



WHY JEWS ARE *(still)* LIBERALS



SPRING 2010

 **KORET**
PERSPECTIVES



FROM THE PRESIDENT

The Koret Foundation recently welcomed prolific author, exacting editor, outstanding thinker, and my personal friend Norman Podhoretz to San Francisco. At an intimate luncheon with community and college campus leaders, Mr. Podhoretz, the editor emeritus of *Commentary* magazine, led an engaging discussion about liberalism, American Jewry, and Zionism centered around his new book, *Why Are Jews Liberals?*

Joining him were Daniel Pipes, founder and director of the Middle East Forum, and Charles Kesler, professor of government at Claremont McKenna College and an editor and author in his own right.

A summary of this meeting comprises this issue of *Koret Perspectives*.

It has long been our view that the solutions to social challenges lie in free markets, entrepreneurship, and the power of the individual. Koret has also consistently been a staunch supporter and outspoken advocate for Israel.

We looked to our guests to help guide us through an analysis of the causes and symptoms of American Jewry's longstanding identification with liberalism in the hope that achieving better understanding of this complicated issue will lead many Jews to reflect on and reconsider their political leanings.

On a personal level, it was a pleasure to spend time with Norman, who recently celebrated his 80th birthday. He continues to forge ahead full-throttle. I hope we can all be as actively engaged as he is when we reach his auspicious age.

— *Tad Taube, President*



WHY JEWS ARE (STILL) LIBERALS

By Jennifer Franco

In November 2008, an extraordinary thing happened: Barack Obama was elected President of the United States, becoming the first African American to serve in that office. The elections were unique in other ways as well, but celebrated author and former editor of *Commentary* magazine Norman Podhoretz likes to say that the most extraordinary feature of the 2008 presidential election was that Obama captured 78 percent of the Jewish vote, the highest percentage of any ethnic or religious group aside from African Americans.

While the average Jewish vote for the Democratic presidential candidate has hovered around 75 percent since 1928, and surveys show that on issues such as abortion, gay rights, school prayer, and gun control, Jews are by far the most liberal of any ethno-religious group in America, Mr. Podhoretz argues that the overwhelming Jewish support for Barack Obama was surprising to say the least. For one thing, most American Jews report that their presidential vote is strongly influenced by the candidates' positions on Israel, and on that issue alone it seemed that John McCain, and his history of advocacy for Israel, should have trumped Obama, who has been linked to anti-Zionists like the Reverend Jeremiah Wright and the historian Rashid Khalidi.

But overwhelmingly, Jews chose Obama.

Mr. Podhoretz has often said that the question he is asked most often, on any subject, is why most Jews are liberals, or why most Jews continue to vote for Democrats. In his latest book *Why Are Jews Liberals?* and in front of an audience of distinguished scholars and community leaders gathered together by Koret, Mr. Podhoretz

answered this question, arguing that liberalism has become so entwined with most American Jews' conception of Jewishness that it has emerged as a religion in its own right.

This commitment, Mr. Podhoretz asserts, is irrational. It is an indication of "willful blindness and denial." It is counter to Jewish interests and ideals. It is ultimately, he says, very bad for the Jews.

HISTORY LESSON

Most American Jews, Mr. Podhoretz says, sincerely believe that their liberalism is founded on Judaism's philosophy, directives, and values, but Mr. Podhoretz contends that even a cursory look at the political attitudes of today's religious Jews unravels this idea. The Orthodox, who base their lives on following the commandments and ideals of traditional Judaism and Jewish law, are far from liberal: On nearly every cultural issue from abortion to suicide, the Orthodox fall somewhere on the right, and they are the only Jews who consistently vote Republican. Rather, the answer to at least the roots of American Jews' affinity for liberal values can be found in 20th century history.

At the end of World War II, most Jews in the United States were poor, and the Democratic Party appealed to people in that socio-economic position. In addition, most American Jews shared a collective memory of centuries of terrible discrimination visited upon their European ancestors, and on that continent, the political left fought for emancipation and civil rights for the Jews. Franklin Delano Roosevelt's coalition and the Democratic Party were, in post-WWII America, the brethren of those European friends of the Jews, while the political right seemed to be an American echo of the dangerous conservatives in Europe.

During the turbulent 1960s, however, and particularly after the Six-Day War in 1967, Mr. Podhoretz believes the Jewish affinity for liberal politics should have subsided. The liberals' commitment to social justice gave rise to a new version of the old quota system that historically had kept Jews oppressed. As prosperity increased, the other white members of FDR's coalition moved away from the Dem-

ocratic Party, whose ideals ran counter to their economic interests. And while most American Jews celebrated Israel's brilliant military victory in 1967, the left's response was a rash of anti-Zionism, which Mr. Podhoretz argues is nothing but ages-old anti-Semitism wrapped in a political cloak.

By 1967, the left, which had for so long been the Jewish political homeland, was the incubator for people, values, and ideals that were outright hostile to the Jews. But the majority of Jews, a stiff-necked people, remained committed to the Democrats. Why?

A NEW TORAH

Mr. Podhoretz answers the question he is asked most often, the title of his book, by saying that for most American Jews, liberalism has become much more than a political stance—it has become its own religion. Contemporary, non-Orthodox Jews, particularly those who identify as secular, are dedicated to the creeds and commandments of liberalism in the way their ancestors were committed to religious Judaism and Jewish law: It is the "Torah of liberalism." Believing it needs no explanation.

While he focuses on the political differences between liberals and conservatives, Mr. Podhoretz says the issue is much deeper: There is a schism in the way the two sides view America and American society. Liberals, he argues, tend to see American society through the lenses of economic and social injustice and oppression, and conservatives see a country founded on ideas and traditions that have allowed more freedom and more wealth for its citizens than any culture in history. Conservatives want to preserve those traditions, and liberals seek to undo them.

But, Mr. Podhoretz argues, it is the conservative ideas and traditions that have permitted and encouraged Jews to migrate to America in unequalled numbers, to enjoy unparalleled freedom and prosperity, and to have the opportunity to create a permanent home unprecedented in 5,000 years of history. The Jewish experience in America is proof of the validity and the vitality of conservative values. This, Mr.

Podhoretz believes, means that the Jewish commitment to liberalism is counter to Jewish economic and social interests, and is, therefore, irrational.

Mr. Podhoretz, an avowed socialist 40 years ago who has steadily and inexorably moved to the right, is vocal about his hope that American Jews will awaken from the slumbering denial of their orthodox liberalism. He hopes Jews will travel the same political path he has traveled, discarding the Torah of liberalism for the conservative philosophies and values that he believes uphold the traditional American way of life. He wants his fellow Jews to realize that while the political left was a friend to the Jews in the past, it no longer reflects or promotes their interests. Whether the liberal majority will awaken to the cry of its own enlightened self-interest, as Mr. Podhoretz sees it, only time will tell.

QUESTION AND ANSWER PERIOD

Following Mr. Podhoretz's remarks, he responded to questions and comments from seminar participants.

Charles Kesler, Professor of Government, Claremont McKenna College

The propensity to vote Democratic, if that can be used as a proxy for liberalism, correlates quite well with very low income and very high income, and with having less than a high school education and having post-graduate degrees. This means the old socioeconomic correlations are weaker than they've ever been in American politics and that the religious and cultural correlations are stronger. The more often people report attending religious services, the more likely they are to vote Republican. So the case of the Jews is less exceptional than it once was, perhaps, and more typical of American politics. So we could reformulate the question and ask, why are liberals liberal? That's a very hard question to answer through modern socioeconomic correlations. And I need to say that on the right, it isn't just Pat Buchanan and his ilk who have been unwelcoming to Jews—I think of Hermann Goering pinning a medal on Charles Lindbergh—and much latter-day tradi-

tionalist and southern conservatism has been suspicious of principles like the emancipation of blacks and Jews. But today, in Australia, in Great Britain, and in Canada, Jewish political sentiments are fairly evenly divided between left and right, and of course in Israel, Jewish sentiments lean to the right. So what's different about America?

Norman Podhoretz: I should have known you'd ask the toughest question, Charles. The picture you paint of other countries is actually not quite accurate; Israel has only been moving right fairly recently in relation to the whole peace process. It was overwhelmingly dominated by socialists until very recently, which had hampered economic growth; it was only under (Prime Minister Benjamin) Netanyahu that that began changing. The leftist attitudes are still very powerful, especially in the universities, but it's true there is something unique about America. As a great believer in American exceptionalism, I suppose I'd apply that characterization to the treatment of Jews here and how Jews have responded. American society has been more benign to Jews than anywhere else, and this may have had something to do with the persistence of liberal attitudes. As for the question of the socioeconomic correlations, you're right, but it still remains an anomaly that when the socioeconomic conditions were different, Jews continued to vote for Democrats.

**Marc Dollinger, Professor of Jewish Studies,
San Francisco State University**

My major question is about causality, and I want to push you on a regional aspect since we're here in San Francisco; it's been pointed out that Jewish liberalism may work according to that model in New York City, but over time and place it breaks down. It breaks down with the Orthodox, with certain conservative Republicans, and in San Francisco, which has been the center for anti-Zionism from both the right and the left in the 1940s and today, and yet the first woman to serve in Congress was Jewish and from San Francisco. So how can you mediate between regionalism when it comes to causality?

NP: Everything you say is true, except that the anomaly of Jewish liberalism is something that's developed in more recent years, from

about the late 1950s onward. No one would've asked that question from WWI to WWII because the answer would've seemed self-evident. The regional issue you raise is very interesting. I was under the impression that San Francisco had been a hotbed of anti-Zionism from the get-go and I think I understand why, but what you have today seems a pretty uniform distribution of Jewish folk everywhere, except in the Orthodox enclaves. I suspect that San Francisco Jewry voted more heavily for Obama even than New York Jewry. I don't think those regional differences hold any longer. My book doesn't so much answer the question why as *how* liberalism came to be what I call the religion of American Jews. To the extent that there is an answer to the question of why, I still believe it's true of everyone except the Orthodox that liberalism has taken hold with the kind of intensity and passion and power that religious conviction has, and it's deeper and more resistant to empirical and rational arguments. I think the liberalism of American Jews responds to criticism the way religious people respond to blasphemy.

**Tammi Benjamin, Lecturer in Hebrew,
University of California, Santa Cruz**

I'm studying academic anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism, and what I've seen is that primarily it's Jewish faculty who adhere to those positions. A conference took place at my school a few years ago that was purportedly about alternative histories of Zionism, but really it was an anti-Zionist conference, and all the panel members were Jewish. What was interesting is that they all used their Jewishness to make their case. I agree that this idea of liberalism is a kind of religion in itself, so I wonder why don't these Jews reject their Jewishness?

NP: Some years ago during the Cold War there was a *New York Times* columnist named Anthony Lewis; it wasn't widely known that he was Jewish, but when he wanted to attack Israel, he was willing to make the sacrifice to acknowledge that he was Jewish in order to increase his credibility on the topic of Israel. I think that applies to some of the people you're talking about. It certainly applies to an organization like J Street. There is some kind of atavistic, residual attachment among people who care nothing about Judaism but who

sort of want a Jewish *hechsher* (stamp of approval) on their beliefs, even if their beliefs are in stark contrast to anything that's traditionally Jewish. All I can do is refer you to a verse in Isaiah, which says that your destroyer will come out from among you. The prophets were not always that accurate in their predictions of the future, but this one really was, it seems to me.

Tad Taube, President, Koret Foundation

Support for Israel and love of Israel is a mantra of most Jewish community organizations, and in fact we just had a war here in San Francisco about this. Yet if you took a poll of the people who are members of those organizations, it's quite likely that an overwhelming majority would side with the leftist views of the Obama administration as it relates to their foreign and domestic policy. On the other hand, the Israelis themselves, who are under the threat of immediate annihilation, totally reject the foreign policy of this administration. How do you account for that?

NP: I think it's actually not so difficult to explain. Most American Jews, including the liberals, still care deeply about the security of Israel, and they say it's a major factor in their voting decisions. It's one of the symptoms of the anomaly. How is it possible that Jews who care about Israel would still vote for a candidate like Obama? The Israelis, who under other conditions might be enthusiastic about someone like Obama, have been through a series of recent traumas, like the one in Gaza, and this has had a very powerful effect on the Israeli left. Very few Israelis now believe in the peace process; and that's because, as Samuel Johnson once said, the threat of hanging concentrates the mind wonderfully.

KORET FOUNDATION

Board of Directors

Susan Koret, *Board Chair*

Tad Taube, *President*

Richard C. Atkinson

Michael J. Boskin

William K. Coblenz

Anita Friedman

Robert Friend

Richard L. Greene

Abraham D. Sofaer

Jeffrey A. Farber, *Chief Executive Officer*

Susan Wolfe, *Director, Grantmaking Programs and Communications*

Jennifer Franco, *Communications Officer and Editor*

Casey Dillon, *Graphic Designer*

NONPROFIT
U. S. POSTAGE
PAID
SAN FRANCISCO, CA
PERMIT NO. 1011



Koret Foundation

33 New Montgomery
Suite 1090
San Francisco, CA
94105-4526

