Thoughts on the Future of the American Jewish Experience
Regularly, American Jews hear, as I did at the start of my career from a scholar at a distinguished rabbinical seminary—and as other Jews did in colonial times, and in the era of the American Revolution, and in the nineteenth century, and in the twentieth century—that Judaism in America is doomed, that assimilation and intermarriage are inevitable. Should high rates of intermarriage continue and the community grow complacent, that may yet prove true.

But history, as we have seen, also suggests another possibility: that today, as so often before, American Jews will find creative ways to maintain and revitalize American Judaism. With the help of visionary leaders, committed followers, and generous philanthropists, it may still be possible for the current “vanishing” generation of American Jews to be succeeded by another “vanishing” generation, and then still another.

“A nation dying for thousands of years,” the great Jewish philosopher Simon Rawidowicz once observed, “means a living nation. Our incessant dying means uninterrupted living, rising, standing up, beginning anew.” His message, delivered to Jews agonizing over the loss of 6 million of their compatriots, applies equally well today in the face of contemporary challenges to Jewish continuity. “If we are the last—let us be the last as our fathers and forefathers were. Let us prepare the ground for the last Jews who will come after us, and for the last Jews who will rise after them, and so on until the end of days.”

Jewish women, along with men, mostly do not feel bound to operate within conventional and inherited institutions. They do not feel compelled to behave as their parents or grandparents did. In a postmodern age, with its intense focus on personal choice, they look for ways and places to function as Jews. The solutions they produce do not necessarily reflect the weight of tradition or the continuity of past practice. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, on some level all American Jews, not just the growing number of converts, had become Jews by choice. While those communal leaders who worry about continuity can hardly be dismissed, and their apprehension about what the future of the Jewish people in America may be well justified, they might take solace from the reality that large numbers of American Jews, whether or not they affiliate, continue to invest their Jewishness with meaning. Definitions of Jewishness may be more elastic than they have been at any time in the modern past. But that elasticity, a hallmark of American culture, may indeed hold the key to the continuance of the “eternal people” in a new and uncharted age.
American Jews may be the descendants of not very learned, poor immigrants, but they are Jews, and thus they know that being Jewish is indissolubly connected to moral responsibility and to the inner life of the spirit. Tevye in all his quaintness had not read much Bible, and he misquoted wildly, but it reechoed within him, and the memory of that memory is present among his descendants. They still worry about the poor, and they still think that they are “chosen,” perhaps to suffer. The embers of the classic Jewish faith still smolder, but they may be dying among the mainstream of American Jews. The rational evidence is that these Jews will continue, with growing unhappiness, to bet their future as Jews on what they know, their ethnic togetherness. But Jewish experience through the centuries has often been surprising and unpredictable. The need for and the possibility of a spiritual revival are clear. If it does not happen, American Jewish history will soon end, and become a part of American memory as a whole.

When Asser Levy and all the other refugees from Recife arrived in New Amsterdam in 1654, they did not know that the fundamental questions of meaning were then being asked in Amsterdam by Baruch de Spinoza (who contributed that year to the fund for the relief of Levy and all the other stranded Jews). Spinoza insisted that by the light of reason, Jews had only two options, either to assimilate to the majority or to reestablish their national state in the land of their ancestors. But Levy had chosen to come to America, and to remain a Jew. He had fought to join the militia as an equal, but that fight, in all its permutations, is over. Three-and-a-half centuries after the oblique encounter between Levy and Spinoza, the question of faith remains open. It will be answered, if at all, not by politicians and bureaucrats, but by men and women who hear voices—even in America.
In America, where until recently the temptation to abandon a dual allegiance was great, Jews did not throw the past upon the scrap heap. Instead, through the creative transformation of their ancient and more recent past, they constructed a religiously authenticated Jewish American ethnic identity around philanthropy, Israelism, political liberalism, and the search for social justice, as well as around anti-anti-Semitism. The choices Jews made—to be educated, civic-minded secular humanists, to be universalists, even as they defended their particular culture and values, to be metropolitan and egalitarian—were far more important as the source of Jewish American cultural distinctiveness than the facts of birth and inheritance. Yet Jews stayed true to Leon Wieseltier’s aphorism “What is made should be celebrated as much as what is given, not least because it is made out of what is given.” Jewish Americans maintained a powerful ethnicity at least unto the fourth generation without either undermining individual identity or becoming overly particularistic and socially divisive. On the contrary, Jewish American individuals were conspicuous even as they were sustained by their ethnic attachment, and they promoted that ethnic attachment as part of a universal, mutually enriching commonwealth of ethnic cultures, in the larger shared national culture of American civilization. This was a result of conscious, deliberate choice.