

The Future of the Jews

by Jacob Neusner

*"A people still, whose common ties are gone;
who, mixed with every race, are lost in none."*

—George Crabbe

Faith or Fear: How Jews Can Survive in a Christian America

by Elliott Abrams
New York: Free Press;
237 pp., \$25.00

The Vanishing American Jew: In Search of Jewish Identity for the Next Century

by Alan M. Dershowitz
Boston: Little, Brown;
412 pp., \$24.95



That Americans of different ethnic or religious origins intermarry surprises no one—half of Japanese-Americans, more than half of all Catholics, nearly three-quarters of Italian-Americans, 84 percent of Polish-Americans, and so on. But where others declare a religious catastrophe, Jews call down heaven and earth in prognostications of gloom, counting the years to the last Jew in the United States, who supposedly will die in 2076. These two books, taking up the hyped demographic question, ask theology to address a problem of sociology. Because of their remarkable confusion of categories neither works terribly well, but while one is measured and well-crafted, the other spurts streams of words onto paper in an interminable flow of impressions and opinions. Elliott Abrams advocates a reversion to Judaism as the final solution to the American Jewish problem; Alan M. Dershowitz demands the rejection of Judaism as a religion to solve that same problem. Expert in what he knows from personal research and eschewing what he does not, Abrams has written a thoroughly professional study.

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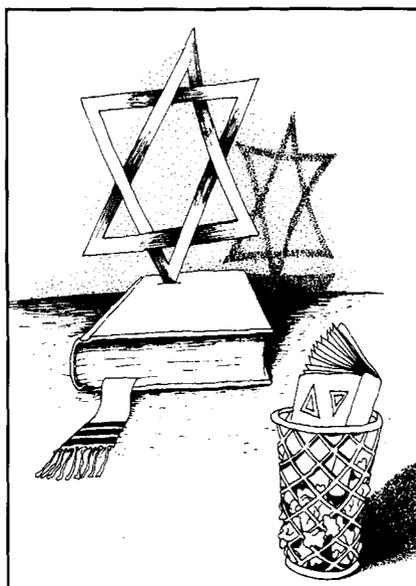


ILLUSTRATION BY WARD STREIB

Dershowitz, a hobbyist and parvenu, sets forth an intellectually vulgar and self-celebratory exercise in amateurism.

Abrams' book is concise. The crisis that precipitates his reflections involves the decline of the proportion of Jews in the United States population (3.7 percent to 2 percent) and of Judaism among the Jews themselves ("one-third of all Americans of Jewish ancestry no longer report Judaism as their religion"). The majority of Jews married after 1985 wedded non-Jews, and only a quarter of the children of those marriages are being raised as Jews: thus the phenomenon Abrams describes as "the vanishing American Jew." Having surveyed the history of the Jews in the United States, and Roman Catholic, mainstream Protestant, Evangelical, and Jewish views of Christianity's views of the Jews and Judaism, he returns to the question of assimilation by intermarriage.

None of this has much bearing on the question that prompted the book in the first place, but it does set the stage for Abrams' advocacy of Judaism in his discussion of "the flight from Judaism."

Not only do the vast majority of American Jews not practice Judaism in any form, they reject religion entirely. Polls show that while three-quarters of American blacks, 57 percent of white Catholics, and 47 percent of white Protestants declare religion to be important in their lives, scarcely a third of Jews do. And of this third, an indeterminate proportion have in mind ethnic identity when they speak of religion. A majority of Jews claiming strong ties to the Jewish community do not pay their dues. "Jewishness," meaning ethnic sentiment, replaces Judaism the religion in any form. Surrogates for religion ("civil religion") include philanthropy, activities in support of the state of Israel, liberal politics in the cloak of "prophetic Judaism," and memorialization of the holocaust: "In fact, 85% of American Jews say that the Holocaust is very important to their sense of being Jewish. Fewer Jews say that about God, the Torah, or any other factor." But these fundamentally ethnic formulations of personal and even public identification are losing purchase as ethnicity dissolves in the melting pot.

American Jews have mostly abandoned the religion of Judaism, Abrams says, whether in Orthodox or any other form. His prescription is simple: "A decision to place Judaism back in the center of Jewish life would mean that the American Jewish community must reevaluate its struggle for secularism. It would mean a rethinking of relations between Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews. And it would require each Jew to rethink his own religious life and practices." But American Jews do not affirm "the 'apartness' that Judaism demands." The reason this fact provokes fear, in Abrams' words, is simple: "Whether American Jews can commit themselves anew to the goal of survival, to reversing the demographic patterns that threaten their collective future, depends on whether they

still believe they are above all else members of a religious community. As an ethnic, cultural, or political entity they are doomed.”

But religion is not a solution to the threatened problems of an ethnic group: it is a way of life, a worldview, embodied by a social entity deemed holy, concerned (in the case of Judaism) with God, God’s self-manifestation in the Torah, God’s love for the supernatural social entity, “Israel” (meaning the chosen and holy people, not to be confused with this-worldly entities of the same name), and God’s image of Man, who is made in God’s image, after God’s likeness. Adopting these principles of faith not by reason of conviction but from political or social considerations simply deepens the political or social crisis, even in the short run. Has anyone before offered mass hypocrisy as a solution to a social problem? I doubt that God, for His part, will be much impressed. People practice religion because they believe that is what God wants them to do, not so that their grandchildren will do the same. They leave the rest, including their lives and their future, in God’s hands. Appealing to the sacred in the name of the secular, Abrams asks for what cannot, and should not, be. Still, in a this-worldly framework, his book is objective and professional.

Responding subjectively to the personal crisis of his son’s marriage to a Gentile, Dershowitz mounts a full-scale attack on the religion—Judaism—which for theological reasons condemns marriage of Jews to unconverted Gentiles. Instead he advocates not a faith but a heritage: “an eclectic, tolerant” and inclusive secular Jewishness—an ethnic identity—for American Jews. His autobiographical starting point is the intermarriage of Jews and Gentiles, which takes place in a society ever less characterized by anti-Semitism; “thus we must define our Jewish identity in different and more positive ways than we did in the past.” He identifies in the Christian Right (“and their Jewish allies”) a principal surviving form of anti-Semitism, sharply differing from Abrams’ generally positive assessment of the Christian Right.

Dershowitz rejects the three principal modes of Jewish survival: the religious solution, meaning synagogal affiliation; the Israeli solution, meaning emigration; and, agreeing with Abrams here, the eth-

ical solution, meaning stress on liberal politics. Instead he advocates, along with a call to action, “a new, more positive, Jewish identity based on a 3,500-year-old tradition of education, scholarship, learning, creativity, justice, and compassion. But first we must figure out a way to make this diverse library of Jewish knowledge accessible and useful to generations of Jews who are abysmally ignorant of their remarkable tradition.” Jewish educators have struggled with that challenge for generations, but Dershowitz seems not to acknowledge this fact.

Dershowitz takes a militantly secular position. It is Judaism the religion that forbids what his son has done. So, to love his daughter-in-law, Dershowitz despises that religion. Rabbis, monopolizing control over Jewish education, must be deposed. Only secular Jews embody the good: “How come so many of the Jews who contributed so much to the world were not practicing or observant Jews?” Jews who practice Judaism as a religion are dismissed: “Why has the Jewish background or heritage of so many individuals who have contributed so much to the world been so important to their success, while the core of Jewish religious observance has been relatively unimportant?” He cannot mean Senator Joseph Lieberman in the United States, or the Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, in Britain: two enormously influential Jews at the highest levels of public life who practice Judaism. Exactly what Dershowitz has in mind in making these invidious comparisons—apart from a general attitude of disdain—is scarcely obvious. Dershowitz creates his world out of empty words—an uncharitable language of abuse, nothing more.

Dershowitz’s own position is simple. “If eclectic Judaism is to survive and thrive, then Jews must devise eclectic rules adaptive to the changes in Judaism and to the worlds in which Jews live today. Secular Jews have the right and power to do what is necessary to preserve secular Jewish life,” as does everyone else. But when it comes to making concrete explanation of what he means by “secular-Jewish,” Dershowitz admits he is stymied: “The further one moves away from the strictly religious component of Judaism, the more difficult it is to define the Jewish character either of Israel or of the Jewish community.” He does discover a familiar source of definition, which is education: “For Judaism to become a

transmittable civilization in an integrated, secular world where Jews do not experience isolation, discrimination, and victimization, Jewish learning must become accessible to integrated and secular Jews. It must become usable to them in their daily lives.” Dershowitz further advocates spirituality without religiosity: Jewish ethics, Jewish environmentalism, Jewish feminism, and the like—Judaism à la mode. “Judaism must become less tribal, less ethno-centric, less exclusive, less closed off, less defensive, less xenophobic, less clannish.” “Jews must adopt a different approach to the increasing reality of intermarriage.” That, indeed, is the idea prompting this unending flow of empty platitudes from the secular left.

Dershowitz wants to reinvent the Jewish wheel: “Recognize the validity of secular Judaism, which does not require belief in the supernatural, which is devoted to Jewish learning, and which regards Judaism as an evolving civilization.” This is nothing more than the language of Jewish Reconstructionism. He advocates, as being of his own coinage, strings of contemporary Jewish and Judaic clichés. “We need a leadership of Jewish educators who can address the pressing issue of Jewish illiteracy and ignorance.” “The Judaism I am trying to defend . . . is a Judaism of ideas, of attitudes, of skepticism, of justice, of compassion, of argumentation, and of inclusiveness.” I cannot think of a single rabbi in the United States who would take issue with him, except on his violent rejection of religiosity. He ends with a call to action, something bordering on self-parody: a conference to be telecast live by satellite, open to mass participation via the Internet and e-mail—more or less the media he used when he was counseling O.J. Simpson. He concludes: “I look forward to saying ‘Shalom’ to you on the information superhighway!”

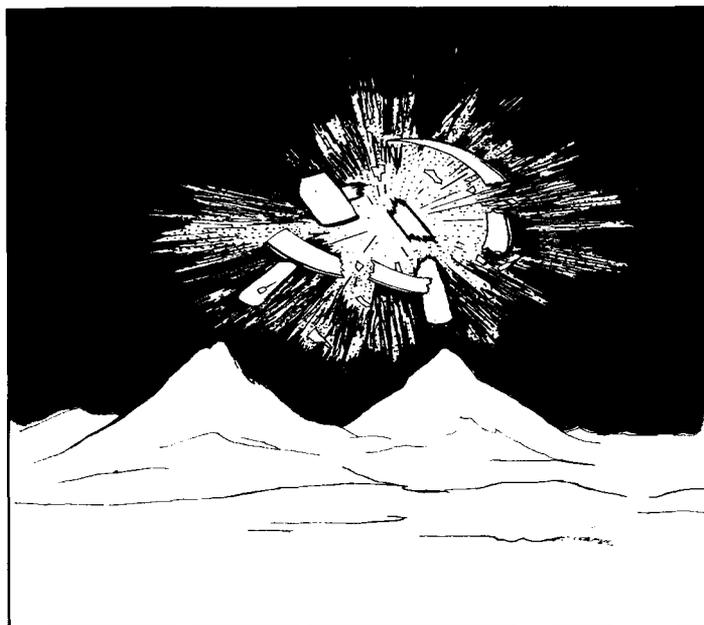
So far as Dershowitz claims to construct his proposal for an eclectic Judaism out of the resources of religious Judaism, which he both dismisses and hails as a principal resource, he has written a work of surpassing ignorance and utter intellectual vulgarity. In advocating learning he himself does not possess, Dershowitz simply does not know what he does not know. That is why he embarrasses himself in his pathetic pseudo-theology. The humility of Elliott Abrams contrasts powerfully with the ignorance and arrogance of this opinionated boob.

Targeted Missiles, Guided Democracy

by Paul Gottfried

"Democracy is more cruel than wars or tyrants."

—Seneca



George F. Kennan and the Origins of Containment, 1944-1946

by George F. Kennan and John Lukacs
Columbia: University of Missouri Press;
85 pp., \$19.95

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The correspondence on the origins of the Cold War between John Lukacs and George Kennan, who have been friends for more than four decades, is not entirely unknown to fans of either. Much of it was printed last year in *American Heritage*, and Lukacs's stately introduction to this expanded version of the exchange reprises themes that come up in *The End of the Twentieth Century* (1993) and in his earlier works on contemporary history. As I have elsewhere commented extensively on the work of both men, it may be redundant for me to repeat tributes to these acknowledged mentors. Instead, it may be more useful to focus on what I find problematic

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about their vision of recent history: both men see this century's two world wars as "the two mountains" (Lukacs's words) dominating the historic topography of the modern era; and both see the Russian Revolution as an event of only secondary importance, born of World War I but greatly overestimated by conservatives and neoconservatives as the turning point of the 20th century.

These notions are troubling for two reasons. First, it is not at all clear that neoconservatives hold the Russian Revolution to be as earth-shaking as Lukacs suggests. A year's subscription to *Commentary* or a reading of the historiography of Donald Kaben and Paul Johnson should make clear that neoconservatives are far more obsessive in their dislike of the Germans than of the Soviets, and that they are nearly as hostile to the Kaiser's Reich as they are to Hitler's. The neoconservatives and some British Tories may be the last proponents of the dubious thesis of Fritz Fischer, which blames World War I on the implementation of a supposed German plan for world conquest. The point is not whether this thesis can be sufficiently

documented to make it worthy of respect (from what I can determine, it cannot). More relevant is that the neoconservatives' preoccupation with the German problem would never allow most of them—Richard Pipes being a signal exception—to identify Bolshevism as the mother of all 20th-century disasters. From the neoconservative perspective, the Soviet problem was a secondary one, compared to a German menace extending from Bismarck to Hitler.

A fixation with communism, from the Soviet Revolution on, was rather characteristic of certain postwar conservatives—most particularly Frank Meyer, Robert Strausz-Hupé, Stefan Possony, and, for a while, James Burnham. Nonetheless, what critics call "apocalyptic anticommunism" has been less an *idée fixe* for the American right than antifascism has been for the American left and center-left. Despite the militantly interventionist anticommunism prevalent among those who read and wrote for *National Review*, isolationism continued to be found on the Old Right into the 1950's and 60's. Such right-wing libertarians as Frank Chodorov and Murray