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Making Sense of  
Jewish Liberalism

*By Don Feder*



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214 Massachusetts Avenue, N.E.  
Washington, D.C. 20002-4999  
U.S.A.  
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# Making Sense of Jewish Liberalism

By Don Feder

Periodically, someone on the right—usually a neo-conservative—will address the anomaly of Jewish liberalism, noting that the politics of the Jewish community undermines the manifest self-interest of American Jewry. Said pundit will confidently predict that it is only a matter of time before Jews come to their senses and begin voting for conservative candidates and supporting conservative causes.

As an ardent conservative and a deeply committed Jew, whose conservatism is a natural outgrowth of his Judaism, I wish I could bring you such a comforting message. I can't. It ain't gonna happen, at least not in the foreseeable future.

As I noted in a recent column, shrimp will learn to whistle "*Hava Nigilah*" before American Jews escape the liberal ghetto. However, there may be some small satisfaction in learning how this lamentable state of affairs came about, and discovering that for the malady of Jewish liberalism there most assuredly is a cure.

At the outset, perhaps we should ask: Just how liberal is the Jewish community? Shall we say, exceedingly? Shall we say, devoutly? It's a cliché that is nonetheless true that Jews have the incomes of Episcopalians and vote like Puerto Ricans.

Ruth Wisse, professor of Yiddish literature at Harvard, writes: "Jews are associated with liberalism the way the French are associated with wine: It is considered native to their region." Excepting blacks, Jews are the most liberal demographic group in the population.

**The "Jewish" Vote.** The 1988 election was, in this regard, typical. As the Democratic presidential nominee, Michael Dukakis received 70 percent of the Jewish vote. Jewish support for Dukakis exceeded his vote among the unemployed (66 percent), union households (64 percent), Hispanics (66 percent), and even his fellow Greeks (55 percent).

Jews overwhelmingly endorsed the Massachusetts governor despite the fact that the Republican national platform opposed the creation of a Palestinian state, denounced anti-Semitism, and called for rescission of the U.N. resolution equating Zionism with racism, while the Democrats were conspicuously silent on all of the above. Even the governor's warm embrace of Jesse Jackson (considered an anti-Semite by a majority of Jewish respondents to an opinion survey that year) did not keep Jews out of the Democratic column.

The 1988 election was part of a trend lasting more than half a century. Over ten presidential elections from 1932 to 1976, the average Jewish vote for Republican presidential candidates was an anemic 28 percent. The only blip on the graph came in 1980, when Ronald Reagan won nearly 40 percent of the Jewish vote. By 1984 Jewish political normalcy had reasserted itself. In his reelection bid, Reagan swept 49 states and got less than one out of three Jewish votes.

Far from an election-year phenomenon, Jewish liberalism is a day-in, day-out love affair. According to a 1988 *Los Angeles Times* survey, 41 percent of Jews consider themselves liberal; only 17 percent are self-described conservatives. This is almost exactly the reverse of political identification

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Don Feder is a syndicated columnist and author of *A Jewish Conservative Looks at Pagan America*.

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among the general population, where 18 percent choose the liberal label and 30 percent call themselves conservatives.

On issue after issue, American Jews pledge allegiance to the liberal agenda. Among Jewish groups, support for so-called abortion rights reads like a directory of community organizations. The Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights tries to cast an aura of sanctity over feticide on demand. Of the 35 constituent organizations listed on its letterhead, fully one-third are Jewish, including the American Jewish Congress, American Jewish Committee, National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods, Union of American Hebrew Congregations, and Women's League for Conservative Judaism.

By a margin of nine to one, Jews endorse homosexual rights. Alfred H. Moses, president of the American Jewish Committee, enthusiastically enunciates the organization's support for ending the ban on gays in the military, which he describes as essential to the achievement of "full justice and equality in the United States."

How delighted Moshe Rabbeneau (Moses our teacher) would have been to know that three millennia after he gave humanity the law which bears his name—a code that includes the strongest possible injunctions against sodomy—another Moses would promulgate a new Torah where minority status is bestowed on the basis of sexual behavior, and where fidelity to the original Law of Moses is the equivalent of racial/religious bigotry.

Whether it's feminism, day care, defense cuts, opposition to school prayer, or First Amendment fanaticism—with certain honorable exceptions (the Orthodox, in particular), the Jewish community marches in liberal lockstep. Indeed, American Jews are fervent proselytizers for every "ism"—feminism, environmentalism, pacifism, redistributionism—save Judaism.

It's not just that Jews can't distinguish their political friends from their enemies, or that Jews consistently promote non-Jewish values. Far worse, this reflex liberalism compels them to take positions adverse to their best interests.

Let us digress a moment to consider just three of these cases, where the politics of the community borders on the suicidal.

## **School Choice**

In a 1987 poll, Jews opposed tuition tax credits by a two-to-one margin. In 1986, a ballot question in Massachusetts would have amended our state constitution to allow such limited governmental aid to private schools as textbooks, a type of state support held constitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court. The measure was defeated, due in part to the opposition of Jewish organizations—which raised the dreaded specter of an erosion of the wall between church and state.

It is no secret that intermarriage and assimilation are major problems for American Jewry—task forces are commissioned to study the crisis, conferences are convened to debate solutions. In some areas, the rate of intermarriage approaches 60 percent.

By and large, non-Jewish spouses do not convert to Judaism. The children of mixed marriages generally are not raised as Jews. In most cases, they and their descendants are irredeemably lost to the spiritual nation of Israel.

Combined with a declining Jewish birth rate, this has made us the incredible shrinking people. While the general population grew 22 percent between 1970 and 1990, Jewish demographic growth was an insignificant 1.8 percent. As a component of the overall population, Jews declined from 2.7 percent to 2.2 percent during that period.

Jewish education is by far the best answer to this tragedy. Graduates of Jewish day schools rarely intermarry. Their levels of observance and commitment are extremely high.

There are now more than 500 Jewish day schools nationwide, thanks in large part to the Orthodox and the Lubavitch Hasidic movement. Most struggle to survive. Their teachers are underpaid, their facilities inadequate. The parents of day school children bear a double burden—the taxes they pay to maintain the public school establishment and the tuition to educate their children. Many more would opt for the day school alternative, if they could afford it.

If Jewish leaders had any sort of survival instinct, they would be leading the charge for public aid to private education. Instead they're in the forefront of opposition. Tuition tax credits and vouchers would "entangle the government with religion in a way Jews find unhealthy," a Jewish leader piously proclaimed. Three of my children attend the Yeshiva Academy in Worcester, Massachusetts. God forbid the Commonwealth should give them school books—which would lead directly to pogroms, another edition of the Spanish Inquisition, and the installation of Pat Robertson as Archbishop of the Church of America, we are told.

## Defense

In 1990, Saddam Hussein represented the greatest threat to Israel in our generation. The aptly named Butcher of Baghdad was a Hitler clone with the strongest army in the Middle East, who had sworn to annihilate the Jewish state. Moreover, here was an international gangster who had swallowed a sovereign state, who was clearly on the march—a calculating madman on the threshold of acquiring a nuclear capability.

In light of the foregoing, Jewish organizations abandoned their historic pacifism. The Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations endorsed the Bush approach to removing Saddam from Kuwait. Henry Siegman, of the American Jewish Congress, supported the use of military force. Even such inveterate Jewish doves as Representatives Mel Levine, Stephen Solarz, and Tom Lantos voted for the resolution to authorize force in the Persian Gulf. On the other hand, it must be noted that such celebrated kneejerks at Barbara Boxer and Barney Frank were unable to see beyond their ideological blinders, even when the fate of Israel was at stake.

Throughout the Reagan years, those Jewish organizations and leaders who lined up behind Desert Storm had invariably and habitually supported the defense cuts which would have made the operation impossible. For instance, in 1984, some 60 percent of Jews surveyed agreed that "U.S. military spending should be cut" and then illogically added that this nation should continue "to be a reliable supplier of Israel" and "maintain a strong military capacity." Commenting on this glaring contradiction, Milton Himmelfarb, writing in *Commentary*, quotes the Duke of Wellington to a man who addressed him as "Mr. Jones, I believe." Said the Duke: "If you believe that, you can believe anything."

Well, the Jewish community breathed a great sigh of relief when Saddam was driven from Kuwait, his army decimated, and then—this past November—turned around and rewarded the party whose congressional delegation overwhelmingly opposed the war to stop Iraq. If there is any logic in this, it will take a keener observer than I to discern it.

By the way, this is not the first time that Jewish survival has taken a backseat to Jewish politics. In the mid-1980s, when the Evil Empire was still a going concern, 52 percent of Jewish respondents to an opinion survey said Soviet human rights abuses should not impede progress toward arms control. This at a time when Jews were the most persecuted minority in the Soviet Union, and Moscow had replaced Berlin as the worldwide center of anti-Semitic agitation.

## Black Anti-Semitism

Opinion polls show that blacks are twice as likely as whites to hold negative views about Jews. This hostility is manifested in various ways.

Organizations like the Nation of Islam and rap groups like NWA reach millions with messages of hatred. According to *The New Republic*, at a 1990 conference on African-American education in Atlanta, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* were openly displayed. The most recent issue of the Weisenthal Center's newsletter reports on a November speech at Columbia University, sponsored by the school's Black Students Organization, which amounted to a mini-Nuremberg revival.

According to observers, the speaker, one Khalid Mohammed, spent two hours denigrating Jews and Judaism, charging that Jews were responsible for the slave trade, practiced a "dirty religion," and had long conspired to oppress blacks.

In his new book, *Inside American Education*, black sociologist Thomas Sowell relates similar episodes on dozens of campuses. According to the author, other speakers invited to address black groups at various schools have made such comments as: the Jews are a "violent people," the "best Zionist is a dead Zionist," or have referred to "Columbia Jewniversity in Jew York City." Not since the days of Father Coughlin has anti-Semitism reached such a wide audience.

The Anti-Defamation League's 1992 Audit of Anti-Semitic Incidents, released earlier this month, notes that since 1988 the number of anti-Semitic incidents on college campuses has more than doubled. It attributes this in part to "the disturbing fact that many Black student leaders and representatives—in effect, a significant portion of the future leadership of the Black community—repeatedly and enthusiastically support speakers who are well known for their Jew-baiting."

It's just an intellectual stone's throw from the Columbia campus to the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn. In August and September 1991, that heavily Hasidic area witnessed the worst anti-Semitic violence in this nation since the lynching of Leo Frank. Following the death of a black child in an auto accident, mobs of black teenagers went on a three-day rampage reminiscent of Czarist pogroms. To shouts of "Heil Hitler" and "Kill the Jews," Jewish stores were vandalized, Jewish homes stoned, and Jews beaten in the streets. Yankel Rosenbaum, a 29-year-old Hasidic scholar, was dragged from his car and knifed to death for no other reason than his Jewishness.

Main-line Jewish organizations were literally paralyzed. Groups which could issue a press release denouncing skinhead graffiti in a matter of minutes, took a week or longer to condemn these atrocities. The horror so contradicted their world view—where Jews support "oppressed minorities" and the recipients of that beneficence naturally appreciate their benefactors—that they were psychologically unable to respond.

For some, the response can only be described as bizarre, self-loathing, but entirely consistent with liberal dogma. In December, the American Jewish Congress ran an ad in *The New York Times* defending Mayor David Dinkins (who restrained the police for 72 crucial hours) from charges of anti-Semitism. The group also touted its recent alliance with Jesse Jackson, to push a broad range of welfare state issues, as an example of constructive Jewish-black engagement.

Consider the words of David Saperstein, director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism. Among the solutions he offers for Jewish-black tensions is "Economic Justice." Saperstein writes: "Economic distress leads to bitterness and despair, which in turn lead to resentment and hatred. Where economic opportunity thrives, the divisive words of cynical demagogues—black and Jew—fall on deaf ears." How unique. How totally out-of-character for a liberal to fall back on economic determinism as an explanation for malice and envy, instead of admitting the possibility that human nature is flawed.

Imagine a Jewish leader rationalizing Brown Shirt atrocities of the Thirties with the observation: “Nebbish, the poor Germans. They’re unemployed. They suffered so in the aftermath of the First World War. No wonder they’re rampaging in the streets, burning synagogues, and murdering Jews.” The liberal Jewish response to Crown Heights and rampant black anti-Semitism generally is no less absurd.

## Explaining Origins

Now, having surveyed the surrealist landscape of Jewish liberalism, let us briefly consider its origins. Two explanations are universally offered—one historic, the other philosophic.

The first holds that Jewish liberalism is a natural response to the Jewish experience in modern times. In Eastern Europe, Jews were bitterly persecuted by autocratic regimes and so—quite naturally—side with the perceived underdog. Right-wing anti-Semitism from the Czars to Hitler caused Jews to identify with the left.

A number of flies do backstrokes on the surface of this ointment. Even assuming that Nazism was a movement of the right (which is open to debate), this century has seen at least as much Jew hatred from the left. Why didn’t the anti-Semitism of every Soviet ruler from Lenin to Brezhnev cause a major realignment of the American Jewish electorate?

Other groups, besides the Jews, have known the sting of oppression. The Irish, who suffered centuries of foreign occupation as well as famine and civil war, weren’t persecuted?

Back when Louis Nizer started practicing law, counsel for a criminal defendant prayed for a jury composed of Irishmen and Jews, such was their well-known sympathy for the guy with his back to the wall. Yet it has been decades since a majority of Irish-Americans voted Democratic. Why hasn’t the Jewish electorate undergone a similar transformation?

Another theory, beloved of Jewish liberals, is that their liberalism reflects something broadly called “Jewish values.” They take great pride in the paradox of one of the most affluent segments of society backing welfarist proposals. Jewish voting patterns are at variance with the rest of the white electorate because Jews put their values before self-interest, they smugly proclaim. A self-effacing proposition to be sure.

Jews may indeed vote their values, the trouble is there is nothing remotely Jewish about those values. Jewish liberals speak loftily about the Biblical mandate to feed the widow and orphan, to clothe the naked, the prophets who put social justice above empty ritual.

Judaism certainly has much to say about our responsibilities to the less fortunate. The Hebrew word *tsadaka*, describing those obligations, often mistranslated as “charity,” means justice. But for every right, the Torah posits multiple responsibilities. Recipients of *tsadaka* have an obligation to become self-sufficient as soon as possible. The rabbis of the Talmud would have been aghast at the thought of multi-generational welfare families.

And what of the other defining elements of Torah? Do words like “modesty,” “sanctity,” “self-control,” and “faith,” have no place in Jewish tradition?

And Jews are even more liberal on social questions than on economic issues. You will search in vain, through 3,300 years of normative Jewish legislation, for anything that sanctions abortion on demand or homosexuality (which Leviticus calls an “abomination,” a designation reserved for the gravest transgressions).

Orthodox Judaism itself is the ultimate refutation of the “Jewish values” polemic. Those Jews whose lives are governed by Jewish law (i.e., Jewish values)—who spend years studying the sacred texts in their yeshivas—are as conservative as the rest of the community is liberal.

In 1984, while Ronald Reagan lost the Jewish vote by a margin of three to one, he carried the Satmar Hasidic neighborhood of Williamsburg by four to one, and Borough Park by two to one. In 1988, George Bush swept Orthodox areas of New York City with anywhere from 72 percent to 86 percent of the vote.

It is almost axiomatic: The more observant a Jew, the more he understands Jewish law, the more he lives Jewish values, the less liberal he will be—witness the pronouncements of the Orthodox Union, the Rabbinical Council of America, Agudat Israel, and the Lubavitcher Rebbe on a broad range of social questions.

There is only one rationale left, one that is rarely considered—a theological explanation: Liberalism has become the ersatz religion of secular, assimilated Jews.

Jews are the most secularized community in America. While 40 percent of the population as a whole attends religious services weekly, only 11 percent of American Jews go to synagogue at least once a week. In a 1984 Gallup poll, only one in four Jews indicated that religion was “very important” in their life, less than half the level of religious commitment of any other identifiable group.

The reasons for Jewish alienation from historic Judaism are too numerous and complex to adequately discuss in the time available. Suffice it to say, the phenomenon is due in part to the relative paradise that Jews found on these shores—a land where they were not pariahs, where opportunity was limitless.

Many wanted to put the Old World—including the old faith—behind them as rapidly as possible. In the mad rush to cast off their separateness, there are stories of Jewish men on board ships bound for America throwing their *tfillin*, their phylacteries, into the ocean.

The values their children and grandchildren did not learn in *cheder* or yeshiva were replaced by dogmas absorbed at Harvard, Yale, and on the editorial pages of *The New York Times*.

As a result, the average Jew of my generation has at most a casual acquaintance with Jewish law, customs and philosophy. Their bar or bat mitzvah marked the conclusion of their Jewish education, which usually consisted of a few Bible stories interspersed with a half-hearted attempt to learn Hebrew. For them, Jewish ritual is confined to a highly abbreviated Passover seder in English and synagogue attendance twice a year, on Rosh Ha-Shanah and Yom Kippur.

What has filled the vacuum for many is a new god, the pseudo-religion of the 20th century. Like all religions, liberalism provides its followers with an ethical world view, an explanation for the existence of evil, a code of conduct, rituals, and a vision of salvation.

In liberal theology, evil is explained by environmental factors, lack of adequate education and social services (especially counseling), and—most important—inequality. Prominent in its demonology are capitalism, racism, sexism, (a recent addition) homophobia, emotional repression, and religious fundamentalism.

Its dogma is comprehensive. Thou shalt raise taxes, spend more on the poor, enlarge the public sector, institute quotas for disadvantaged minorities, deny the concept of personal responsibility, reduce defense appropriations, ignore foreign dangers, decry intolerance, fight censorship, remove all obstacles to a “woman’s right to choose,” give condoms to 13-year-olds, and bow down to the rain forest and the ozone layer.



Liberalism lets its adherents feel good about themselves, in the words of pop psychology. Thus, the liberal acolyte can say to himself: "I'm a good person, I demonstrate my compassion by voting for redistributionist candidates, by religiously recycling (to show my devotion to Mother Earth), by making the world a safer place by working for disarmament."

The religious quality of modern liberalism is the reason adherents cling to the creed in spite of its glaring failures, including a crushing tax burden, declining productivity, stifling bureaucracy, multi-generational welfare families, a crime explosion, drug contagion, bankruptcy of public institutions (schools first and foremost among them), and social disintegration. Blind faith alone explains a willful disregard of the obvious.

It is, therefore, naive to suppose that Jews will reject their creed any time in the near term. The devout do not abandon their faith. In the light of rational challenges, they cling ever more tenaciously to cant.

If all of this sounds depressing, there is a glimmer of hope. An antidote to Jewish liberalism exists; it's called Judaism.

Ours is the first generation to experience something miraculous, substantial numbers of Jews from assimilated backgrounds returning to traditional Judaism. The phenomenon even has a name, the *ba'alei t'shuva* movement.

In this nation, indeed worldwide, Orthodox Judaism (which was supposed to have expired in the death camps of Europe) is experiencing a renaissance. The Orthodox are establishing day schools and *yeshivot* in record numbers. (There are more yeshivas in Israel today than in all of Eastern Europe prior to the Second World War.) They are reaching out to their alienated brethren, who are responding enthusiastically. In generations past, it was always Orthodoxy which lost sons and daughters to the modernist branches of Judaism. This is the first generation in which the trend has been reversed.

This has augmented a change in Jewish demographics. The Orthodox alone are having Jewish children at above replacement levels. Demographers predict that sometime in the century before us Orthodoxy will be the Jewish norm in this nation.

This has led to a new confidence among Orthodox organizations, an insistence on being heard in the public policy debate. As Orthodoxy grows, as its political presence is felt within our community, Jewish liberalism will fade. It is ironic, then, that this creed—which facilitates a merging with the general population—bears the seeds of its own destruction.

American Jewry of the 21st century will be strikingly different from today's community—smaller as a percentage of the population, more cohesive, more religious, once again aware of its mission in the world, to attest to the presence of a universal God and his law. Then, perhaps it is we who will raise a banner to which the righteous will repair.

