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ARE AMERICAN JEWS BECOMING CONSERVATIVES AND SHOULD THEY?

Reflections After the 1980 Elections

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The scent has been in the air for some time now, and the 1980 election marks, according to some, the full flowering of the American Jew as political conservative. After decades of almost rote support for Democratic presidential candidates by margins of 65% or better, Jewish voters in 1980 appear to have split their ballots nearly evenly between Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan, with about an eighth rejecting both in favor of independent (ne Republican) John Anderson. Combined with the 30%+ votes received by Gerald Ford and Richard Nixon four and eight years ago, the new visibility and vocalism of self-avowed Jewish conservatives and neo-conservatives, the alienation of many Jews from their erstwhile "liberal coalition" partners, and the hardening attitude among Jews toward national defense and the Soviet Union, Ronald Reagan's near plurality among Jewish voters nationally and "victory" among Jews in some areas seems to signal the beginning of a new era; an era in which conservatism will be not only respectable, but perhaps even the dominant political posture of American Jewry.

Partisans of this ostensible shift hail it as a "coming home": a recognition (at last) by Jews not only of where their interests lie, but of the inherently conservative cast of Jewish social philosophy - with its profound respect for individual freedom and initiative, its suspicion of powerful government, and its commitment to a standard of justice which favors neither the rich nor the poor. The contemporary conservative agenda, these proponents claim, is more compatible with the Jewish quest for security, fairness, and opportunity than a liberal agenda which espouses detent with the Soviet Union and unilateral American arms reduction, racial and ethnic quotas in the name of affirmative action, and economic policies which stifle growth and enterprise. Judging from the election results, this is a message which is more than beginning to sink home.

Or is it? Does 1980 in fact herald the emergence of a new conservative majority among American Jews? Are American Jews wise to respond to the siren song of Republican outreach and neo-conservative Jewish intellectuals? Ronald Reagan did win over 40% of the Jewish vote. There are growing numbers of outspoken Jewish conservatives. But the result of 1980 can be read in other ways as well, and Jewish "conservatives" may well find themselves increasingly making common cause with their liberal counterparts (Jewish and non-Jewish), rather than with their ostensible conservative allies.

I wish to argue that the apparent American Jewish romance with political conservatism is both shallow and likely to be short-lived, and that in the long run Jews will and should continue to be markedly "progressive" in their political orientation. I suspect, in fact, that 1980 may well mark the zenith of conservative and Republican voting among Jews - although liberals and Democrats may by their failures to regroup effectively, somewhat prolong the conservative/Republican tide.

First, the empirical questions. As Aaron Rosenbaum has pointed out in a recent insightful article in Moment magazine, analyzing the "Jewish vote" is made difficult by the problem of identifying the "Jewish vote." Since it is idle to quibble about a few percentage points here and there, let us accept AIPAC's estimate that the Jewish voting split was 45% Carter, 42% Reagan, and 12% Anderson, and that Reagan won pluralities in several areas, including New York. What does this indicate? Above all, that Jimmy Carter was an incredibly unpopular candidate, among Jews as among the rest of the electorate. It also indicates, as Rosenbaum has noted, that Reagan's Jewish supporters and those charged with making his pitch to Jewish voters were successful in establishing him as a respectable alternative for a large number of Jews. This was not done, however, by highlighting Reagan's virtues as a conservative - indeed, Reagan's relationship with the New Right and Christian conservatives was a problem for those courting the Jewish voter. If some Jews supported Reagan because he is America's leading conservative politician, many more, I would suggest, probably supported him in spite of this fact. The combination of Jimmy Carter's manifold disabilities (in policy, personality, and performance), Anderson's slide toward oblivion, and Reagan's attractive prsentation of himself as a forthright supporter of Israel and a strong leader, produced a 42% vote among Jews for the new President. It is difficult to imagine a weaker Democratic candidate than Jimmy Carter from a Jewish perspective. And yet, Carter won a plurality of Jewish votes.

Would Reagan have fared nearly as well among Jews against any other Democrat? I doubt it. A Democratic centrist with a good record on Israel - a Jackson or a Moynihan - would have slaughtered him, I believe. Even a "liberal" Democrat - a Bayh or a Kennedy - would likely have beaten Reagan fairly handily among Jewish voters. On the other hand, a "moderate" Republican - a Baker, a Ford, perhaps a Bush or an Anderson - would probably have won a clear plurality of Jewish votes against Carter, or a majority in a two man race. Anyone who spent any time among American Jews in 1980 would, I believe, have to concede that Jimmy Carter was for most Jews a "non-starter," at best the recipient of grudging support, at worst perceived as Yassir Arafat's surrogate.

That this may well have been grossly unfair to President Carter is irrelevant. Within the Jewish community, his campaign was entirely defensive in tone and often inept in execution. Reagan's triumph was not in converting Jews to his conservatism, but in making himself acceptable to Jewish moderates. The collapse of the Anderson campaign masks the message in the 12% of the Jewish vote Congressman Anderson did receive; many Jews desperately wanted a candidate without Carter's Middle East policy, and without Reagan's social policies.

Here we reach the nub of the question. There can be little doubt that many Jews do approve - for both interested and ideological reasons - of elements of the Reagan agenda. The promise of Great Society liberalism has been played out; Jews are troubled by the insensitivity they find among "progressives" to Jewish concerns; the identification of a Jewish commitment to social justice with the Democratic Party platform no longer appears inevitable.

What is it about contemporary conservatism that attracts Jews? An apparent congruence on several highly salient specific issues, but not a fundamental ideological convergence. Conservatives tend today to be more vocal than liberals in denouncing terrorism, in labelling the Soviet Union as an implacable adversary, in pushing for larger defense budgets, in opposing school busing and quotas in dealing with racial discrimination, in promising lower taxation, in singing the virtues of family and neighborhood stability, in calling for crackdowns on crime. These are appealing stances for many Jews who fear for Israel's security and for their own position in a society in which they constitute a dwindling percentage of the population.

But what about the other elements of the conservative agenda today? Insofar as it is possible to speak of a "conservative political philosophy" in the United States today, it is really not the mainstream Republicans (with whom some Jews now indeed find themselves comfortable) who are its ideological proponents. The Republican center has by and large made its peace with the New Deal. It offers a politics of moderation, of skepticism with regard to excessive liberal program-mongering, of fiscal restraint, and of a slightly augmented anti-Communism.

The acceptability of such a program, or that of neo-conservative intellectuals, or of Democratic "conservatives" or even neo-liberals (Gary Hart, Paul Tsongas), to Jews rests on the fact that it does not challenge in any fundamental fashion the basic thrust of the past fifty years toward a society of greater economic, political, and social justice and more assured civil liberties. A political conservatism - I would prefer to call it centrism or moderation - which accepts the fruits of the 1930s and the 1960s and attempts to inject a note of caution and balance against those who urge more radical steps to cure the social ills - domestic or international - which liberalism has not eradicated, can indeed appeal to Jews. This is the type of "conservatism" which I suspect most of those Jews who voted for Reagan hoped they would get.

And they might. But the locus of conservative political energy in the U.S. today is in a very different place, in the hands of those New Right activists who wish to claim Reagan as one of their own. And this is a conservatism which many Jews - even, I would contend, many who voted for Ronald Reagan - find far less appealing and in some instances downright appalling. There are, especially among Orthodox Jews, those who can and will make common cause with elements of the New Right and Moral Majority. But far more Jews are afraid - and in my mind justifiably so - of what the imposition of the vision these groups hold for America would mean for American Jewry, and indeed for the quality of American society as a whole. Reflect: can one imagine even 40% of American Jewry supporting the return of prayer to the public schools; a constitutional amendment outlawing all abortion (the current version of this amendment is, according to some analyses, so absolute that even the exceptions endorsed by a stringent interpretation of halakha would not be permitted); repeal of the voting rights act; drastic cuts in health and welfare programs, food stamps, foreign aid, programs for the elderly (even if Jews turned all of their projected tax savings over to Jewish federations, these cuts could cripple many of our Jewish human services agencies and programs); an overturning of the Warren Court decisions on civil rights and liberties; a completely free hand for the oil companies in setting energy policy? Should this become the face of conservatism in the United States, Jews will, I would predict, quickly discover how unconservative they remain.

Another look at the 1980 elections and at the Jewish reaction to them may help to reinforce this perspective. In the weeks following November 4, I heard at least two dozen versions of the same plaint: "I don't mind Reagan winning (variant: 'Well, I supported Reagan'), but, oy!, the Senate." By no means were all of the liberal Democrats who lost on November 4 Jewish favorites; nor will all of their opponents prove to be undeserving of Jewish support. The fact remains, however, that Jews were stunned - and not a few frightened - by the magnitude of the defeat suffered by Democratic liberals on election day.

By and large, Jews were not part of the tide which swept Democrats out of office in 1980. The defeats suffered by Frank Church, Birch Bayh, John Culver, and earlier Richard Stone and Donald Stewart - all ousted at least in part by the same conservative wave which pushed Reagan to victory - took place despite the fact that (to my knowledge) they enjoyed overwhelming Jewish support. In the absence of detailed analyses of these and many other Senate and House races, it is difficult to be definitive. I know of no analysis, however, which has pointed to a wholesale shift away from Democratic and even liberal Democratic candidates by Jewish voters in other than the presidential contest in 1980.

In my own Congressional district, the 4th in Massachusetts, a massive outpouring of voters in Brookline and Newton - centers of Jewish population - helped a strong liberal, Barney Frank, narrowly defeat a more conservative Democrat (who enjoyed the endorsement of Henry Jackson) in a hotly contested primary. The fact that Frank is Jewish and that Boston's Cardinal Mederiros had injected himself into the race by calling for Catholics not to support pro-choice candidates complicates the analysis. But it also illustrates the fact that a turn to the right might quickly confront Jews with the prospect of allying themselves with forces and causes they are unprepared to join.

I have no doubt that the Jewish political profile in the U.S. is changing today. So too, however, is the political profile of the society as a whole. Not long ago there was a virtual congruence between American liberalism and Jewish political preferences. That congruence no longer exists as liberalism has lost its drive and focus and as Jews have redefined their own political agenda. American Jews do appear more prepared to assert such an agenda, and to vote in accordance with it. But this agenda is neither "liberal" nor "conservative" as such. Nor, though they tend to agree on its centerpieces, do all Jews agree on its scope and precise content. As a result, it is no longer unthinkable for significant numbers of Jews to support a "conservative" candidate - if the circumstances are right.

Some conservatives - primarily of the moderate variety - have recognized this shift and taken advantage of it. Ronald Reagan was a beneficiary of this change in American Jewish political behavior, thanks in no small measure to the circumstancial assistance provided by Jimmy Carter. But Reagan's 42% of the Jewish vote is not, I would conclude, evidence of a substantial swing to the right by American Jews. It certainly is no sign that Jews in any significant numbers will embrace the brand of conservatism which today makes conservatism an ideological rallying cry. As I read it, Jews are simply not prepared to abandon the notion that government has a responsibility to promote economic security as well as opportunity, human rights as well as the fight against Communism, the liberties and aspirations of minorities as well as the "moral majority."

If such is the case, then we can expect that the romance of American Jews with political conservatism may be a rocky one. Its course will depend in part on the directions which conservative political forces themselves take. Should the New Right come to define the conservative agenda, the vast majority of Jews will, I think, want out quickly. And even a more moderate conservatism may not long retain its luster.

Some of the expectations which led Jewish non-conservatives to support Reagan - both in the economic and foreign policy spheres - may well go unfulfilled. Already there are indications that no major change in Middle East policy may be forthcoming. Saudi Arabia too is a "conservative" nation, and one which the American business community will not wish to see offended. Jews may also discover that a "benign neglect" of the cities, a turning away from national health insurance, a diminution in support for the service sector of the economy - from education to social work, accelerated economic and energy development, and a less vigorous enforcement of civil rights legislation and court decisions do not enhance either the opportunities, the quality of life, or the relationships of Jews to other groups in our society.

That American Jews are no longer rote liberals is perhaps one healthy product of the general crisis of liberal-progressive politics in the United States today. The new independence of Jews, coupled with their new willingness to grapple with a specifically Jewish political agenda, will give them an opportunity to reexamine Judaism's own political tradition, to avoid overly facile identification of its elements with contemporary catchwords and to seek ways to put forward their own political vision(s) which may cut across both party and ideological lines. Yet I suspect, however, when all is said and done, that after this period of flirtation with political conservatism - a flirtation, we must remember, which even in 1980 remains confined to barely half the Jewish voting public, if that - American Jews will find themselves once again preponderantly within the progressive camp. In any event, the message of 1980 for American Jewish liberals need not be one of despair. The contestation of political viewpoints within American Jewry is another sign of our maturity - as Americans and at least potentially as thoughtful Jews.

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