astor Hotel in New York to hear McCarthy and Cohn speak. Time Magazine reported on the event, memorializing some of the speeches that were heard that evening, some of which seem remarkably contemporary in tone and content. For example, one young collegian, George Reisman, 9 confidently informed the assembly that:

Roy Cohn and Joe McCarthy will be redeemed when the people have taken back their government from the criminal alliance of Communists, Socialists, New Dealers and the Eisenhower-Dewey Republicans.

McCarthy’s antisemitic proclivities, recently detailed in a new biography, 10 did not seem to concern Cohn, Schine, Schultz, Riesman, or many other Jewish boosters who gathered that night to support the work of the American Jewish
League Against Communism. The crowd gave Schultz a huge ovation when he called McCarthy “My Hero.”

It is not difficult to cite other examples of Jews who took political positions that ran contrary to the sensibilities of most American Jews. Mississippi Senator Theodore Bilbo, a notorious bigot who referred to Jews as kikes and made blatantly antisemitic statements on the floor of the US Senate, nevertheless had Jewish supporters across the state. At one point in his career, Bilbo’s campaign manager was a Jew, who calmly explained to his rabbi that when the senator disparaged Jews, he was taking aim at New York Jews, certainly not the Jews of Mississippi!

These illustrations, too, are clear examples of the “cult of synthesis” and the coalescence instinct that has consistently animated the character of Jewish life in America. Even though the past provides us with a helpful perspective on present-day circumstances, ever-changing contexts remind us that historical precedents do not enable us to forecast the future with confidence. The Plot Against America is historical fiction; the insurrection of January 6, 2021, was an unprecedented assault on democracy that has intensified Jewish communal worries about the durability of American democracy and the future of Jewish communal life in post-Trump America. As one American Jewish historian noted: “We will have to confront the fact that the Jewish story in the United States is still being written, and progress is not its inevitable conclusion.”

In the wake of the Trump presidency and the lingering effects of Trumpism, we can itemize four broad categories of concern that have become salient within the organized Jewish community. As we noted above, many of these issues have identifiable historical antecedents. Yet these four disconcerting subjects generate disruptions to the deeply engrained tendency for American Jews to harmonize Americanism and Judaism:

I. ANTISEMITISM

According to a recent survey conducted by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), nearly sixty percent of Jewish Americans confessed to feeling less safe in the United States today than they did ten years ago. The upsurge in antisemitic incidents, particularly the horrific and widely viewed episodes that occurred in Charlottesville, Pittsburgh, and Poway, have resulted in American Jews—perhaps for the first time in American history—reporting a generalized
fear of being attacked while attending Jewish events or while they are in Jewish institutions. These anxieties have catapulted internal security and communal safety issues to the top of the American Jewish agenda, a phenomenon that would have been hard to imagine a decade or two ago.

The ADL survey also reveals that a significant number of American Jews have encountered “antisemitic comments, slurs or threats” on social media. A large portion of those who have experienced antisemitic incidents personally say they have trouble sleeping, and a notable number believe that anti-Jewish harassment in America has affected their lives financially. These are troubling statistics that strongly suggest we are living through a period that future historians will characterize as a high tide of American antisemitism.15

II. FAITH IN THE DURABILITY OF AMERICA’S DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS

The vitality of American democracy became a pertinent topic during the Trump era. Institutional norms have been abrogated and core principles have been questioned. Many have postulated that there is no longer a broad public consensus as to what American democracy means. On the one hand, intensified partisanship in the chambers of Congress have convinced many Americans on both sides that their government may no longer be capable of responding effectively to their basic needs. The government’s disunified response to the COVID-19 epidemic reinforced these concerns.

On the other hand, heated disagreements over issues such as voting rights, free and fair elections, and even the meaning of the Constitution itself have led many to conclude that our current system of government must seriously consider itself in jeopardy from those who are promoting authoritarian populism and militant extremism in America. “Domestic extremism,” one expert recently warned, “is the greatest threat to the homeland—yet it’s not getting nearly enough public attention.” Two leaders of a major Jewish philanthropic foundation framed the issue in the starkest of terms: “Myriad disputes rage on the policy front, but deepening cracks in our democratic norms and institutions transcend these debates and represent a genuinely existential threat to America.”16

American Jews have long recognized that the vitality of Jewish life pivots on the nation’s commitment to the democratic ideals in the Declaration of
Independence and the US Constitution. Fealty to the durability of democratic institutions and norms is an inviolate commitment for the vast majority of American Jews, who believe that “the future of our democracy and the sustainability of the American Jewish experiment” are inextricably linked.\textsuperscript{17}

III. COSMOPOLITANISM VS. TRIBALISM

The Trump era has been characterized by intense expressions of loyalty to party, religion, or ethnicity. This tendency, frequently dubbed “tribalism,” has influenced every element of American society, including the Jewish community. Over the last half of the twentieth century, most American Jews prioritized liberal, universalistic values over particularism, believing a society that is fair and just for all will enable Jewish life to flourish. Yet a significant (and some say growing) minority of Jews insist that universalism and liberalism inevitably have led to Jewish identity’s fading into the mist of general culture. The only way to strengthen Jewish life in America, particularists contend, is to dedicate themselves primarily to “ideas aimed at strengthening Jewish continuity in the U.S.”\textsuperscript{18}

The founders of the American republic worried about the human tendency toward tribal loyalty, especially regarding political parties. They realized that if thirteen colonies filled with a culturally and ethnically diverse population ever hoped to achieve unity as a nation, universal ideals would need to supersede tribal loyalties. Little wonder why George Washington warned in his Farewell Address that the “spirit of party” was democracy’s “worst enemy” in that it “kindles the animosity of one part against another, foments occasionally riot and insurrection.”\textsuperscript{19}

Here again, the current cultural tensions pitting long-standing American Jewish commitment to universal values against Jewish tribalism disrupts the harmonization of Americanism and Judaism, as tribal loyalty elevates the interests of the ethnic group or political party over that of the common good. This dialectic places the American Jewish community in an awkward spot, struggling to find a balance between the particularistic interests of the Jewish people even as it looks out for the good of the whole community. American Jews must now try to find the equipoise between defending the rights of all minorities—opposing what de Tocqueville famously described as “the tyranny of the majority”—while preserving its own vibrant identity. This contemporary dilemma was well expressed thousands of years ago by the sage Hillel: “If I am not for
myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I?” The Trump era has pushed American Jewry to recalibrate its allegiance to universalism with its own particularistic needs and interests.

IV. CHALLENGING ASSAULTS ON REALITY
There is nothing unusual about politicians making false statements to the public. Misleading and even bold-faced lies are part of the warp and woof of the political process. Yet the Trump era has broken entirely new ground in this realm by repeatedly contravening empirical truth or, as one critic put it, “Trump’s lies were different. They belonged to the postmodern era. They were assaults against not this or that fact, but reality itself.”

The drift toward “truth decay” also bears directly on the future of Jewish life in America. As Arnold Eisen recently observed, “The well-being of religious and ethnic minorities like the Jews particularly depends upon devotion to getting the facts right, lest those who wield power might hold unchallenged sway over the depiction of how things are and should be.” Belief in wild conspiracy theories, incessant dissemination of misinformation, gaslighting, and refusal to accept the validity of empirical data illustrate that many people are willing to accept lies that reinforce their beliefs over truths that challenge them. Much of Jewish history reminds us of the dangers of “truth decay.” One needs merely to recall the many malevolent canards leveled at Jews over the centuries—Deicide, Host Desecration, Judensau, Blood libel, well-poisoning, carnality, global conspiracies, the Nazi Holocaust—to prove conclusively “how easily the truth can be manipulated . . . by those with power.”

American Jews and all minorities have a stake in maintaining American civil society, which is now threatened by a culture infected with strains of irrationality and flights of fancy. This, too, is a legacy of the Trump years, and the organized Jewish community will need to be front-line advocates for fact-based data and credible information to maintain civil society.

In 2005, on the 350th anniversary of Jewish communal life in America, President George W. Bush noted that “The story of the Jewish people in America is a story of America.” Six years later, then-Vice President Joe Biden made a very similar observation: “Jewish heritage, Jewish culture, Jewish values are such an essential part of who we are that it’s fair to say that Jewish heritage is American heritage.”
American Jews have long embraced such statements as immutable facts of life in America. Yet the durability of American Jewry’s un faltering belief in the consonance of Americanism and Judaism will ultimately pivot on two inscrutable contingencies: the extraordinary tradition of Jewish communal resilience in the face of adversity and, also, American democracy’s ability to withstand the schismatic societal dissonance that produced the Trump presidency and its lingering consequences.
Notes

8. For more on this subject, see Aviva Weingarten, *Jewish Organizations’ Response to Communism and to Senator McCarthy* (Portland, Oregon: Vallentine Mitchell, 2008).
9. It is likely that the Columbia University student mentioned in the article, George Riesman, is the prominent American economist. Riesman served on faculty at Pepperdine University and became a leading proponent of economic objectivism. See profile at Mises Institute, accessed April 27, 2021, https://mises.org/profile/george-reisman.
14. These four issues are identified as the ways in which the Trump Presidency has changed America. See Michael Dimock and John Gramlich, “How America


17. Ibid.


Bibliography


Israelite (February 19, 1864): 268.


Occident and American Jewish Advocate 12, no. 10 (Tebet II, 5625/January 1865): 433–41.


