

1917- One Hundred Years Ago. The World Was at War.

The United States entered the conflict in April, and instituted the draft shortly thereafter. In Russia, the February revolution began a year of turmoil that ended with Lenin in a leadership position. The world would never be the same.

In the United States, the Supreme Court upheld the 8 hour workday but fear of anarchists and radicals was increasing. Suffragettes were arrested at marches and protests, New York State gave women the right to vote, and Jeannette Rankin became the first woman elected to the US Congress. Race riots broke out in East St. Louis and Houston Texas, while in NY 100,000 African American men marched silently against lynching while the Supreme Court knocked down a Kentucky law requiring residential segregation.

In the Jewish world, the first synagogue in 425 years opened in Madrid. The immigration to America of over 2 million Yiddish speaking Jewish refugees from the pogroms in Eastern Europe was interrupted by the First World War. Later it would be slowed to a trickle by the anti-immigrant sentiments of the 1920's. There was concern about the clannishness of these Eastern European immigrants, their failure to learn English, their

criminality, and the impossibility of their ever becoming real Americans.

This culminated in the [Emergency Quota Act](#) of 1921 and the Johnson Reed [Immigration Act of 1924](#) which established very limited numbers for Eastern and Southern Europeans and Asians, and which would remain in place until the 1960's. Meanwhile poverty was rampant in the Jewish communities in the areas affected by the Great War and would continue in the post war period.

In Palestine, the Jewish community was small. Removed from Tel Aviv and Yaffa during the war by the Turks, they returned with General Allenby. The Balfour Declaration, that His Majesty's government looked with favor on the establishment of a national home for the Jewish people in Palestine, was considered a very significant sign that the post war environment would be more supportive of Zionist efforts.

From the vantage point of one hundred years later, it is easy to identify the things that happened in 1917 that were significant and to understand that some of the rest was noise. Of course if we had lived at that time, it might not have been so easy.

Did anyone in 1917 foresee the significance of the growth of the American Jewish community? It's true that by then American Jews had begun providing some financial support to European Jewry, but American Jewish life was still highly dependent on Europe. Further, living in 1917 would anyone have believed that just 50 years after Theodore Herzl convened the first Zionist Conference in Basle, the state of Israel would come into existence? Or that in the decade after the founding of the Jewish state, whole regions of formerly flourishing centuries old Jewish communities, the Jews of the Arab world, would disappear?

What about today? With the 24 hour news cycle and the constant barrage of stories, **it is difficult to discern what is really significant and what will disappear in the churn.**

The bomb threats against Jewish community centers this spring felt significant. The sight of our kids being led out of the Addison Pensak Jewish Community Center, though handled masterfully, was not something we expected to experience. But, now, several months later, with at least some information about the perpetrator, those incidents seem to have been more about the downsides of technologically enhanced communication and less about enemies of the Jewish people. But what about other manifestations of anti-Semitism?

How worrisome is it that traditional anti-Semitic accusations are repeated again today? Does the removal of Steve Bannon really limit the influence of anti-Semitic groups? How serious is it that the post -World War II national consensus that anti-Semitism is anti-American seems to have broken down? What is significant in what we are experiencing today, and what is ephemeral?

There were various changes going on one hundred years ago whose implications the Jewish community of 1917 couldn't yet understand. For example, by 1917 children of immigrants were going to college but no one was thinking about how the increasing affluence our community would forever change Jewish life.

I finished college with a degree in economics and found that recently, with the popularity of Freakonomics, the discipline of economics is being used to study Judaism as well.

I can't decide whether it's comforting or discouraging to know that as we synagogue staff and volunteers struggle to increase Jewish engagement, we are battling great and well known economic forces. Dr. Carmel Chiswick, in her book Judaism in Transition: How Economic Forces Shape Religious Tradition, uses well known economic concepts to probe

contemporary Jewish life. She points out that we should not be surprised that as Jews have moved up the economic ladder, the value of their time has increased, since hourly wages are a good short hand for the value people put on their own time. Worship services could be long and well attended, she argues, back in the shtetl when the value of time for the men attending, based on their wages, was very low.

According to Chiswick, when people tell me that time is the constraint on their participation in our activities, they are telling me the truth. As people's income increases, more options are opened up, but they still have the same 24 hour day. Now there are not enough hours in the day for all the great opportunities that are within reach. It is exciting that I have helped arrange it so that our members can attend high holyday services on three continents, but it also symbolizes the many options today that were not part of Jewish life in earlier times.

Chiswick makes a second important observation. Using education to increase human capital has been the American Jewish way but that also means that "whether an hour spent in Jewish observance is worth more than its full cost ( ie expenditure of money and time) depends on the skills obtained in the course of a Jewish education". She writes, "a professionally oriented Jewish community is uncomfortable in activities where they had

little competence.” However at the same time that becoming Jewishly competent has become more significant, getting there is more of a challenge. As a parent recently pointed out to me, our Jewish educational program is being compared by students and parents to some of the finest schools in the country, with handpicked teachers and nationally ranked coaches. As we all know, a melamed who picks the kids up by their ears will not cut it today.

Economists also offer different insights into American Jews and Israel. Looking around today, I see American Jewry and Israeli Jewry heading off in two opposite directions. Think of the divide between the Israeli government and the World Jewish community these last few months on conversion, the Kotel compromise, and the status of non-Orthodox Judaism. Being told that Reform Jews are worse than Holocaust deniers, doesn't help promote the concept of one people. These Jewish issues come on top of serious differences in outlook on political issues between the current Israeli government and large segments of the American Jewish community, particularly younger Jews. That would seem to bode poorly for the future. My nightmare is that just as Israel becomes the largest Jewish community in the world, it will seem more and more remote and unappealing to American Jews,

But economists who are focused on data like the wage rate of Israeli Jews, see things differently. They believe that because a large numbers of Israelis, including even some Orthodox families, have wages that now approach those of American Jews, this will lead to a convergence of attitudes.

We do see some glimmers of parallels between our two communities today, in the growth of the progressive movements in Israel and in the Israeli versions of the contemporary search for spirituality. Look at the Secular Yeshivah's and the non-traditional religious experiences that have become very popular like Shabbat at the Port in Tel Aviv or at the train station in Jerusalem. It remains to be seen whether these people will change politics in Israel as many are anticipating but so far without much result. Predicting Israel's future is very challenging. Not only are there external issues, the challenges of Israel's neighborhood and the possible change to the status quo with a West Bank-Gaza alliance, but also the real possibility of the Netanyahu government falling either because of a corruption scandal or because the Supreme Court's recent ruling on Yeshivah draft exemptions could force the government to alienate its ultra-Orthodox allies.

There are nights when my husband can't sleep, worrying about natural and political disasters , those that have already occurred and those that seem possible in the near future.

Pausing to look back a century, is not totally comforting but it does remind me to keep my eyes on the big picture, while seeking the clues to those things that may snowball and have the biggest future impact.

In terms of our American Jewish future, it is interesting to consider what Israeli Prime Minister David Ben Gurion told Konrad Adenauer of West German back in 1960. He was commenting on how different American Jews were both from Sephardic Jewry and from European Jewry. He said: "The Jews of American who live in a country of immigrants, see themselves as American like all other Americans". Professor Chiswick, writing today makes a similar argument. She writes, "as long as this country still believes that it is our diversity that makes us great, then even people who practice a minority religion, like the Jews, can be equal participants in every aspect of American life". Neo-Nazi's may be breaking news, BDS a concern on some college campuses, but for the future of Jewish life, what is most significant are American attitudes towards religious freedom , civil liberties, and minority rights.



Further as long as our community continues to invest in Jewish education, building human capital, such that Judaism can compete in the marketplace of ideas, I believe we have a future as Jews.

As far as American Jews and Israel, I hope Professor Chiswick is correct that the increasing parallels between our communities in terms of advanced secular education and occupations will create more of a bridge to connect our two communities. As long as democracy and rule of law prevent Israel from becoming a fortress theocracy, then I have hope that our communities will not become strangers walking off into the distance in separate directions.

1917 One Hundred Years ago, the world was a war. May our 21<sup>st</sup> century be spared the tragedies of the last. May our Jewish people, at home and abroad, move forward to a positive future.