

To Our Readers . . .

Our loyal readers will be pleased, we trust, that the editors expect that this will be the next to last in a series of special double issues. For the calendar year 2002, the *American Jewish Archives Journal* will again appear biannually—marking a return to the founding editor's original intention of having the American Jewish Archives publish "a semi-annual bulletin" containing "at least one article of scientific caliber."¹

This particular issue is the first of the new century. A *fin de siècle* typically provokes increased cogitation about the passage of time and changing realities. This is certainly true in regard to the American Jewish experience. During the last decade of the twentieth century, intense concern about the future of American Jewish life gave rise to a bevy of essays, articles, and books.² Many questions about the future character of American Jewish life have accompanied the dawn of this new millennium: What will become of American Jewry in the twenty-first century? Will American Jewry survive the impact of intermarriage, assimilation, and persistent pressures to conform to the secular mainstream?

Though they specialize in analyzing the past, historians are often asked to predict the future. Nearly fifty years ago, for example, in 1957 the B'nai B'rith invited two eminent historians—Professor Oscar Handlin of Harvard University and Professor Jacob Rader Marcus of Hebrew Union College—to compose essays for its monthly magazine, in which they would describe the character of American Jewish life in the year 2000. It is interesting to consider the accuracy of futuristic expectations in the very year that once, long ago, seemed to be far off. That is why scholars now enjoy evaluating the work of Edward Bellamy's utopian *Looking Backwards: 2000-1887*, or George Orwell's gloomy *1984*, and even Arthur C. Clark and Stanley Kubrick's vision in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Thus Handlin's and Marcus's predictions as to what United States Jewry would look like in the year 2000 also deserves notice.

Neither Handlin nor Marcus predicted the demise of American Jewry. To the contrary, both viewed Jewish endurance as a certainty. Both distinguished scholars anticipated changes in the character of North American Jewry, although Dr. Handlin's view of the future was clearly the most dour of the two. "The danger is not so much that the

Jewish community will disappear," Handlin wrote, "but that its culture will become a museum piece, preserved out of curiosity and ancestral piety, but devoid of meaning."

Dr. Marcus, on the other hand, predicted that the process of acculturation would intensify so that "in speech and dress American Jews will much more closely resemble their Gentile neighbors." By the year 2000 he averred that American Jews would become so assimilated, family names may no longer function as "an identification of the Jewish family." A small minority of Jews will continue to observe the dietary laws, Marcus opined, "but kosher style food will be popular both among Jews and Gentiles, 'a delectable aspect of transculturation.'"

Even though the two historians agreed on the trends that would affect the character of United States Jewry by the year 2000, their respective essays reflected differing attitudes about the ultimate impact of these forces. The allure of American mass culture would be so overwhelming, Handlin asserted, that Jews and Gentiles may be "no more set apart than, say, the Methodists from the Baptists." In contrast, Marcus suggested that assimilation, which was normally assumed to cause disintegration, would actually provoke "a tight Jewish community." Though many attenuated Jews would fall away from Judaism by the dawn of the twenty-first century, Marcus asserted that "a tight Jewish community will have to come into being and a new fusion type of [Jewish] religion" may well be in the making.³

Reading these predictions a half-century after they were made—in the very year about which they were written—may well convince us that neither Handlin nor Marcus had an accurate crystal ball on hand. Still, their observations were unquestionably insightful and clearly, with regard to at least some of the projections, the proverbial jury of time has not yet rendered its final verdict.

We can safely assume that, many years from now—perhaps by midcentury—a new generation of historians will undoubtedly wish to reexamine Handlin's and Marcus's analyses, along with the many additional prognostications that were made at the dawn of this new century. Historians at midcentury will seek to ascertain how the present generation of American Jewry viewed its own future. To achieve this objective, they will look for historical documents and records that speak to these concerns. As long as there is an American Jewish Archives—and similar institutions—dedicated to preserving

this data, future generations will have the tools they need to reconstruct and interpret the past.

This issue of our journal contains a diverse array of scholarly essays. They vary in topic, but they all have one feature in common: the articles published herein deepen our understanding of the American Jewish past. A cursory examination of the notes that accompany the essays in this volume will illuminate the pivotal role our remarkable historical collection plays in the work of those who strive to reconstruct the history of American Jewry.

"A people that is not conscious of its past," Dr. Marcus repeatedly observed "has no assurance of its future." The American Jewish Archives is the nexus wherein the Jewish past and future meet, and it is our hope that this journal will continue to function as a window through which a broader audience can view the valuable and inspiring consequence of this union.

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1. "Program of the American Jewish Archives," *American Jewish Archives* 1, no. 1 (1948): 5.

2. For example, see Alan M Dershowitz, *The Vanishing American Jew* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1997); Elliott Abrams, *Faith or Fear* (New York: Free Press, 1997); Alfred H. Moses, "Jewish Survival in America" (New York: American Jewish Committee, 1993); and Arthur Hertzberg, "The Future of American Jewry," in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica Yearbook, 1990-1* (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1992).

3. See "A 'New Kind' of Jewry Seen for the Year 2000," in the *New Orleans Jewish Ledger*, May 17, 1957. A copy is held in the Jacob Rader Marcus Nearprint File, The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio.

Postscript:

As we go to press Dr. David Ellenson has been named the eighth president of the Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion. This issue, therefore, marks the first time in our journal's fifty-three year history that a president of HUC-JIR has published his scholarly research with us. We are pleased and proud that Dr. Ellenson's first work as president is appearing in the pages of *The American Jewish Archives Journal*.