

# Closing the Christian Gap

*Elliott Abrams,*  
**Faith or Fear: How Jews Can  
Survive in a Christian America**  
*Free Press, 1997.*  
*237 pages.*

*Reviewed by Adam Pruzan*

At the start of this century, American Jewry's political leadership formulated a strategy for the integration of the Jewish people in their new promised land. Through the abandonment of the myriad ritual obligations their tradition had hitherto demanded of them, and the adoption of the appearance and norms of their host country, the new immigrant Jewish masses would stand a chance of finding acceptance, and even success, in America—and all, they reasoned in earnest, without sacrificing their commitment to the Jewish people and its heritage.

Today, the failure of the Jewish secularist experiment in the United

States lies bare for the world to see: In the past three decades, America's Jewish population has suffered a steep decline, most American Jews are intermarrying, few non-Jewish spouses convert, and intermarried couples raise only twenty-eight percent of their children as Jews. In two generations, the Jewish population in America will probably be cut in half.

In *Faith or Fear: How Jews Can Survive in a Christian America*, Elliott Abrams pulls few punches in his effort to address the problem of American Jewry: "The results of the National Jewish Population Study of 1990, and several other major works of research, draw the portrait of a community in decline, facing in fact demographic disaster." In contrast, Abrams points to a thriving Orthodox community as uncomfortable evidence that not only was Jewish secularism the wrong way to go about preserving the Jews, it was probably the *opposite* of what was needed:

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Increased levels of observance and Jewish education, it turns out, are directly linked to any measure of “continuity,” and today there are virtually no social or professional hindrances to a full observance of Jewish tradition.

The problem, though, is that Jewish secularism has long left the confines of communal strategy, and has become ingrained as an article of faith among the vast majority of non-observant Jews in America. Where once the Tora, the observance of halacha and the faith in the covenant with God formed the central pillars of Jewish identity, American Jews now look to “social justice” (read: the liberal political agenda), anti-Semitism and the Holocaust to keep the Jewish people together. A new faith has arisen, and Judaism the religion has been replaced with “Jewishness.”

**T**he wealthy, non-observant German Jews who dominated the turn-of-the-century American Jewish community actually set out to create a new Jewish identity, and new institutions to support it. The life of the traditional Jew revolved around religious observance, Tora study and locally centered charity; the central institutions were the synagogue, the yeshiva and the home. The new Jewish identity, on the other hand, placed a greater emphasis on impersonal “social action” activities, necessitating

the creation of a range of new public organizations.

First, a phalanx of large-scale, professionalized charities, including the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) and the United Jewish Appeal (UJA), integrated the massive wave of Eastern European Jewish immigrants into the American mainstream. This work served two complementary purposes. By taking some of the rough edges off the new arrivals, who would always be identified in the public mind with their more urbane coreligionists, it insured that they would not impede the Germans’ steady progress toward full social equality. Moreover, the nobility of the charitable work allowed the leadership to enshrine *tzedaka* as the central form of Jewish expression—establishing a secularized version of the “prophetic tradition” to replace the Tora and its many commandments. At the same time, the secular leadership established the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) to fight anti-Semitism—never a life-or-death problem in America, but an occasionally jarring reminder that the ideal of full participation in society had yet to be reached.

As the decades passed, the centrality of community organizations in American Jewish life increased. They grew in size, and their missions evolved. The emergence of Israel and

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Soviet Jewry as causes greatly strengthened the charitable organizations. Israel's increasing reliance on American patronage gave birth to AIPAC. The Holocaust gave new meaning to the battle against anti-Semitism, and eventually grew into a cause of its own.

The political mission expanded and changed as well. The fight for social equality had been won by mid-century, yet America remained a devoutly Christian country. Public expressions of the majority religion continued to make many Jews uneasy about the completeness of their victory. So the "defense" organizations, as they came to be called, adopted the position that society itself must be further secularized—all in the name of protecting Jews. Forming the vanguard of the "absolute separationist" coalition, they began to oppose virtually any expression of religion in public life. This radical secularism went hand in hand with the political liberalism of most Jews: Abandoning the Republican affiliation of the original German Jewish secularists, the vast majority of Jews embraced first the Democratic Party and then the civil rights movement. The latter was also promoted on "defense" grounds: By supporting equal rights for all minorities, the movement would make America safer for the Jews. More generally, liberal politics became the

embodiment of the "prophetic tradition," the vehicle through which *tikun olam* ("repairing the world") would be realized.

And thus a new, American "Jewishness" was born on the ruins of the old faith. No longer were study, belief and observance the touchstones of the "good Jew"; instead, participation in organized communal activities—from industrialized charity, to fighting anti-Semitism, to saving Soviet Jewry, to supporting Israel—became the essence of what it meant to be Jewish. The irony was that this transformation, which seemed at the time crucial to the survival of the Jews in America, contained in it the seeds of their demise.

The fight against anti-Semitism in America was always a bit overblown in proportion to the threat; or, to put it more charitably, it was merely the outer edge of the overall struggle for social acceptance. In our generation, that struggle is long over. The intermarriage statistics demonstrate that most American Jews have no fear of Gentiles, and no problems gaining their acceptance. In fact, there is considerable evidence that the Jewish organizations, who would like to take much credit for social integration, were merely pushing on an open door. After all, Japanese Americans experienced far worse than the inconveniences and exclusions with which

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Jews had to contend: They were massively and officially persecuted, as recently as half a century ago. This has not stopped them from achieving full equality today, without anything resembling the Jewish network of community organizations.

By now, then, the alarums of the defense organizations simply breed cynicism and hypocrisy. Abrams cites an amusing report by Earl Raab: "According to a 1985 survey by the San Francisco Jewish Community Relations Council, almost a third of the Jews in one northern California region said that they did not think non-Jews would vote for a Jew for Congress. At the time they said this, all three of their elected Representatives in that area were Jewish." Just as all good liberals used to say they feared nuclear war, but didn't build bomb shelters or move to southwest Oregon, so it seems that "fear" of anti-Semitism has become a fashion, rather than a genuine concern. One simply *believes* in anti-Semitism because it is a part of one's "Jewishness."

The Holocaust is a stronger illustration of the same principle. Tens of millions of community dollars have gone to museums, memorials and educational programs to keep alive the memory of this tragedy. And it has worked: As Abrams points out, "Eighty-five percent of American Jews say the Holocaust is very important to

their sense of being Jewish. *Fewer Jews say that about God, the Torah, or any other factor.*" Again, American Jews have invested scarce resources in developing a secular source for Jewish identity, but one which, as a generation of survivors passes from us and the Holocaust fades inevitably into the dark history of Jewish persecution in exile, cannot be transmitted to future generations, and cannot serve as an effective barrier to assimilation.

Jewish charity and its accompanying liberal activism have similarly proven insufficient as a source of Jewish identity. The past thirty years of American history have called into question the idea that pursuing "social justice" by means of liberal politics actually "repairs the world." An honest "before" and "after" comparison of the typical inner-city black neighborhood would show that the welfare-state programs of the Great Society achieved quite the opposite of "repair." Equally important, to the extent that one's vision of *tikun olam* derives from political liberalism, rather than the sources of Judaism, why should a liberal American of Jewish ancestry implement this vision through specifically Jewish channels? With many Jewish leaders insisting on the universalism of their vision, does not a gift to the Federation, rather than the United Way, smack of

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the very parochialism a good liberal should avoid? The Jew senses the incoherence of his own position; small wonder that should he ever have to choose between his liberal universalism—which he has been taught to work for all his life—and a seemingly dogmatic allegiance to the Jewish people, he will in all likelihood choose the former.

What emerges is a shockingly self-defeating form of “Jewish identity”: Having gutted the content of traditional Jewish life, Jews today have come to see as holy precisely those things which work *against* the perpetuation of their people. In sanctifying the Holocaust and anti-Semitism, Jewish leaders have for decades preached a brand of Judaism that brings to mind unspeakable suffering rather than a truly positive vision; in sanctifying liberal politics, they have embraced a belief system which rejects particularism and therefore any notion of Jewish “continuity.” Rather than offering a Judaism that looks to Jewish tradition itself as the source of identity, Jewish leaders have spent years crafting the mechanism of “defense,” basing Jewish identity on the never-ending search for anti-Semitic or anti-liberal demons. And the greatest demon of all, one which appeared so readily anti-Semitic and anti-liberal, they found in conservative Christianity.

It is Abrams’ critique of Jewish attitudes toward American Christendom which makes up the most important part of the book. The mandate Abrams sets for himself in *Faith or Fear* is to consider Jewish survival not in the abstract, but specifically in the context of a Christian America. No better enemy for the Jewish community organizations has appeared on the scene than conservative Christians in general, and Evangelicals in particular. Here, in fact, American Jews have truly put their secularism and liberalism ahead of any parochial interests. As Abrams shows, the Jewish establishment has essentially institutionalized fear and contempt of Christian conservatives—despite the fact that none have been as consistently influential in protecting the interests of the Jewish state, and therefore bear some of the markings of a natural ally for American Jews. Indeed, most Jewish liberals prefer to conduct “interfaith dialogue” with the old-line Protestant denominations, even though their own move to the political left has made them more or less implacable enemies of the Jewish state.

Nonetheless, Abrams’ two chapters on Christians (the first devoted to traditional Protestants and Catholics, the second to Evangelicals), while powerfully argued and hard-hitting, miss a crucial aspect of the nexus between

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politics, religious traditionalism and support of Israel—an aspect that applies equally to Jews and Christians. In these chapters, Abrams focuses on the development of Christian attitudes toward Jews and Judaism. He assesses this evolution primarily by analysis of stated Church doctrine, and how that doctrine has filtered down into Sunday-school textbooks. What he neglects to mention is that the recent warming of main-line Protestant teachings on Judaism is but one consequence of the overall liberalization of those denominations. Over the past generation, the traditional Protestant churches have changed beyond all recognition, and in precisely the same ways that Reform Judaism broke with Orthodoxy. These churches have watered down and universalized their theologies, removed anything “hard” from their ethical codes (such as, for example, disapproval of homosexuality) and wholeheartedly embraced liberal politics as central to their religious mission. *Of course* such a group will be more likely to say the right “happy-talk” words about another religion—any religion, for that matter, but especially Judaism, whose history of persecution and powerlessness in Christian lands allows for an unequalled outpouring of liberal guilt.

What a universalized Christian denomination *won't* do is respect Jewish particularism by supporting Israel. In fact, since Israel is the one place on earth where Jews can use state power to the disadvantage of a local minority group, the liberal Christian denominations, even as they apologize for the Holocaust, frequently cast Israel as the villain in the Middle East conflict. Evangelicals, on the other hand, who infuriate Jewish liberals by calling America a “Christian nation,” are naturally comfortable with Israel as the embodiment of the Jewish nation. Indeed, this is the only explanation that can truly make sense of the otherwise contradictory aspects of Evangelical behavior toward Jews. For example, Abrams is sharply critical of the fact that Evangelicals have maintained a hard line both on teaching the Jewish role in Jesus’ crucifixion, and on proselytizing to Jews. At the same time, he notes that these two factors have been shown *not* to have caused any negative effect on Evangelical attitudes toward Jews. Christians, it turns out, are not as simple-minded as ADL training courses on “tolerance” presuppose. For a devout Christian, it is possible simultaneously to believe that Jews are tainted by their failure to accept Jesus, and that they remain irrefutable witnesses to God and His covenants. The survival of

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Israel is, in the eyes of many Christians, seen as an earthly sign of a divine relationship which Christians themselves may feel compelled to support.

But conservative Christians have done something far more important for the American Jewish community than support one of its favorite causes. They have shown religious Jews an alternative to liberal politics: Namely, conservative politics. Political conservatism is not just an alternative in the sense that it opposes the specific initiatives and programs of liberalism. It is a very different style of politics altogether, and it therefore plays a very different role than does liberalism in the lives of its practitioners. For both Jews and Christians, liberalism offers a replacement for religion, while conservatism mounts a defense of religion. Liberalism seeks to transform traditional society with abstract, universalist principles. Conservatism seeks to restore a more traditional society by rebuilding the numerous particularist and local attachments which the Enlightenment stripped away; accordingly its institutions tend to be similarly local (e.g., the school board) and particularist (the church). Thus, if America's Jewish leadership today genuinely seeks, as they did a century ago, a set of public beliefs which offers the successful integration

into American society while not only allowing but *encouraging* the respect for Jewish tradition sorely lacking in liberalism, they might just find it in political conservatism.

The bottom line on *Faith or Fear* is that Elliott Abrams has written a powerful prolegomena to any future discussion of the American Jewish community. By essentially closing the argument about the efficacy of "Jewishness," Abrams has prepared the ground for a reconsideration of Judaism. Unfortunately, the book is only a prolegomena. As an alternative to liberal secularism, Abrams offers the Orthodox community as evidence that it is possible, at least in today's America, for Jews to survive and even thrive without giving up an iota of their heritage. Abrams' answer for American Jewry is the return to a more traditional Judaism, a return whose key elements include increased synagogue participation and more Jewish education, especially in day schools.

The suggestions are welcome, if not exactly original. But the tragic flaw of *Faith or Fear* is its refusal to address a fundamental problem: Even if American Jews are largely ignorant of Tora, they are not so ignorant of Orthodoxy. Many non-observant Jews have made at least a token effort

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to examine this radically different “alternative lifestyle”—and they don’t like what they see. Fairly or not, Orthodoxy has earned a reputation for closed-mindedness, snobbism, archaism and preoccupation with minutiae at the expense of values. (In Israel, the religious establishment has gone much further, convincing much of the country that Orthodoxy is also synonymous with the subversion of democracy, sleazy politics and the use of government to foist halacha on an unwilling populace.) While Abrams does emphasize that his call to “observance” need not be equated with a call to Orthodoxy, he makes little effort to say what he exactly is proposing in its stead. The result is that *Faith or Fear* offers precious little to those Jewish parents who have come to see their children’s acceptance of halacha as a fate almost as ignominious as intermarriage, and less still to an Orthodox that has not yet come to terms with its proposed role as the leader in American Jewry’s struggle against assimilation.

For Abrams’ noble vision of a new Jewish traditionalism to come to bear, more will be required than the reevaluation of observance on the part of the heterodox public. The Orthodox, too, will have to take great pains to step into the shoes of leadership which Abrams has cobbled for them: They will have to recast their image as a

communal force that is not only successful, but eminently *respectable*.

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*Adam Pruzan is Managing Director of Research at The Shalem Center in Jerusalem.*