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PATTERNS in  
JEWISH HISTORY

Insights into the Past, Present & Future  
of the Eternal People

Maggid Books

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## *Chapter One*

# Does History Really Repeat Itself?

**T**his chapter should properly be entitled “Need History Really Repeat Itself?” Common wisdom asserts that one must learn from history – in other words, the past is a useful and accurate guide to the present and to future events as well. Yet the nature of people and governments is to pretty much ignore this apparently simple wisdom. The same mistakes that were made centuries ago in personal lives and national policies are repeated again in the blissful hope that somehow now these failed policies and wrong behavior will work. Thus the pattern of wrong policy and behavior followed by disaster followed by recovery, and then followed by the cycle of wrong policy and behavior again, disaster, recovery etc., is firmly established in the story of humans and institutions. If insanity is truly defined as following disastrous policies over and over again in the forlorn hope that somehow this time those policies will work out successfully, then we all truly live in an officially insane world. For the nature of all humans, and Jews are no exception, is to consciously repeat past errors of judgment, policy and behavior. I think that is what the rabbis of the Talmud meant when they stated that

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one does not commit sin unless possessed by a spirit of foolishness and near insanity. The wonderful historian and author Barbara Tuchman wrote a gem of a book called *The March of Folly*. That book, covering millennia of human history, clearly shows the mistakes of national policy that were repeated over and over again throughout the centuries in every climate and clime. Human folly is not restricted by location or creed, nor by time or circumstance.

One need only study the books of the Bible to become aware of this human trait. The Jewish people in biblical times always were backsliding into paganism, divisiveness, and false alliances with neighboring powers. The constant and inexorable disasters that followed were later always followed by periods of repentance and restoration of Jewish values as though the Jewish people had learned its lesson and now would continue forward on its God-given path of holiness and dedication to the Lord and humanity. But a generation or two later, the previous lesson was forgotten or ignored and this cycle of waywardness, foolishness, disaster and revitalization would repeat itself anew. This seemingly insane behavior is not restricted to biblical times or the people of Israel. For a current example, the policies of the Western world toward aggressors, terrorism, anti-Semitism and totalitarianism are starkly reminiscent of those exact same policies that took place in the 1930s in the disastrous lead up to World War II. Then, these policies were called “appeasement,” and today they are called “engagement.” But a rose by any other name is still a rose, this time a putrid one. And this rose has wilted prematurely many times before in the human story. The pattern of Jewish history therefore reflects this biblical story in all times and localities.

In the world of finance and economics the boom-and-bust cycle is well known and oft repeated. Such cycles have repeated themselves in all centuries of the modern era. Yet every time the bust phase occurs, the experts and we ordinary mortals are shocked, surprised and confused. I remember hearing one of the great financial gurus of the time state in a radio interview when the NASDAQ index reached 5000 that this was its correct valuation. Of course the NASDAQ since has declined by over fifty percent but that financial guru is still giving out sage advice to people who choose to forget or ignore his very mistaken statement a generation earlier. Comrade Stalin and Chairman Mao, Fidel Castro and

Pol Pot no longer exist but the radical Left still idealizes them in spite of the hundreds of millions that they killed in bringing about the “new better world” that somehow never quite arrived. Thus North Korea, Syria, Iran, Venezuela and others still remain the darlings of the Left and are encouraged in their vicious totalitarianism by the forgetful humanists who want to see only good in a world that unfortunately does not conform in reality to their illusions and wishful thinking. Thus the cycle of cruelty, death, failure, rehabilitation and recovery common to all human societies continues unabated.

In the Jewish world the pattern of abandonment of Torah and its observances, followed by assimilation, self-hatred, disasters, and later resurgence of Torah beliefs again can clearly be traced throughout Jewish history. In the later chapters of this book regarding acculturation and assimilation as well as the chapter regarding messianism, these patterns will be traced for the reader in greater detail. Suffice it to say that for now this pattern is omnipresent in the story of the Jewish people. Part of the problem in breaking this vicious cycle is the blind refusal of much of Jewish society, in the entire variety of the spectrum of this society, to even recognize the existence of such a pattern in Jewish life and, therefore, it becomes impossible to learn any of the lessons of the past and not to continue to repeat those errors over and over again. If one does not recognize or remember past recurring problems then there certainly cannot be any current solutions to the difficulties that afflict us. The patterns that exist in Jewish history are evident only to those that wish to examine them objectively. It is not so much a matter of belief and ideology that should govern us as it is a matter of clear thinking and recognizing reality. If such recognition truly takes place then there is excellent hope that history need not ever eternally repeat itself in our society. The Talmud teaches us that the words of the great Hebrew prophets that were written down in scrolls and preserved for us in books were so written and preserved because they have validity in all generations. They point out the major and difficult problems that afflicted Jewish life in the past, recommend solutions to those problems, and warn about repeating those errors in the future. Since the problems are recurrent ones, the words of the prophets should be studied and internalized in every age and situation. History certainly does repeat itself, but it need

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not do so always. Common sense and a little less insanity can prevent the recurrence of the cycle of continuing disaster and then forced rebirth in Jewish national and personal life.

The departure of much of eastern European Ashkenazic Jewry from Jewish observance and tradition – the creation of the so-called secular Jew – occurred in the nineteenth and early twentieth century in eastern Europe itself. A major factor that propelled this mass desertion from Jewish tradition was the state of Jewish society at that time. Overwhelming poverty, fractured and bitter divisions within the general and in particular the religious Jewish world, the refusal to deal with an increasingly unfair social hierarchy, all reflected in religious Jewish life of that time and place, combined to alienate the younger generations from their heritage and faith. False gods, such as Marxism and secular Zionism, made grandiose promises and ignited inspirational dreams. The Torah leaders of the time, for various reasons of societal circumstance, were unable to match the promises of these false gods. Preaching poverty as a permanent way of life and having a one-size-fits-all, very limited educational system proved to be a very unattractive way of life for millions of Jews. Jews voted with their feet, fleeing that society and way of life and immigrating to new shores which would prove to be more hospitable physically but more dangerous spiritually. They also voted with their intellect, minds and new beliefs. Humanism, socialism, nationalism, militant labor unionism and complete assimilation into the non-Jewish world all proved themselves to be initially more attractive than a faith-based society that was viewed as being desperately poor, to a great extent uneducated and backward, and riven with factionalism. Yet somehow this pattern is being repeated again in sections of the Jewish religious world two centuries later. In over glorifying everything in the past, including unfortunately its errors, mistakes and defeats, we guarantee that the same sad results will inevitably occur once more. Eventually, history is unforgiving and thus repeats itself.

A final word, if I may, regarding history repeating itself. In democratic societies when popular elections take place regularly – people are running for office continually – it is de rigueur for politicians campaigning for office to propose change, hope, and easy solutions to often intractable problems. Almost all of the time this leads to unreasonable

expectations, and when elected, almost inevitably to a repetition of past policies and ideas that have failed and thus to a continuation of the cycle and pattern described above. Resurrecting past policies by giving them new names is a well known political habit of governments. Many times leaders convince themselves that they really have new breakthrough solutions to old problems without realizing that they are really reinventing the wheel, and more often than not a broken wheel at that. Very rarely has this type of essentially recycled programming and initiative been successful. Yet the nature of the beast is to continue with this type of process. Thus a realization of the past and a determination not to repeat its follies and errors is a necessary requirement of governmental, social, religious and communal life. The patterns in history do repeat themselves for good or for better. Being aware of them is already a small but essential victory in the campaign for a better society.



## *Chapter Two*

# Acculturation and Assimilation

**T**here are definite dangers in being a small people. The Torah promised us at the beginning of our story that we would never be a numerous people – in fact that we would be the smallest of all peoples. One would think that as long as we are in our country and isolated society we are safe from outside influences. However that would not be an accurate assessment of the real world. A small people, a continual minority amongst the many, is always faced with the dangers of outside, dominant cultural influences, physical assimilation and eventual disappearance.

From the first day of our existence as a people we were influenced by the other nations and cultures that existed in that area of the world. Centuries of life and decades of slavery in Egypt left their mark on the Jewish people. Many commentators are of the opinion that the generation of those who left Egypt did not enter the land of Israel because they could not shake off the influence of Egyptian culture and its pagan values in their lives. Throughout the story of the Jews in the desert of Sinai we continually hear the refrain “back to Egypt” sounded whenever problems and difficulties arise. The generation of the desert therefore can be

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seen as somehow being Egyptians of the Mosaic persuasion. This is in spite of the fact that this generation was known as being a *dor de'a* – a generation of wisdom and holy knowledge, the generation that stood at Sinai and accepted the eternal Torah on behalf of the eternal people. We see in the Torah how the Jews were influenced by the hypocritical blessings of Balaam, how they were seduced by the daughters of Midian, how they reverted to Egyptian paganism at the incident of the Golden Calf, and how they suffered both military victories and defeats at the hands of the Canaanites and Amalek. Thus, from the beginnings of our becoming a people, the Jews were always affected by the processes of acculturation and assimilation. Acculturation was necessary in order to allow Jewish life to exist and even flourish in an exile dominated by non-Jewish inimical powers. Acculturation occurs regarding dress, language, secular studies, systems and methods of education, food, mannerisms and societal mores. Assimilation however reflects a deep desire to be less Jewish and to blend in completely with the surrounding environment and society. It reflects the willingness to give up Jewish particularism in favor of being a part of the general whole. Assimilation doomed and dooms Jews to eventual demographic extinction. And this is a constant pattern in Jewish history – the struggle against assimilation and disappearance while somehow Judaizing and accepting and dealing with acculturation.

Throughout the biblical period as recorded for us in the Tanakh the influence of the pagan neighbors and societies on the Jewish kingdoms of Judah and Israel was profound and continuing. In spite of all of the warnings of the prophets of Israel of the impending disasters that following the value systems and mores of the surrounding pagan societies would bring, the Jews could not break out of this ring of intense acculturation. Even the most righteous kings of Judah were unable to completely stem this tide of pagan culture, practice and values. Marriages of political and diplomatic convenience were consummated between the Jewish royal houses and the royal families of the non-Jewish neighboring empires, all of which led to assimilation and physical and spiritual disaster. Eventually the northern kingdom of Israel – the Ten Tribes – was carried off into a never-ending exile by Assyria, and the southern kingdom of Judah and Jerusalem and its holy Temple were destroyed by

the Babylonian empire. Carried off to Babylonian exile, the generation of the time refused to acculturate let alone assimilate. They bit off the tips of their thumbs rather than play the songs of Zion on their harps for the amusement of their Babylonian captors. But soon Jews became more comfortable in their new Babylonian homes and society. Eventually there arose a generation of Babylonian Jews that approached the prophet Ezekiel and told him, in effect, we quit! They stated that the Temple is destroyed, there is no longer a Jewish state in the land of Israel, we are comfortably and apparently permanently settled here in Babylonia, we desire to assimilate completely into the host society, so therefore we state “*kekhol hagoyim beit Yisrael*, The house of Israel is to be exactly alike to all of the other nations of the world.” The Lord, however, told the prophet that He would not allow that to happen, and soon thereafter the near annihilation of the Jews in the story of Purim proved His point. In the later chapter in this book on anti-Semitism, the role of anti-Semitism in combating assimilation on one hand, and conversely encouraging it on the other hand will be discussed much more fully. Suffice it here to state that anti-Semitism is always a potent force in the story of both Jewish acculturation and assimilation.

Ezra, Nehemiah, and the Men of the Great Assembly found and build the Second Commonwealth in Jerusalem and restore the Temple. The seventy-year Babylonian exile is at an end. Yet most of the Jews of Babylonia remain in Babylonia. Ezra is able to bring less than fifty thousand returnees to the land of Israel. And as the Talmud records for us, the “better” Jews of clear pedigree and wealth remained in Babylonia. Ezra encounters a Jewish population in the land of Israel that is not Sabbath observant and with a great deal of intermarriage with non-Jewish women in its midst. The Samaritans, a group of questionable Jews converted under duress during a plague of lions running amok in the country, claim to be the real Jews, and that Ezra and his people are interlopers and frauds. Facing this drastic situation of assimilation, Ezra and Nehemiah somehow rectify the situation, the Samaritans are faced down and defeated, the non-Jewish women are sent away, the public observance of Sabbath is restored, new laws and decrees to strengthen religious values and observances are adopted, and a new covenant – *berit amana* – is entered into between God and Israel. However, signs

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of the acculturation of the Jews that occurred while living in Babylonia and Persia are now evident in Jewish life. The names of the Jewish lunar months are now Babylonian in origin, the ancient semi-holy tongue of Aramaic, spoken in Babylonia, becomes the *lingua franca* for much of Second Commonwealth Jewry living in the land of Israel and many domestic customs of Babylonian and Persian life are present in Jewish life as well. Since there is such a large Jewish population still living in Babylonia and Persia that retains intimate and continuing contact with the Jews in the land of Israel, this type of acculturation was readily understood and accepted. All of this would soon change with the coming of the conquering Greeks to the Middle East in c.325 BCE.

Alexander the Great arrives in the land of Israel. He brings with him not only his armies but Greek culture as well. Eventually his armies leave, riven by internal ambitions and disputes. But the wisdom of Aristotle, the language of Homer, the ideas of Greek politics and nascent democracy, the glorification of the human body, the advanced technology of empire, all remain in the land of Israel. And the acculturation of what is called in the Talmud *hokhmat Yavanit* – Greek wisdom and culture and values – begins for the Jewish people.

Whereas the pagan cultures of the Canaanites, the Assyrians, the Egyptians and the Babylonians were not viewed as being particularly glorious in their contributions to the progress of human civilization, Greek culture took a quantum leap above these preceding societies. Greek culture embodied drama, art, sports, philosophy, mathematics, aesthetics, political innovations, poetry and literature. It was blinding in its shining appeal. It was the living incarnation of the beauty of Japheth mentioned in the Torah. As such it proved almost irresistible to many Jews. The dark side of Greek culture, its dependence on slavery, its glorification of homosexuality as the highest form of human love, its paganism and rampant immorality in sexual matters, its pantheon of gods and goddesses each more violent and evil than the other, was somehow ignored by many or fully adopted by others. In any event, these groups of Jews who were simply enamored of Greek culture formed a group called the Hellenists, a group which eventually included almost thirty percent of Jews living in the land of Israel and in Egypt as well. This group eventually assimilated completely into Greek culture and beliefs,

many of them becoming pagans, avoiding circumcision or even attempting to reverse it on their bodies, and cooperating with the Syrian Greeks ruling the country in suppressing Judaism and persecuting its rabbinic leaders. After the defeat of the Syrian Greeks by the Hasmoneans in c.160 BCE, the Hellenists waned in numbers and influence and eventually morphed themselves into joining the Sadducees, an anti-rabbinic group that denied the divinity of the Oral Law. Nevertheless, there was continual assimilation into Greek (and later, Roman) society and beliefs amongst a significant minority of Jews within the larger Jewish society living in Second Commonwealth times.

If assimilation was obviously present but somehow mainly contained in these times, acculturation took hold in all areas of Jewish life. Greek language appears throughout the Mishna and later the Talmud as well. Greek names abounded in Jewish society and eventually became accepted as being “Jewish” names. Many of the great rabbis of the Mishna bore pure Greek names. The Bible itself was translated into Greek – the Septuagint, *Targum HaShivim* – and the rabbis ascribed to it a miraculous status. Many halakhic terms and norms are described in the Greek word associated with the subject. The rabbis also used Greek medicine, mathematics, astronomy, agriculture, technology and logic in their studies and Torah commentary. Some of the rabbinical students also engaged in the study of *hokhmat Yavanit* – most probably Greek philosophy – but apparently not in combination with their Torah studies. But generally speaking, Greek social behavior, values and practices were shunned and abhorred in traditional Jewish society. The difference between acculturation and assimilation is therefore seen clearly in this Jewish attitude toward Greek culture. The Jews of Second Commonwealth times became acculturated, but the majority of them, fiercely loyal to Torah and tradition, never became assimilated.

In Babylonia at the times of the Talmud and the early Geonim (the rabbinic heads of the Babylonian *yeshivot*) around 200–650 CE, the Jews were fully integrated into Babylonian commercial and social life but were in no way assimilated. In fact it is no exaggeration to state that the Jewish world after the completion of the Talmud continues to this day to live a Talmudic lifestyle. Aramaic, the spoken language of Babylonia at that time, in its various dialects became and remains the language

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of the study of Talmud till today and is part and parcel of modern-day Hebrew as well. But we are unaware of any real assimilationist tendencies or movements within Babylonian Jewry of that time. In the seventh century, Islam arose and conquered Babylonia as well. Originally, Islam set out to convert all of the Jews to its banner and beliefs by the sword. But when it became apparent that the Jews as a whole would not adopt this new faith of Mohammed, Muslims and Jews reached an accommodation whereby the Jews certainly became acculturated in Muslim society but never assimilated in any significant numbers. For assimilation then meant conversion and even the most acculturated Jews were always loath to consider such a radical departure from the faith of their ancestors and its traditions.

The main acculturation in Jewish life in the Muslim world occurred during the “golden age” of Spanish Jewry from the seventh to the twelfth centuries. Arabic then became the spoken language of Spanish Jews though Hebrew experienced a revival amongst the scholars and poets of the Jewish world of the time. Jews adopted Arab medicine, originally Greek in origin; Arabic poetry and literature, music and melody; Arabic dress; participated in the politics and courts of the rulers of the time and in the armies of the rulers of the country; and were deeply embedded in all areas of Spanish Muslim society. Nevertheless, they did not assimilate, for again, assimilation meant conversion and that was outside the pale of Jewish thought and behavior. The Jews of Spain were much influenced by the advanced Muslim culture of the time. They studied all forms of science and philosophy. The reputation of Jewish doctors having extraordinary healing skills and knowledge of pharmacology and medicinal herbs was a product of Jewish life in Spain. The greatest exemplar of the Jewish Torah scholar, philosopher, medical healer and leader of Spanish Jewry is naturally Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam, Maimonides). However it is with him that the Spanish “golden age” certainly ends. In 1150 the fanatical Almohad believers in Islam conquered much of Spain and many Jews were forcibly converted, many others brutally executed and still others exiled. In the next century the Christian Reconquest of Spain began and the last three hundred years of Spanish Jewry were years of decline and repression. Even under Christian rule, with the success of the Reconquest, and

with its accompanying unrelenting efforts to force the Jews to convert, Jewish philosophers and doctors flourished. Rabbi Moshe ben Nahman (Ramban, Nahmanides), Don Isaac Abrabanel and Rabbi Yosef Albo are only three of the many examples of the process of acculturation that continued in Jewish society even in Christian Spain and even in the times of the murderous, Church-inspired and enforced Inquisition. But this process of acculturation in Jewish life now met determined foes within Jewish society itself.

The central point person in this conflict was the Rambam, Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, himself. His work of philosophy, *Moreh Nevukhim* (*The Guide for the Perplexed*), and his philosophical chapters in his grand masterpiece of halakha, *Mishneh Torah*, raised a storm of protest among certain sections of Provençal and Spanish Jewry. This dispute flared for half a century and eventually resulted in the burnings of these works by the Church at the instigation of Jewish zealots and hotheads. Even though the dispute died down, the approach to acculturation hardened significantly. After the exile of the Jews from Spain many rabbinic leaders, both Sephardic and Ashkenazic, attributed this disaster to the willingness of Spanish Jewry over the centuries to acculturate itself within the general Spanish society. However, the truth be said, acculturation occurred in Ashkenazic society as well. It is certainly true that the Ashkenazic world also absorbed acculturation although in a much more limited fashion than its Sephardic brethren. Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki, eleventh-century France), in his commentaries to Torah and Talmud, uses French words liberally. Jews were very active in the commerce of the time especially in the fields of banking and money lending and exchanging, wine producing, and all types of crafts and trades. However, since the non-Jewish society in France and Germany was basically ignorant, illiterate and light-years behind the culture of the Muslims of the time, this was reflected in Ashkenazic Jewish society as well with almost no interest in poetry (except for liturgy and lamentations), medicine, the arts or science. Mathematics and astronomy were known to Ashkenazic Jews but basically from Talmudic and traditional sources exclusively. Thus, acculturation was severely limited, while assimilation as such was unknown short of actual forced conversion to Christianity. In general, it may be said that Ashkenazic Jewry in the Middle Ages was much less influenced

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by the surrounding society and therefore not as open to acculturation as were the Sephardic Jews of the time. Of course a great deal of this is due not only to Jewish attitudes, but to the overwhelmingly hostile environment toward Jews that medieval European Christian society fostered. When the non-Jewish world attempts to completely shut out the Jews from their society and lives, there is little room for assimilation or even much acculturation to take place. The open hostility of the Christian European society to Jews and Judaism forcibly insulated much of medieval Jewish society from any form of acculturation. Only when the outside society becomes more tolerant and accepting of a Jewish presence in its midst does the pattern of Jewish acculturation and the danger of assimilation resume.

In the sixteenth century, a sizable number of Spanish Jews settled in the Netherlands and helped create the thriving metropolis of Amsterdam. A large number of Sephardic Jews immigrated to Turkey. There they used and developed a previously known distinctive language – Ladino – which was a combination of Spanish, Arabic and Hebrew. The Jews of Turkey created a strong community and, though much acculturation took place, were loyal and traditional Jews. Holland was more liberal toward its Jews than Turkey though discrimination and bigotry against them certainly existed there. From famous works of art of the Dutch painters of the time it is apparent that Jews became acculturated early and easily in that environment. They spoke Dutch, dressed (including the rabbis) like the non-Jewish nobles and burghers of the time, and were very active in commerce, thereby helping Holland to become a world colonial empire. Jews were also patrons of the arts and supported many of the great Dutch masters including Rembrandt. The number of Jewish scenes painted by him testifies to the Jewish presence and influence in the Amsterdam of his day. Holland was overwhelmingly Protestant and therefore the horrors of the Inquisition disappeared. Jews traveled and settled in the newly established colonies of the Dutch West Indies and the Jewish presence in Curacao and other West Indian islands was strong and influential. In fact, it was from these islands that the first Jews, all Sephardic in origin and practice, arrived on the shores of North America. Eventually some of these Jews assimilated as well, intermarrying and losing their Jewish identity. However, the vast majority of Dutch Jewry,



though certainly acculturated, remained loyal and observant Jews. They were the Jews who began to return to England in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, becoming acculturated there but still retaining their Jewish identity and practices. They faced great discrimination but not outright persecution there. In colonial times in America there were relatively few Jews in the country. The range of discrimination against them depended upon which of the colonies they settled in, but essentially they enjoyed relative freedom and even acceptance in the new world that was being created there on the basis of equality for all, and freedom of and from religion.

In Renaissance Italy, Jews were deeply acculturated and adopted the dress and manners of the general population. From rabbinic responsa of the time we can easily see that the social mores and practices were adopted generally by Italian Jewry, often to the disapproval and consternation of their rabbinic leaders. Since many of these rabbis were eastern European Jews in origin and outlook, their reaction against the extreme acculturation of Italian Jewry is understandable though they were apparently futile in strongly influencing their congregants in these matters. Italian Jewry remained fiercely loyal to Judaism though they were completely acculturated into Italian society. This was in spite of the creation of the ghetto in Venice in the sixteenth century to separate Jews from the general society. In fact the creation of the ghetto itself testifies to the fact that the Jews were so integrated in Venetian and Italian life that the Church and the local governments felt threatened by their presence and influence. The ghetto helped remind the Jews that their presence and status in Italy was fragile. But nevertheless, Italian Jewry continued to function, completely acculturated but not assimilated. Italian Jewry had its own form of liturgy and customs and was fiercely loyal to them. As mentioned above, many of its rabbinic leaders came from Poland and Central Europe (such as Rabbi Yehuda Mintz [the Mahari Mintz of Padua], and Rabbi Me'ir Katzenellenbogen [the Maharam of Padua] and others) and they also underwent the process of acculturation, though they strongly warned of the dangers of assimilation that they felt lurked below the surface of Italian Jewish life. Another anomaly of Italian Jewish life was the institution of the "Pope's Jews." This group of Jews lived in Rome under the express protection of the Pope and the

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Church. These Jews were meant to be preserved as witnesses to the perfidy of the Jews in not recognizing the Christian savior and to witness his second coming. The Church strongly protested to the Germans the deportation of these Jews to Auschwitz in World War II while having been silent on the killing of millions of other Jews by the very same Germans. There always seemed to be a difference in non-Jewish eyes throughout Jewish history between Jews generally and “my good Jews who are not like the others.”

Eastern European Jewry also became acculturated. Its spoken language was Yiddish, a corrupted form of German interspersed with Polish, Hebrew, and Slavic words. The Jews did not speak the language of the countries in which they lived in eastern Europe amongst themselves; Yiddish was the permanent lingua franca of the people. Yet in dress, mannerisms, food, music and commerce, Jews became acculturated in Lithuania, Poland, Ukraine and later Russia. Ashkenazic Jewry of eastern Europe developed its own liturgy and customs, which differed materially from those of western Europe, Germany and certainly the Sephardim. Jews enjoyed a certain amount of internal autonomy for a number of centuries (late fifteenth till early eighteenth century) in eastern Europe establishing its own governing body known as the Council of the Four Lands (Congress Poland, Galicia, Ukraine, Volhynia, and later Lithuania). This enabled the Jewish community to live in a sort of splendid isolation at least regarding all internal matters of its life and society. Thus even though acculturation existed and pervaded many aspects of Jewish life, it was perhaps mostly unnoticed by the Jews themselves. Jews then lived mainly in small villages – the *shtetl* – and thus there was no strong desire among eastern European Jews to resemble or copy the life style of their illiterate, violent, alcoholic non-Jewish neighbors. Assimilation was therefore not a great threat to these communities, though there were always some defections from traditional Jewish life in all ages and in all places. For a number of centuries, eastern European Jewry was able to wrap itself in a protective cocoon that allowed for acculturation but admitted little threat of assimilation. From the eighteenth century onwards until its destruction in World War II, all of this would change as the pattern of history again rose to change the present and the future.

The ideas of the Enlightenment, the rise of Protestantism in

Europe and the discoveries of new continents and resultant colonialism, all combined to bring about a change in the status of Jews in Europe, especially in western Europe. The successes of the American and French revolutions, the spread of the ideas of Western liberalism through Napoleon's armies and the gradual victory of Parliament over the King in England, collectively helped to free Jews from the prison of ghetto walls and to allow them at least limited entry into general society. Ironically, the country that allowed Jews to proceed most rapidly toward equal participation in society in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was Germany, under the leadership of Prussia and its emperors. Thus, the Jews living there, who always were somewhat acculturated, became even more so, giving up Yiddish to speak pure German and attending German schools. Moses Mendelssohn was the champion of this wave of strong push for maximum German acculturation. However, this type of acculturation almost immediately led to assimilation and conversion to Christianity. Most of Mendelssohn's own children converted, and his descendants in the next generation were almost uniformly all Christian. The Reform movement then arose in Germany, partially to stem the tide of conversions. It radically changed Judaism to fit then current German mores. Saturday became Sunday, most of the observances of Judaism were done away with, an organ was installed in their temples, Hebrew was eliminated in favor of German in the prayer services, Zion and Jerusalem were eliminated from the aspirations and goals of the Jewish people and it espoused the idea of Jews no longer identifying themselves as Jews but rather as "Germans of the Mosaic persuasion." All of this did not arrest complete assimilation and conversions but instead encouraged them. Heinrich Heine, one of the noted Jewish apostates of the nineteenth century whose self-hatred of himself often translated into overt anti-Semitism, famously stated: "Christianity is the ticket for admittance into European society." Tens of thousands of Jews were willing to purchase that ticket. Thus a wave of assimilation and conversions swept the western and central European Jewish world in the nineteenth century. The biblical pattern of rising (and later waning) assimilation stretching through all of the previous generations of Jewish history was thus now repeated in a more modern, nineteenth-century form.

Traditional Jewry in Germany fought back against this wave of

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assimilation and resultant conversions by adopting almost complete acculturation, but Judaizing it. Rabbis Yaakov Etlinger (author of the great Talmudic commentary *Arukh LaNer*), Ḥakham Isaac Bernays, Samson Raphael Hirsch, Seligman Baer Bamberger (author of *Yad HaLevi*), Azriel Hildesheimer, David Tzvi Hoffman and others, led this nineteenth-century, German-Jewish movement in differing degrees and localities but with a general common strategy of allowing Jews to be full participants in German society without having to compromise their sacred beliefs and Torah observances. Hirsch translated the Torah into impeccable German and supplied a brilliant commentary to it, also in German. He built a model community in Frankfurt am Main of Jews engaged fully in German financial, professional and academic life who were nevertheless meticulously observant of Jewish law and ritual. So to speak, he beat the Reform movement at its own game, disproving the idea that assimilation was the only way to enter and prosper in nineteenth-century German society. Hildesheimer established a rabbinic seminary in Berlin that combined intensive Talmudic and rabbinic studies with broad secular knowledge and public skills. Hoffman authored a great work of rabbinic and halakhic responsa – *Melamed LeHo'il* – while authoring at the same time a commentary to Torah that demolished the specious theories of biblical criticism that had gained fashion (and unfortunately still exist today – ironically, mainly in Jewish academic circles) at that time. Orthodoxy in Germany, especially in the smaller communities, recovered strongly from the onslaught of Reform. It was an outstanding example of the triumph of the process of allowing acculturation in a traditional form to take hold in the Jewish society thus triumphing over outright assimilation and the abandonment of all traditional Torah norms.

In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century eastern Europe new movements arose to change the traditional rhythms of Jewish life that had existed there for centuries. The Hasidic movement, in all its various branches and ideologies, gained great popular support. In so doing, it undermined the traditional authority and role of the rabbis and scholars and substituted for it the authority of the rebbe – the righteous and holy leader of a particular Hasidic sect. Hasidism created its own acculturation with its different nuances of dress, prayer ritual, customs,

song and melody. It took the garb of seventeenth-century Russian and Polish nobility and made it Jewish garb. This is especially true regarding the *shtreimel* – a fur-trimmed hat. A variation of this type of hat – a *spodek*, a taller, straighter, all-fur hat – became the dress of certain groups of Hasidim. Lithuanian rabbis also wore these types of fur hats, but in the nineteenth century they mainly wore the frocks and top hats of Western nobility. In England, Germany and France, rabbis wore robes that resembled those of Christian clergymen of the time. However, in eastern Europe, the rabbis refused to apply the acculturation of German Orthodoxy to their congregations. The spoken language remained Yiddish, in the main secular studies were unknown in their educational system, and the Orthodox Jew found almost no entry into the general non-Jewish society, except for the traditional fields of Jewish commerce: the liquor trade, the rent broker between landowners and the serfs and tenant farmers, and money lending. Jews were also commonly porters, water carriers, peddlers, teamsters, and wagon drivers and, toward the end of the century, tailors, shoemakers, and factory workers in the textile trade. Jewish poverty was rampant in eastern Europe as was a high rate of infant and child mortality. Living conditions were miserable. Assimilation meant conversion, something which Jews in eastern Europe, unlike their German and Austrian brethren, refused to countenance in any substantial numbers. The ideas of Western Enlightenment found expression in the movement of *Haskala*, which promised to alleviate Jewish suffering and soften governmental anti-Semitism. *Haskala* failed to accomplish either of these two goals and gradually led to a disregard for Torah observances and Jewish tradition amongst its adherents. Hasidism vehemently opposed all ideas of *Haskala* and was in turn opposed and vilified by the adherents of *Haskala*. *Haskala* was an attempt to create a new kind of acculturation – a Jewish acculturation through the creation of a Jewish culture to substitute for Torah and religious observance. This type of acculturation in many instances led to complete assimilation and the defection of its adherents from Jewish life completely over the space of a few generations.

In one of the great ironies of Jewish history, the assimilation of German Jewry in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries only exacerbated the barely latent anti-Semitism of that society. Amos Elon's book,

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*The Pity of It All*, doggedly traces this tragic descent to the Holocaust. In eastern Europe the attempts of *Haskala* to neutralize the anti-Semitism of the Czar and his court also met with dismal failure. The modern, sophisticated well-read Jew of the nineteenth century was in many ways despised more by Russian society than was his *shtetl*-bred, caftan-clad brother. In the face of this, many conversions took place amongst this “elite” group of Jews, an act of personal desperation at their failure to otherwise ingratiate themselves with the non-Jewish society. Movements of acculturation arose in eastern European society in an attempt to stabilize and improve Jewish life. In the religious world, the *Musar* movement, founded by Rabbi Yisrael Lipkin of Salant, incorporated within it Western-style dress, punctiliousness of time and appearance, ethical behavior between people and a sense of tolerance for others, introspection and psychological insight, a demand for greater personal spirituality, and a penetrating analysis of classical Jewish texts. This movement took hold mainly in the Lithuanian yeshivot of the time but sadly is of little influence today in the twenty-first century. This type of acculturation as exemplified by the *Musar* movement is, in reality, an attempt to return to Jewish basics and to shed some of the layers of the non-Jewish acculturation assembled in our long exile and dispersion among the nations and cultures of the world. It is an attempt to “return our crown to its ancient luster.” Thus, many times it is possible paradoxically to return to our original selves by the process of positive acculturation of Jewish values that were somehow preserved in the non-Jewish world around us.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, acculturation and assimilation came about through ideals and ideas that gained popularity and policy in the non-Jewish world. Enlightenment, Marxism in all of its virulent forms, nationalism, imperialism, colonialism, theories about social evolution and master races, all gained wide currency in the Europe of their day and all of them penetrated the Jewish world as well. The Bund (the large and powerful anti-religious labor union), secular and labor Zionism, *Haskala*, anarchism and impractical resettlement plans to solve the “Jewish problem” all ravaged the Jewish society of the time. Most of them led to complete assimilation of millions of Jews within two generations, though the success of Zionism in establishing a Jewish state in the land of Israel proved to be a strong brake against assimilation

though certainly not to acculturation. By the early twenty-first century, all of these ideologies mentioned above largely disappeared from Jewish society but very few new ideals arose to fill the void. Acculturation now took place through the pursuit of wealth, entertainment and professional sports. All sectors of Jewry were thus acculturated, especially the large Jewish community living in the United States. The acceptance of Jews into American society in the latter half of the twentieth century created a situation that Jews in America no longer felt themselves to be a minority but rather as full Americans, members of the majority American population. This in spite of the fact that numerically, Jews are a very small percentage of the American population, much smaller in number than those groupings that still consider themselves legally and socially to be minorities. This Jewish mindset of full acceptance in American society, echoed by a great many non-Jewish Americans as well, has led to drastic assimilation and intermarriage within Jewish society. The bitter rule of history seems to be that when non-Jews are willing to marry Jews in the absence of any social stigma in so doing, there will also be Jews who are willing to intermarry. This is especially true for Jews who have little Jewish education, are non-observant and do not have connections to Jewish family traditions. The American Jewish community is thus clearly acculturated in all of its sections, but half of it is assimilated while the other half is becoming more and more committed to Jewish tradition, observances and education. The fact that at many American professional sports stadiums and arenas there are public announcements that *Minḥa* (afternoon) or *Ma'ariv* (evening) prayer services will take place at a certain section of the stadium or arena, or that strictly kosher foods are available for purchase, only shows the depth of acculturation in American Jewry. The great accomplishment of American Jewish life – exemplified for instance by Senator Joseph Lieberman's (an Orthodox, observant Jew) near successful run for Vice-President of the United States – is the ability to become completely acculturated without becoming assimilated. Perhaps in no other time and place in the story of the Jewish exile (except maybe Spain's "golden age") has this achievement been realized. The Jewish community in America is still relatively new in the country, historically speaking, so that no permanent conclusions regarding its ultimate fate are now in order. Yet, I think that it should be

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obvious to all that until now, the American Jewish experience has been unique in the annals of the Jewish Diaspora and exile.

In the modern-day State of Israel, the acculturation to a combination of a traditional yet apparently secular society that is composed partly of socialistic, bureaucratic, Western-values oriented, capitalistic, hedonistic, deeply and rigorously observant, and technologically advanced ideals, has been difficult. However, that this acculturation has occurred is evident in the Israeli personality common to all sectors of the populace, for good or better, and in the modern spoken and written Hebrew language which is pervasive across its polyglot population. Israel is heavily influenced by Western, especially American, cultural norms and ideas. The culture of the Middle East itself and its Arab population has not made as lasting a dent in the Israeli psyche or way of life. Even the midday nap and store closing that was part of Israeli culture a few decades ago has given way to all-day store openings and afternoon naps restricted mainly to Shabbat. Classic assimilation in Israel is almost unknown even though there are many vociferous anti-religious organizations, politicians and individuals in the country. Nevertheless, most of the country eats kosher food and marries halakhically, the cycle of the Jewish calendar and its holidays is fully observed, and Jewish customs, speech and mannerisms permeate everyday life. In the United States for instance, the holiday of Shavuot is almost non-existent except in observant society. Not so in Israel where the dairy companies sell thirty-five percent of their annual cheese and other dairy-products output for Shavuot and constantly advertise the advent of this holiday for weeks before its arrival. Acculturated as it may be, life in Israel is a Jewish life in all facets of existence. Even if many Jews in Israel are not observant, basically the vast majority of Jews living in Israel are religious. They believe in the existence and benevolence of the God of Israel. And that is probably the greatest barrier to assimilation that exists.

The pattern of acculturation and assimilation is clear in the Jewish story. Acculturation is apparently unavoidable since Jews are so small in number compared to the rest of the world's population. But acculturation need not necessarily lead to assimilation. However, not recognizing that acculturation always occurs and pretending that nothing has changed in Jewish life and society for the past thousands of years leaves us vulnerable



to an acculturation that will lead to assimilation. The inability to deal with and recognize the distinctive nature of American life and society led to the creation of different schisms and groupings within the Jewish American society, and these in turn have led down the slippery slope of assimilation and intermarriage. History's patterns constantly reappear before us. Dealing with them successfully, honestly and realistically is the key to Jewish survival and healthy continuity.