A Certain People:
American Jews and
Their Lives Today
A Review and Roadmap

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Reading Charles E. Silberman's book and writing this paper proved to be an uplifting revelation for me. Through his optimistic study and his positive eye, I was able to see why, in part, I am who I am.

Not only did Nathan Garfinkle, Benjamin Kubelski, Israel Iskowitz and others change their names in order to avoid any hint of anti-Semitism in their chosen profession but so did Avrum Rosen in order to survive the slings and arrows of his youth. Having reentered the world of secular education from a Yeshiva at age 13, I quickly learned that it was actually safer being Marshall, and Avrum got buried in my subconscious for a goodly number of years. Silberman's work enabled me to reflect on some of those things which have occurred in my lifetime that have helped shape and mold me. Though I avoided bodily harm as a teenager, I recall, only 10 years or so later, incurring the ire of one of my fellow congregants ("a big giver") when he judged me to be "too enthusiastic" while soliciting funds for Israel in the summer of 1967 and why only 15 short months ago I publicly stated that my first name was Avrum.

Compared to other texts on the subject, Silberman's volume is, perhaps, the most optimistic portrait ever
written of this nation's 5.8 million Jews. And precisely because it is so sanguine, it has caused a rare public debate on the state of the American Jewish soul. Silberman does not look merely at one aspect of American Jewish life but, through statistical data, reference to sociological studies, interviews and anecdotes (he calls each an "ITEM"), Silberman investigates and dissects areas of interest such as occupational success, the relationship of American Jews to the State of Israel, assimilation, intermarriage and anti-Semitism.

Told as a story of rags to riches, the book begins with a brief history of modern anti-Semitism under which Jews were oppressed in Europe and discriminated against more subtly in America. Unlike other ethnic groups, Jews did not suffer the trauma of change from majority to minority status when they came to these shores. Nor were they uncertain of their decision to emigrate to the United States. Early arrivals in the new country found a society more tolerant than it was to become after the Civil War. When almost one-half of the non-Jewish immigrants in the early 1900's returned to their native lands, it was the rare Jew who renounced even the worst of our open society in favor of the pogroms of Eastern Europe. By and large, Jews arrived with their families, skills attributable to city-living and the firm intention of becoming Americans. They were prepared to face the challenges of the new world and rise to the top.

While many Jews in the 20th Century changed their names
as a way of evading anti-Jewish sentiments while at large in gentile America. "No one was more careful to expunge his or her Jewishness than Jews who were in the public eye", declares Silberman. Some noteables avoided this identifi-
cation so strongly that they seemed almost anti-Semitic themselves. Motives for dissimulation took on many shadings, but the essential intent was to minimize friction during passage through an often abrasive society. Of all the problems faced by Jews since their earliest days in America, the endless struggle over identity seems most fraught with anguish.

Much has changed since Joseph Seligman was turned away from Henry Hilton's hotel, and American Jews have, by reason of their tenacity and malleability, overcome the obstacles in their path. Yet the transformation of American society over the last twenty-five years is, perhaps, the ultimate "American success story" as Silberman declares. Among American Jews, the commitment to Judaism is stronger than ever. In this, the first generation to have a choice of becoming assimilated into the general society or keeping its identity, today's young Jews are choosing to remain Jews. If they are not the same kind of Jews that their parents were, he notes, neither were their parents like their grandparents.

Another example of Silberman's positive outlook for the future of American Jewry is reflected in his argument
that the anti-Semitism in the United States is merely residual. While recognizing that it is real and shuddering that the upsurge of anti-Semitism in the Midwestern Farm Belt is frightening, he distinguishes between levels and trends. Pointing out that there is a great difference between an isolated incident and an entire society in which Miss Prenowitz could not get a clerk's position with the telephone company but Miss Prentiss could; from a time when no first-ranked law firm had a Jewish partner to one in which a Jew could become the chief executive of DuPont Co.

What has to be kept in mind is that anti-Semitism is the fringe. It does not affect the crucial decisions we make in our lives today. It does not affect where we live, work or send our children to school. As one illustration, Silberman harkens back to the oil embargo of 1973. Stating that "everyone took it for granted that the Jews would be the scapegoat," he notes that there wasn't any upsurge in anti-Semitism. Citing a more recent example, Silberman reports that no great surge of anti-Semitism followed President Reagan's trip to the German military cemetery at Bitberg. An Anti-Defamation League Executive whom he interviewed told Silberman that "The ADL received no more hate mail than it gets 'every time we burp'."

Silberman does concede, however, that any anti-Semitism is dangerous. It is always possible that conditions calling for a scapegoat will enable low-level anti-Semitism to become
high and official. But considering the great changes over the past 50 years and the nature of U. S. institutions, Silberman feels the odds are much against it. On the one hand, American society has broken open to Jews in ways we never could have imagined in my parents' day. On the other hand, many of us are worried. We are afraid that our own success is going to reawaken old pools of anti-Semitism. In my parents' day, there were anti-Semitic newspapers for sale on the street and Jews were subjected to quotas and restrictions. In my own childhood, I was the object of fists, stones and epithets. At that time I saw my Jewishness as a burden if not an embarrassment. But the times really have changed. "The United States really is different," Silberman marveled. And what a different world I have and my children and my grandchildren will inherit. For me, and for them, equality is a fact of life. Opportunities are limitless. As open as that future may appear, the parallel question raised for the next generation is "Will this new freedom, this new openness, mean that Jews will stop being Jewish? Will the dissolving barriers melt the willingness of Jews to survive as a distinct group?"

Silberman's response is a definite "No." He sees the very openness of American society as a boon. "We are in the early stages of a major revitalization of American Jewish religious, cultural and intellectual life - one that is likely to transform, as well as strengthen, American
Judaism," Silberman writes.

To the contentions that the number of Jews is declining or that inter-marriage is eroding our ancient culture, he retorts that "the Jewish birth rate is higher and the inter-marriage rate lower than is generally assumed." Beginning with an inter-marriage rate of 24% in 1981 and assuming a 1% per year increase, Silberman cites a plethora of statistical findings in support of his position that "on the order of 25% of non-Jewish spouses convert to Judaism; and a substantial number, even where conversions do not occur, tend to raise their children as Jews." In addition to the 85% of the Jewish women who marry non-Jewish men and raise their children as Jews, there are the one-third of the Jewish men who marry non-Jewish women who raise their children as Jews. According to Silberman's reasoning, "what this means is that we have the potential of inter-marriage leading to an increase in the number of Jews." "But, what is crucial to realize," he says, "is that what happens is not pre-ordained. The future is very much up to us."

And so it is -- but what can we do? What paths should we take to help insure our future for generations to come? From my own experience and observations, the answer appears to be two-fold. A return to the basics of our religion leading to the many avenues available for outreach; to ourselves, our congregations, the community around us, and the world in which we live.
Turning to one of the basic tenets of Judaism, we find the directive to "welcome the stranger among us". All too often a stranger will attend our services or take part in a life-cycle event without being a part of it. How easy it is for us and our congregants to focus our attention on each other and the familiar faces around us rather than extending a hand with a warm "Shalom". Congregations must get back to the basics in terms of hospitality. No longer should we leave this all too vital task to volunteers who pour coffee at an Oneg Shabbat or to "the Committee" which is often comprised of the same congregational stalwarts year after year. Every member of the congregation, starting with the spiritual leader and the President, should consider themselves the most important member of the Hospitality Committee, so that we may all partake of the mitzvah and strengthen ourselves.

For many people, the decision to formally affiliate depends on their financial status and the dues structure of the congregation. Jewish affiliation, in my view, would be greater if we were to accept people who cannot afford membership at the regularly published rates. If a Fair Share Plan is not consistent with the congregation's policy, then some type of sliding scale for singles and young couples should be available, as well as some mechanism by which members can obtain relief -- even if it is to pay the symbolic amount of one-half shekel. To me, it is much more important that
the congregant who has agreed to pay reduced Temple dues and/or obligations on a monthly basis make those payments (regardless of the amount) on a regular basis. He who makes regular payments deserves much more 'kovod' in my opinion than the person who obtains a reduction and then proceeds to write a check for the full amount of the reduced total.

Many congregations offer a year's complimentary membership to newly married couples. But what happens at the end of that year? If programming has been ineffectual or non-existent, the couple is an excellent candidate for non-involvement and disaffiliation. If the dues structure does not permit flexibility in light of today's strained economics, no amount of programming, as excellent as it may be, will cause them to retain their membership. One way to help reduce the incidence of first-year resignations is to develop a "Buddy System", wherein the new couple (or single) is paired with one or two others of similar age and background who are active in congregational life. During the course of this one year orientation, services are attended, family life cycle events are shared and participation in Temple activities is enhanced.

Programming must be receptive to the needs not only of the congregation but to the community as a whole. Activities for families with young (pre-Nursery School) children are a growing phenomenon. Often known as "Parenting Centers", they offer young parents a place to go, even on the weekends, so they might share the joys, fears, excitement and trepidation
of their status, while their children learn the rudiments of group activity in a Jewish setting. As the name "Parenting" implies, the center offers courses and activities dealing with all aspects of the parent-child relationship ranging from those that teach Jewish Lamaze through infant and toddler play groups; those for the handicapped (parent or child) as well as those for the single parent and those that focus on one's aging parent and the loss of a loved one. More often than not, a successful first experience in Jewish surroundings leads people to formal affiliation with the congregation and continued involvement for themselves as well as further Jewish education for their child(ren) -- another positive step toward reinforcing our cultural and religious heritage.

I believe, too, that the continuance of Jewish education is of primary importance. Programs that go beyond Aleph Bet and B'nai Mitzvah are of vital concern. No longer should "Dveeinu" be the watchword of Jewish children (or their parents) as they reach the age of thirteen. We must call for a commitment toward further education from not only our teenagers but their parents as well. Confirmation classes, and those geared for adult minds, that center on Jewish culture, heritage, values and the world at large are a strong link in the chain of history that binds each of us to the other. Our collective grey matter must be stimulated to think, to ask and to act on behalf of us all whether
the issue deals with Kashrut, conversion and inter-marriage, freedom for Soviet Jewry, aid to the homeless and indigent or support for the State of Israel.

In short, I agree with Rabbi Schindler who, in his address before the 1983 U. A. H. C. convention said, "We lead not by precept but by example. The task of self-renewal must begin with us." And, in my own quiet way, let it begin with me.