

*Edward Levy is a professor of music at Stern College, Yeshiva University in New York City. He is a long-time activist on population matters and a member of the advisory board of FAIR (the Federation for American Immigration Reform).*

# Jewish Attitudes Toward Immigration

By Edward Levy

Like Bugsy Siegel, Julian Simon is Jewish. This elegantly disposes of the notion that Jews are necessarily bringers of light; although heeding Simon could cause greater harm than was done by all of history's Hitlers combined — relating his positions to his ethnicity is fatuous. Such cause-and-effect generalizing, always slippery, is particularly so in regard to Jews.

## Jewish Identity

Judaism is, of course, a religion; but neither religious practice nor belief defines membership in the group. Indeed, among the approximately 5.6 million Jews in America and 13 million in the world, religious commitment covers a spectrum with at least ten broad categories of more to less observant: Chasidic, Orthodox, Conservative, Reconstructionist, Reform, non-observant, Jews for Jesus, non-believer, anti-religious and none of the above. And all of these categories contain varying shades of right wings, centers and left wings.

And Jews are not a "race." Skin color, for example, varies from black (Ethiopians) to swarthy (Mediterraneans) to white (northern Europeans). And a current dilemma for Israel is that certain Asiatic Indians and Nigerians assert eligibility for entry claiming they are descended from the lost tribes of Biblical times.<sup>1</sup>

Officially, you are Jewish if your mother is or if you convert properly. Many Jews choose to follow Jewish teachings; but to cover the entire spectrum, the closest definition I can give is that you are Jewish if you consider yourself to be; if someone, usually a parent, tells you that you are; and if others treat you as if you are. Most Jews accept their own — and others' — Jewishness.

Almost all Jews, however, share a sense of national history. Unique defining events are (1) the receiving of the Torah, which others may "accept" but only the Jews "receive," and (2) the destruction of the temples and the resulting diaspora, where, despite dispersion as minorities among a variety of majorities, Jews retained their group identity even while sub-groups in different locations developed different physical and behavioral characteristics. This group identity held despite varying rates of acculturation, ranging from total (either enforced or voluntary) ghettoization to the virtually total assimilation of those German Jews who felt "more German than Jewish"

until Hitler objected. And it held despite a "sibling rivalry" that engenders antipathies within the group (for an over-generalized example: rich Jews look down on poor ones, northern Jews look down on southern ones and German Jews look down on everyone), but resents criticism from outsiders.

Other events are significant for but not necessarily unique to the Jews: (1) a continuity of persecution that has lasted for more than two millennia — from ancient Egypt through the Crusades and other pogroms to the Nazi holocaust, (2) the existence of the United States, and (3) the establishment of Israel as a state.

## A Jewish View

However, different denominations view Jewish history, and therefore current issues, differently. The more Orthodox are apt to be more politically conservative, tend to see immigration within the context of a long view, while references to more recent events like the Nazi holocaust continually bleed into the views of the less orthodox.<sup>2</sup> Finding a consensus for the entire spectrum, then, is problematic. Although official statements probably reflect Jewish thinking in general, three caveats should be kept in mind.

First, from two Jews you get three opinions. Second, a position definable as "Jewish" has to consider only those with strong Jewish affiliations and eliminate those whose views are unaffected by their Jewishness. And third, committed Jews assign immigration a low priority and thus are as ignorant, and therefore as unworried, about it as others are. That understood, the overall generalization would be that the present is neglected in favor of a strong sense of tradition that still clings to approaches that were valid and valuable in the past, regardless of how appropriate they may be today.

## Four Cornerstones

### Cornerstone One: Individuality

Jews value individuality and are selective about authority. Some revere a chief rabbi; but generally disputes among rabbis may outdo even those among economists. Respect for individuality is supported by the concept that killing one person destroys a whole world. This leads to a focus on the "human interest" angle so favored by TV and to the concomitant neglect of large-scale immigration as a problem.

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Race is rarely an issue. Rather, the idea is that immigration laws should be blind to ethnicity, and consider only the potential contribution of each individual. Kant's imperative: "What if millions of people want to do the same thing?" is not acknowledged. However, more common is the idea of Jewish exceptionalism. One perspective is that their long history of suffering should free Jews from whatever constraints are applied to others. Another is that their persecutions make Jews more sympathetic to others' suffering. Either way, a Jewish view of immigration sometimes means that Jews should be favored; but the preference is that constraints on everyone should be minimal.

One basic cornerstone for recommending less immigration today is the recognition that the number of actual and potential immigrants is too large, that the accumulated needs of so many individuals results in masses of people, and that these masses, in turn, eradicate individuality. The previously positive Jewish focus on individuals tends, then, to become a blind spot today because it ignores the question of massive numbers. Thus, this cornerstone for wanting less immigration is missing.

### **Cornerstone Two: Kinship and Limits**

Crises blur small differences. The centuries-long systematic exclusion of Jews from mainstream societies precisely because they were Jews has, as a survival technique, brought Jews together into a kinship group. Thus, like the Biblical prophets, today's committed Jews fear assimilation as the most crucial attack on continued Jewish survival. This sense of unity leads Jews, like other ethnic groups, to care for their own, pressing for them to be accepted as immigrants. The preference is for migrants, especially Russian Jews, to go to Israel, where assimilation would be, not a loss of Jewish identity, but a way to rekindle their Jewishness, and thus their oneness with themselves and their people. But if Israel is not chosen, the next best choice is the United States, with its lack of systematic, government-sanctioned anti-semitism, its protection of individuals' rights, its laws against ethnic bias, and its tolerance for individual religious choices. The Talmudic concept of being for yourself but not for yourself alone would be interpreted as: if I want something, I must support the right of others to have it, too. Jewish advocacy groups might, then, like to ignore

other ethnic lobbies; but if the way to get Jews in is to get others in too, then so be it.

Thus, one more cornerstone for recommending decreased immigration is missing, for nowhere is it acknowledged that the country as an entity is obliged to serve its own citizens in a fair and impartial way and that the country in its entirety has the right to set its own limits.

### **Cornerstone Three: Population Growth**

Jewish exceptionalism is used to argue against Jewish participation in limiting population size. That is: American Jews already have a zero growth rate; Jews are an "endangered species" whose numbers must increase; and Hitler has already forced the Jews to do more than their share to limit population growth.<sup>3</sup> And then, there is the Biblical instruction to be fruitful. Oddly, in early times, when Jews numbered between four and eight million, having two children was deemed "fruitful." But in medieval times, when there were fewer than one million Jews, the text was reinterpreted to mean that fathering many children is a good deed. One surmises that the mother would help in this endeavor, but she could limit her child-bearing if her health were jeopardized.<sup>4</sup> Today, many Jews act like the rest of the populace; but the more orthodox follow the medieval practice. One interpretation holds, however, that concern for her psychological "health" may lead a woman to limit her child-bearing. And the younger women tend to obey their mentors; the older women tend to recognize reality. Even orthodox Jews, therefore, except some rabbis and most Chasidim, limit their family size to an average of four children.

Never forgotten are the "six million," as if the Nazis had murdered only Jews, as if the massacres in, for example, the USSR, Turkey, Kampuchea and Rwanda and of early inhabitants everywhere are the exceptions, as if the only ones needing "replacements" are the six million Jews. Thus, limiting the number of Jews is not readily accepted; but since some Jews are reluctant to declare Jewish exceptionalism out loud, the attitude becomes: "if we are going to do it, we can't tell you not to." Those who believe in Jewish exceptionalism, however, and not in Kant's categorical imperative, or who neither know nor care that massacres are common in human history say: "you should limit your numbers, but we will not."

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The ethnocentric focus persists. And a belief that past practice is the supreme guide blinds some people to the present and the future. That is, just as holiday celebrants are supposed to, and may indeed, feel that history is alive, that they are with the first celebrants in the original time

and place, most Jews want to remember that they are themselves the immigrants who did come while remembering the refugees who could not. Every boatload of escapees resonates with the 1930s; and told that things are different since 1980, Jews would wonder why fifteen years counts more than 2000, and how long these new conditions will last. Safe havens, when needed again, might again be denied them. Accessible borders, then, are a safety precaution: "Suppose we were today's immigrants, as we were yesterday's, would you want the answer to be 'No' again?"

Such short-term compassion is, like the desire to obey Biblical teaching, hard to transform. It is easier to avoid the hard dilemmas of triage and long-term choices. Thus, the previously positive approach of aiding the victims, considering them as lives full of promise who deserve the opportunities that we have, becomes negative when it does not recognize that today's population growth is erasing those opportunities. And thus, a third cornerstone for recommending less immigration is missing.

### **Cornerstone Four: Environmentalism**

Environmentalism is still a peripheral movement among Jews.<sup>5</sup> Since Biblical times, except for the last fifty years in Israel, Jews could not belong to the land, or to a land, because they could not own land and had to be ready to leave quickly whenever pogroms began again. Thus, a concern for preserving nature is not part of their history. If we live in the present, we can incorporate the new concept of protecting biodiversity into our thinking; but those who rely heavily on the past are slower to respond, holding to the idea that nature exists only to serve humans and does not have its own right to exist. During the entire diaspora, Jews have been literate city and village people whose worth was portable — not in the land, but in their hands and heads. Therefore, the old concepts of being stewards and guardians of nature and of compassion for all creatures are neglected; only usefulness to humans is meritorious.<sup>6</sup>

Environmentalism is also weak in Israel: they undo past devastations, until nature rebels; but how long can their ecosystems withstand the onslaught of so many users? In the United States, where Jews are overwhelmingly urbanites, the lessons of the Sabbath — to rest, but also to respect the land and allow it to rest — are only now being recalled.<sup>7</sup> Some Jewish environmentalists believe that now, since the holocaust is past, Russian Jews are free and Israel is a state, environmentalism could help unify American Jews.<sup>8</sup> But concern peaked during the oil crisis, when Arab interests were the issue, and fell when oil became available again.<sup>9</sup> Environmentalism, then, is a tool, not an end in itself. Even so, the questions are whether Jewish environmentalists will ever succeed and whether they will see the linkage of environment,

population and immigration. Thus one more cornerstone, recognizing the need to preserve, is missing.

### **Teaching**

Finally, Jewish moral teaching, probably similar to most other ethical systems, is balanced: graciousness to strangers must be limited by the need not to pauperize yourself; sufferers must be helped, but we may not make the poor pay the price; examples must be set, but decisions are to be made by the majority. Thus, tensions stem from trying to decide between charity and limits: who and how many will be admitted? How far can hospitality go and who will pay for it?

Jews, then, prefer immigration to be legal, but do not want the illegal individual punished; they favor Jewish refugees, but only when they are truly persecuted, not economic refugees; they are not swayed by bogus claims about immigrants helping the economy, but do sympathize with individuals and groups that the media focus on; they do not believe that advocates of limits are xenophobic racists, for they separate racism from prudence; they recognize that limits exist, but are unaware that even a rich country like the United States can become impoverished; they value family ties, but do not agree on how far beyond the nuclear family those ties should be extended; they value diversity, but believe that multiculturalism and bilingual education, as it is now, lower educational standards. They are concerned about some ecological issues, believing that we can eat the fruit but not cut the tree down,<sup>10</sup> yet retain the teaching that pollution is the price to be paid for earning a living.<sup>11</sup> They believe that undue population growth adversely affects civil liberties, but suppose that the West can, and should, accept more people; yet they are generally unaware of the interdependence of population size, education and the environment.

### **Conclusion**

Thus, like most people, Jews are too little aware that today's immigration is harmful. Their worthy attitudes need contact with today's realities. Their respect for individuality and aversion to authority lead to ignoring the effects of masses; their ethnic pride and sense of group kinship lead to ethnocentric exceptionalism and a belief that they should be exempt from constraints; their ability to learn from millennia of experience leads to an over-reliance on fancied analogies with the past; their belief in nature's bounty and human resourcefulness leads to dismissing the idea that resources and opportunities are now too limited; their reverence for fallen comrades leads to ignoring the threat of population growth; their faith in traditional teaching ignores how interpretations differ; their charity ignores the threat of overwhelming numbers. And mostly, their reverence for the past, dwelling not only on but in the past, relishing and constantly reliving it, makes them imperceptive about the present and too unaware of the unintended but highly probable and probably harmful consequence of present-day choices.

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Ideas persist. The idea, for example, that Israel needs more people to protect itself ignores not only the ecological effects of undue population growth there, but the fact that Israel has won its wars with its neighbors despite a presumed "disadvantage" in population size of 16:1. And then the analogy is: if immigration is "good" for tiny Israel, how can it be bad for America, with its vast spaces and rich resources?

Jews are acutely aware of their role as teachers. And a large part of their influence, despite their small numbers, is their ability to evoke guilt by reminding others of anti-semitic acts performed, or permitted, in the past. And since the guilty acts were all too real, the approach works. Other groups are learning from Jews how to use presumptions of, or sometimes real, guilt to secure, under the guise of "compassion," political or economic advantage.

Thus, official statements of Jewish organizations, like those of other ethnic lobbies, favor immigration, dubbing it the "compassionate" choice. The people I spoke with are less rigid, the problem being lack of awareness and a set of other priorities. Education is possible. Recommending greatly decreased immigration is a position reached by fair-minded people only after much deliberation, deep thought and the gathering of extensive information, for only then is immigration seen as, in the long run, a pernicious solution. The questions then, are: how long will that education take; and will it have its effect in time? ■

[AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Most of the views cited in this article were related to me in personal conversations over the last two decades, or more recently in direct preparation for this publication. The people I spoke with are all intensely involved with Jewish issues, and most have responsible positions requiring information, insights and understanding regarding the attitudes of Jews. The context and choice of particular formulations of viewpoints was, of course, my responsibility; but footnoting all those views was impossible.*]

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#### FOOTNOTES

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<sup>2</sup> For two examples, see The American Jewish Congress' news release of June 16, 1994 and Gary E. Rubin's "Why Jews Should Still Support Immigration," *The Jewish Week*, July 23-29, 1993.

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<sup>4</sup> Epstein, Carol B., "Conservative Judaism and the Problem of Birth Control," *Viewpoints*, Vol. X, #4, 1976, pp.40-54.

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<sup>6</sup> Gorsky, Jonathan, "Review of *Judaism and Ecology*," *L'Eylah*, September 1992, p.48; and

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<sup>7</sup> Keimach, Burt, "The Bible As a Key to Modern Ecology in Israel," *L'Eylah*, September 1992, pp.8-11.

<sup>8</sup> Musleah, Rahel, *Na'amat Woman*, Magazine of the Women's Labor Zionist Organization in America, January-February 1994, p.7.

<sup>9</sup> Chanes, Jerome A., "Jews and the Environmental Question," *Sh'ma*, February 1993, p.55. (op. cit.)

<sup>10</sup> Deuteronomy 20:19-20. See Gorsky, Jonathan, op. cit.

<sup>11</sup> Keimach, Burt, op. cit. p.11.