

Prophecy and Predictions

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Rabbi Yohanan said: “From the day the Temple was destroyed, prophecy was taken from prophets and given over to fools and babes.” (Baba Batra 12b) Not wishing to be labeled either a fool or a babe, I am loath to engage in either prophecy or predictions. But this symposium has thrust on me the role, at the least, of a predictor of the Jewish future and the various religious movements so I have no choice: for better or for worse, these are some of my thoughts and reflections about the past and the future after over a half-century of service in the rabbinate.

I was ordained at the Jewish Theological Seminary in 1957 and served as a Conservative rabbi in congregations for 33 years. Then I went to the New York Board of Rabbis for ten years as its executive vice president and since 2001, I have headed the National Council of Synagogues, responsible for the interfaith work of the Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist movements. These last years have given me a different, perhaps even a unique perspective on Jewish life; my entire outlook has broadened and deepened as I have served all four of the religious denominations of Jewry. Consequently, I see things through less of a parochial lens and more of a universal perspective. Additionally, I have learned much due to my diverse contacts and varied experiences: “Who is wise?” asked Ben Zoma. “The person who learns from all people, as it says (Psalms 119:99), ‘From all my teachers have I learned.’” (Avot 4:1)

What are the positive and negative factors of belonging to one, singular group? From a positive perspective, one feels comfortable in a familiar home base. In belonging to one denomination, a person is compatible with the theology, philosophy and *halakhic* or ritual pattern of observance championed by that group. There is a sense of *hevrah*, of camaraderie; the fact that the group shares a common *alma mater* and teachers with whom one identifies is an important adhesive. Then, too, when a person belongs to a particular denomination, the assumption is that most of the colleagues share a common *weltanschauung*. And those are undoubtedly comfortable and comforting factors.

But there are negative factors as well. Affiliation with one group engenders a parochial outlook on Judaism and life in general. We tend to limit our contacts to members of our own denomination and lose out on much of the cross-fertilization of ideas that results when diverse elements mingle. (How many of us read the publications of the other groups and their significant thinkers?) When we stick to our own denomination, we are less inclined to engage in intergroup cooperation and joint enterprises. Group loyalty tends to trump “truth” and the needs of *klal Yisrael*.

What of the future of the movements in America? Now I am really in the realm of prophecy, so I must be very careful and wary of turning out to be either the fool or the babe. The most recent synagogue survey indicated that there were 3,727 synagogues in America in 2001. The rate of affiliation is definitely higher since the older surveys; today, 43 percent are currently members of a congregation, although I suspect that the number of those who at one time were affiliated (for example, when the children were preparing for bar or bat mitzvah) balloons to over 50 percent.

The percentage of Orthodox Jews is fairly constant at 11 percent, and the Orthodox movement over which *Kaddish* was recited back in the 1930s and 1940s is very much alive and vital. *Yeshivot* and day schools are flourishing; teenagers are sent to Israeli *yeshivot*

after high school; young professionals gravitate to Orthodox enclaves in the Five Towns of New York's Long Island, Boca Raton, Florida, and Teaneck, New Jersey and create dynamic *shuls*; a wealthier membership than ever before in American Orthodoxy has ascended to leadership; *kashrut* and ritual observances are highly prized; and numerous *shiurim* in Talmud and allied subjects are offered to men and women. But I regard Orthodoxy as mainly a Greater New York phenomenon, with smaller clusters in other urban centers. Indeed, there are many communities of Jews where no Orthodox synagogue exists until this day. Still, given its low intermarriage rate, high birth rate, and zeal for Jewish learning and living, I foresee a solid future for a small but vibrant American Orthodoxy.

Conservative Judaism was the leading group in post-World War II American Jewry. It built synagogues faster than the Seminary could train rabbis in the 1950s to 1980s. It seemed that the future of American Jewry belonged to the Conservative movement. But now it is in an era of decline; it is "graying at the temple." Many of its young people have defected to the Reform or occasionally the Orthodox movements; young Conservative Jews are currently hard to discover. Besides, the current mood in politics and religion is not conducive to middle-of-the-road denominations. It seems that extremism is in the saddle and the vital center cannot hold. This is part of the reason why mainline Protestant groups are shrinking as more extreme fundamentalist and evangelical groups are proliferating. Jewish life reflects those new realities so that the middle-of-the-road approach is presently in eclipse. But the Conservative movement is also in a way the victim of its own successes: it steered Reform into the Zionist camp and into a sense of *klal Yisrael* and greater stress on Hebrew and ritual observances; it forced the more moderate Orthodox Jews to come to grips with modernity and reevaluate some of their cherished norms and ideals. But let us recall that the Conservative movement was in large measure created and enriched by dropouts from Orthodoxy. Clearly, the pendulum has swung in the past and I expect will do so again before too long as we contemplate the future.

Reform Judaism is riding high and has regained the lead as the largest of the denominations in Jewish life. It is capitalizing on the soaring intermarriage rate (42 percent) and has embraced both the non-Jewish partners as well as the children of out-marriages where conversion of the non-Jewish mothers has not taken place so that the offspring are *halakhically* not Jewish. What was once known as religious "syncretism" is described these days as "inclusion" and the same approach has been taken in welcoming gays and performing mixed marriages without conversion. But at the same time, paradoxically, there has been a marked return to tradition, the old Union Prayer Book of 1894 had virtually no Hebrew; the newest liturgical productions, *Gates of Prayer* and *Mishkan T'filah*, are chock full of Hebrew. And the leaders of the Reform movement Rabbi Eric Yoffie and Rabbi David Ellenson, spare no effort in encouraging their people to immerse themselves in Hebrew *davening* and singing at prayers, to greater observance of the virtually extinct *Shabbat* in Reform homes, and renewed respect for classical Jewish learning. Strong, confident and dynamic (recent Reform conventions have attracted as many as 5,000 participants), the future of Reform seems very bright, indeed.

Amazingly, the Reconstructionist movement has now ordained over 300 rabbis, although not much more than 100 synagogues and *havurot* are affiliated with the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation. The influence of Rabbi Mordecai M. Kaplan over all the groups in American Jewry has been profound: the development of the synagogue center

and the reevaluation of Jewish values and norms are just two examples of his rich legacy. But he is gone a long time now, and his unique persona has faded from memory. The Reconstructionists are so very close to the Reform on virtually all issues that merger of the two movements would seem prudent and desirable. But institutional loyalties are likely to retard and derail such efforts.

What of the challenges and changes in American Jewry? Well, it seems as if everything is in flux in religious life in general and that applies to Jewish religious life as well. The latest Pew study (2008) indicated that more than a quarter of American adults have left the faith of their childhood in favor of another religion, denomination, or no religion at all. Approximately one-third of respondents raised as Catholics no longer describe themselves as Catholics and 44 percent of Protestants have shifted denominations. The same survey indicated that the Jews of America are the least dogmatic of the faiths and the least theologically oriented next to the Buddhists and Hindus. My teacher, Rabbi Mordecai M. Kaplan, jokingly mused that Conservative Jews could change to Reform “at the drop of a hat.” So the challenge to us is to instill some theological commitment along with a commitment to live Jewish lives and identify with the Jewish people – and that is a very tough challenge, indeed.

I see the greatest challenge, however, in seeking to raise the Jewish literacy level of our people. After all, this is the most secularly educated Jewry in our long history. The definition of a Jewish “dropout” these days is someone who has not gone on to graduate school. At the same time, the Jewish and Hebrew literacy levels are abysmally low. (Isn’t it scandalous that we still produce *Siddurim* with transliteration of the Hebrew prayers after all these years of so-called Hebrew education?) I remind my readers of what Rabban Gamaliel, son of Rabbi Judah the Prince, declared: “The ignorant person cannot be pious.” (Avot 2:5) If we are ever to craft a creative, vital, flourishing, and spiritually rich American Jewry, we must raise the level of Jewish knowledge. The recent Bronfman Philanthropies study of Jewish singles in America, “Uncouple,” (2008) indicated that the number of non-Orthodox Jews between ages 25 and 39 is larger than ever, marking them as the most pivotal demographic cohort in our community. They are a natural target for a concerted effort at educating young American Jews who have not had the benefit and blessings of a rich, day-school type education but who will shape our future for good or ill. In this regard, we must give credit to the Orthodox who have built a remarkable network of Jewish days schools and *yeshivot* in our nation – with dramatic results evident by the high literacy rate of their alumni. In 1900, there were three or four *yeshivot* in the entire country with a few dozen students at best. But in 2000, the number of these schools rose to over 670 enrolling more than 184,000 students in 38 states! That is a stupendous achievement that has compelled the Conservative and Reform movements to also enter the field of Jewish day schools with splendid products.

The second great challenge is to engender in our young people a feeling of peoplehood and belonging to *Am Yisrael*. The success of Operation Birthright should serve as a paradigm for us. Operation Birthright sends collegians to Israel for ten days in carefully scripted and monitored programs and then evaluates their impact on the participants. The new study by Leonard Saxe and Barry Chazan (2008) of the results of those programs has been wonderfully encouraging and positive. The over 150,000 who have participated thus far have declared that they are more committed to being part of the Jewish people than before, more supportive of the State of Israel, and more determined to raise their children

as Jews. It seems to me that we should replicate this program with the cohort of young adults described in the “Uncoupled” study to which I referred earlier.

So we are challenged by the simultaneous forces tugging us in different directions: The centrifugal force that pulls our young people away from us into the realm of out-marriage, assimilation, and disintegration; the centripetal force that sparks an upsurge of interest in Jewish traditional observances, Hebrew language and classic text even within the ranks of Reform, and a revitalized sense of belonging to *Am Yisrael*. Which force will prevail? This is the challenge we all face.

Do our various groups interact and work cooperatively for the greater good of our people? Well, in the past we did come together in unique harmony especially in moments of great crisis. For example, during the Second World War, the Jewish Welfare Board chaplains, consisting of all types of rabbis, served all of our military personnel with great effectiveness, diligence and openness. Prayer services using a single, common Siddur were held all over the world with wonderful results. The necessity to support Israel has also galvanized all Jewish groups in America – especially in moments of crisis as in 1967 and 1973. The battle to free Soviet Jewry was championed by all groups in harmony – with miraculous results. There are examples of non-denominational day schools and community Hebrew High schools that have collected students from diverse Jewish backgrounds together under one roof. And in the past, the various boards of rabbis united rabbis of all four denominations under one banner.

Alas, the old unity has frayed; the boards of rabbis often lack a single Orthodox member as the Orthodox have moved sharply to the right and out of the arena of cooperation. The unity of the Jewish Welfare Board chaplaincy has unraveled and it is becoming increasingly difficult to get all Jews involved in a specific religious project, a communal mission or just a joint service on Israel’s *Yom Ha-Atzmaut*. True, we do come together for *ad hoc* purposes alone – most notably, to fight anti-Semitism and crises in Israel. But once the crisis diminishes, I fear, we once again go our separate ways. And of course, there are the perennial turf battles that seem to obscure the heart of the issues that confront us. Every president wants to grab a headline; every organization wants its *kavod*, irrespective of the cause for which we are battling; every publicity-hound-of-a-Jewish-leader is contemptuous of others and really cares more for personal glory than the advancement of the cause which he or she champions. I recall often the word of the Talmud (Eruvin 13b): “The person who pursues glory finds that it escapes him; the person who flees from glory finds that it pursues him.” This I have seen too often in my work – and it gnaws at my gut.

American Jews have enjoyed freedom of choices for their religious life since 1825 when a group of worshipers seceded from New York’s historic Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue to create Congregation B’nai Jeshurun, and the Reformed Society of Israelites went their separate way in Charleston, South Carolina. Freedom of religious choice is here to stay and I celebrate that reality. Do I relish the pluralism of American Jewish life? Indeed I do: it reminds me of what it must have been like in the days of the Second Temple when there were numerous religious parties and diverse schools of jurisprudence who were busily creating rabbinic Judaism and debating every conceivable issue from the minutest ritual act to the most profound theological concept.

Such diversity enriches us all and mutual influences may be denied but they really are significant and lasting. The Orthodox taught us all the value of maximum Jewish education and ritual *mitzvot*. The Reform compelled us to confront the necessity of living in the

modern world of the West and the need to rediscover social action. The Conservatives laid great stress on working together for *klal Yisrael* and rebuilding Zion. And Mordecai M. Kaplan and his Reconstructionist movement forced us to clear the cobwebs from our mind, rethink old accepted notions, and reevaluate and reconstruct old norms. We have all incorporated those themes. So pluralism as I see it creates cross-fertilization of ideas and ideals, offers us multiple choices of how we might find spiritual fulfillment as Jews, and weaves a variegated tapestry of theology, ideas and ideals.

Do we need any new movements? What for? We currently display every conceivable form of Judaism here in America, from the ultra-Orthodox Satmar Hasidim to the ultra-liberal “humanist” Jews whose rabbis don’t believe in God (an oxymoron if ever there was one). But even a rainbow has its limits of color; or as we say in Hebrew, *yesh g’vul* – there has to be a limit or else Judaism unravels and degenerates into a thousand different Judaisms. And that would truly spell the end of our people.

The American denominational structure that marks our community as special is obviously not the pattern in Europe where the Orthodox chief rabbis maintain autocratic and monopolistic controls and where the liberal versions of our faith are struggling and small. In Israel, the situation is even worse, since the state recognizes the Orthodox monopoly over marriage, divorce, *kashrut* supervision and the like. But things are changing and increasingly the government and the courts are upholding the rights of the Reform and Masorti groups to form synagogues and receive state funding.

In sum, this is a bubbling, dynamic, creative, frustrating, exasperating, challenging Jewish community. But when was it ever different? After all, poor Moses spent 40 years of his life contending with that “stiff-necked people.” We have achieved a great deal and made great progress. If we compare the American Jewry of the early 1900s with today’s Jewry, the advances in education, synagogue life, philanthropy, religious standards, communal endeavors, and scholarly production have been startling. We have, indeed, come a long way; we have a long way to go. But as Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav put it so well, “All the world is just a narrow bridge, a very narrow bridge. The important thing is not to fear at all.”

