

**The Silver Age**  
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On April 18, 1938, Action Comics #1 hit newsstands across America. The cover showed the kinds of action that readers were in for. It showed a strongman in a blue suit, with red boots, trunks, and cape, and a red “S” on a yellow triangle on his chest. He was lifting a green car, smashing the front of it on a rock, while criminals fled in terror. This was the first appearance of Superman, and the superhero was officially born. So began what is called the Golden Age of Comic Books.

Over the next few years, superheroes took America by storm. National Comics, which would later become DC Comics, debuted the Batman, a dark avenger of the night, Wonder Woman, the amazing Amazon, Green Lantern, Flash, Hawkman, The Spectre, Dr. Fate, and many more. Several of these heroes eventually joined forces, and called themselves the Justice Society of America. Timely Comics, which later became known as Marvel Comics, gave us Namor, the Human Torch, and Captain America, whose first appearance showed him punching out Adolf Hitler.

Superhero books sold in the hundreds of thousands, and many publishing companies got into the superhero business. It seemed that every publisher had a different version of these archetypes: a patriot, a strongman, a magician, a dark avenger, and a lady bombshell. The heroes of the Golden Age fought mad scientists, corrupt politicians, domestic abusers, petty street crime, and the Nazis, both at home and abroad. These four-color fantasies became a pop culture phenomenon, crossing into radio shows, movie serials, and merchandising.

But in 1946, it all came to a screeching halt. Suddenly, due to a series of converging events, superheroes were no longer popular. Several publishing companies went out of business or merged. Many characters disappeared, relegated to the dustbin of history. Except for a few of the most popular characters, comics stopped telling superhero stories and instead told romance, horror, and cowboy tales. The Golden Age of Comic Books had come to an end.

This was where my mind went when I read an essay several months ago in the *Atlantic Magazine*, provocatively titled, *The Golden Age of American Jews is Ending*. This piece, written by Franklin Foer, chronicled the rise of Antisemitism on both the Left and the Right since 9-11, and especially the daily struggle since October 7 of last year. He also recounted the decline of Jewish influence in popular culture, politics, and science since the late 1990s, fondly recalling the contributions of Jews to 20<sup>th</sup> century America: authors like Philip Roth and Joseph Heller, musicians like Bob Dylan, Paul Simon, and Barbra Streisand, scientists like J. Robert Oppenheimer and Jonas Salk, and comedians like Lenny Bruce, Mel Brooks, Jerry Seinfeld, and Adam Sandler.

There have been many critiques of Foer's essay, some of which claimed that this so-called Golden Age was really an era with gilded plating. While many Jews were influential to the development of 20<sup>th</sup> century America, these great figures lacked Jewish content. It was Bagels-and-Lox Judaism, instead of a Judaism that was grounded in tradition and our great texts.

Another criticism of Foer's article was that he did not mention that Antisemitism still existed during this period, despite the breaking down of barriers that once kept Jews from certain professions and social circles. In fact, Antisemitism has been present since the founding of America, even as the American Jewish community continued to flourish and become what it is today.

Foer was accurate in his description of the past twenty years, and of present challenges. However, the title of the essay is overly alarmist, speaking only to the anxieties, fears, and traumas that the American Jewish community has experienced in the past year. Change was certainly happening, but was Foer overstating his case? Is our future all gloom and doom?

Without a doubt, this past year has been tough. Even so, as horrifying as the protests on college campuses have been, their numbers are relatively small and they have achieved virtually nothing. The outsized publicity given to these schools, mostly in California or so-called elite universities in the North East, gives the false impression that the protesters' views are the norm, and that their perspective is more pervasive than it actually is. Furthermore, a recent study from *Washington Monthly* magazine showed that there is a direct correlation between

the tuition cost of a university and the presence of an anti-Israel encampment or protest: the higher the tuition, the more likely there will be anti-Israel demonstrations.

Far from achieving their aims, demonstrators provoked a backlash that has included the formation of Antisemitism task forces, the discussion of anti-mask laws, civil rights complaints, lawsuits, and the withdrawal of support from major donors. No school has boycotted Israel, and many of the protesters have shown that they hate America as much as they hate Israel or Jews.

Our anxieties are heightened, and I am concerned about how this hateful ideology will affect the future of some of these universities, and the greater impact on America, but in this moment, the overwhelming majority of higher education is not Antisemitic.

Over the past one hundred years, American Jews have built a Jewish community that is unprecedented in Diaspora Jewish life, even as many of our ancestors were peddlers and sweatshop workers only 3 generations ago.

It has indeed been a Golden Age. We built a true community supported by so many national Jewish institutions and thousands of synagogues that spoke to the wide variety of religious needs of American Jews. We have even created our own brand of American Judaism.

Until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Jewish story had two locations: the land of Israel, and everywhere else in the world. You could either be in the land of our ancestors, or you were in exile. American Judaism changed that. Yehuda Kurtzer, President of the Shalom Hartman Institute, speaks of the complementary ideas of “home” and “homeland,” an idea unique to American Jews. No other Jewish Diaspora community called the country in which they lived their “home.”

American Jews redefined that dichotomy. After the creation of the state of Israel, American Jews stayed in America. We rejected the idea of exile, embraced by a country, a principle of which was *E Pluribus Unum*, “out of many, one.” This place was our home, and Israel was the homeland. We can spend time in Tel Aviv or Jerusalem, or any city in Israel, and feel welcomed and embraced as if we were at home, but then we can come back to Indianapolis, and we are home, the place where our own unique Jewish story is unfolding.

One of the architects of this idea was Louis Brandeis, who proclaimed that we could equally be Zionists and Americans, with no contradiction. He explained that being a Zionist and

an American are not competitive commitments, but rather complementary ones. In fact, he argued that being Zionists made us better American Jews, because Zionism gave substance to our identity as Jews, and connected us to a larger people, giving us a deeper sense of who we are.

Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan enhanced this idea and coined a new term: Jewish Peoplehood. Peoplehood describes what it means to be part of *Am Yisrael*, the People of Israel. We belong to a greater collective, attaching ourselves to a story that is bigger than ourselves, without undermining our ability to live in two civilizations, to be part of both the American story and the Jewish story.

We see and experience these similarities and resonances between Jewish values and American values. Enshrined in America's founding document is the ideal that we are all created equal, endowed by our Creator with inalienable rights. American Jews understand this to be the Founding Fathers' way of articulating the Torah's teaching that we are all individuals created in the image of God.

This American and Jewish belief has allowed us to fully participate in American life, even when there were social obstacles. Part of the anxiety that we feel right now is due to the rise in identity politics: that a person's group identity matters more than an individual's actions or character. Jews have always lost the identity politics game. Being Jewish transcends the simplistic categories of ethnicity, race, and religion, and it is almost always to our detriment when others try to classify us this way.

In our moment, the oppressor-oppressed narrative that has become popular has caused us to replay the collective traumas of the past. However, this time, we, the most actively persecuted group in world history, have been ironically and egregiously placed in the oppressor category. In order to counter this narrative, we must galvanize ourselves by remembering the Jewish influence on America, and the American influence on the Jewish People.

Upon the inauguration of George Washington, the Jewish community of Savannah, Georgia wrote the new President a letter of congratulations. In response, Washington wrote a return letter, linking the story of the Jewish People to the founding of America. He said, "May the same wonder-working Deity, who long since delivering the Hebrews from their Egyptian

Oppressors planted them in the promised land — whose providential agency has lately been conspicuous in establishing these United States as an independent nation — still continue to water them with the dews of Heaven and to make the inhabitants of every denomination participate in the temporal and spiritual blessings of that people whose God is Jehovah.”

Washington saw the God of Israel as the same God who bestowed blessings on America. Similarly, Lincoln called America, “an almost-chosen nation.” These religious connotations contributed to the idea of American exceptionalism: that our nation is called to higher purpose, that America must play a positive role both in our lives as individuals, and on the world stage. It is an idea that has inspired the can-do attitude that America is known for, and provided Americans with the ability to overcome continued challenges and setbacks. And it is derived from the Biblical idea that the Jewish People have a unique and a special purpose.

Every study of the American Jewish community over the past several decades has asked what American Jews believe is the most important Jewish value. Do you know what the majority American Jews say in response to this question? The most important Jewish value? Tikkun Olam – repair of the world. Think about that for a second: American Jews are only 2% of the population of the United States. The entire Jewish People are only 2/10 of a percent of the population of planet Earth. And we are supposed to fix the entire world!?

Where did we ever get this chutzpah? We got it from living in the United States of America. American Jews in the 20<sup>th</sup> century plucked an obscure idea about the creation of the world from 16<sup>th</sup> century Jewish mysticism and connected it with the lofty goals of the American project, creating a value that has become the centerpiece of American Judaism. Our tradition, both as Americans, and as Jews, compels us to change the world for the better.

Another important Jewish value is *Hakarat Hatov*, literally “recognizing the good,” or more simply, gratitude. We are thankful as American Jews. America is different from any other Jewish diaspora community in history. This was expressed in the writings of Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, one of the leading Orthodox rabbis of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He called the United States a *malkhut shel hesed*, literally “a kingdom of kindness.” It is a term loaded with historical meaning, because throughout Jewish history, Jews called countries in which they lived *malkhut harasha’*, “the wicked kingdom.” Jewish leaders as different as Rabbi Moshe Feinstein and

Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan both insisted that it was a Jewish obligation to vote and participate in civic society because that is what we as good Americans must do to contribute to our democracy.

The United States of America is a nation based in covenant. The Hebrew name for our country is *Artzot HaBrit*, “the lands of the covenant.” However diverse Americans might be, we are in partnership with each other, working to live up to our ideals, even as we fall short of them. When God made the covenant with Israel, God surely knew how kvetchy and stubborn our ancestors were. Not much has changed. We will never actually fulfill all of the mitzvot of the Torah, but making a covenant means staying committed to each other, and to the process of continuing to live by those covenantal expectations. Each generation must renew the covenant with itself and with God, and be found worthy of the promise of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

I know that singing is usually the Cantor’s department, but I ask that you indulge me for just a few moments with these beautiful words. You may even want to hum along:

God bless America, land that I love;  
Stand beside her, and guide her;  
Through the night with the light from above.  
From the mountains to the prairies,  
To the oceans, white with foam;  
God bless America, my home sweet home;  
God bless America; my home sweet home.

In our cynical time, our first reaction to hearing such a patriotic song might be discomfort, even if we are moved by it. Isn’t patriotism and love of country out of style? And aren’t patriotic songs written by country singers who vote red up and down the ballot?

Not this one. “God Bless America” was written by Irving Berlin, originally named Israel Beilin, a nice Jewish boy who immigrated to America from Siberia, and who contributed so much to the classic American songbook. He wrote this song as an expression of gratitude for all of the opportunities he received and the successes he achieved here.

Love of country might seem pollyannish, especially in our time of skepticism and polarization. However, love of country is essential for wanting to improve it. Patriotism compels us to work to make our nation better.

If the Golden Age is ending, perhaps this moment calls us to be counter-cultural, to stand up against this tide. You may recall that on Yom Kippur last year, I spoke about how being Jewish was not cool, and that the coolest thing to do was to own your uncoolness. Perhaps this time of uncertainty is our time to stand up and reach out, to argue for a robust response to defeatism.

Ultimately, we are in a struggle over values. Antisemitism is part of that challenge, but this moment calls us, not just to counter the Antisemitic threats we face, but also to create something new with people who believe in liberty, free expression, pluralism, merit, and the promise of America as much as we do. And, despite our current challenges, our country has still shown support for the Jewish people in many ways.

As the Golden Age ends, and old alliances shift, new alliances are waiting to be forged. This moment calls for another value that is shared by America and Judaism, especially at this High Holy Day season: the ability to self-correct and evolve.

Several years after the end of the Golden Age of Comic Books, writers and artists revisited and revitalized old concepts, and experimented with new ideas. DC Comics gave Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman new costumes and origin stories. A new Flash and new Green Lantern debuted. An explosion of creativity led to the creation of more characters, and they soon teamed up as Justice League. These heroes all got sidekicks who formed the Teen Titans. At Marvel Comics, Captain America was thawed out of the ice and joined new heroes Thor, Iron Man, and the Hulk to form the Avengers. Teenagers with genetic mutations were gathered by Charles Xavier as the X-Men. A nebbishy kid from Queens was bitten by a radioactive spider and learned that with great power comes great responsibility. We all know who that is, right? Spiderman! The Golden Age had passed, and upon its foundation was built the Silver Age, which outshined its predecessor in creativity and enthusiasm.

We live in a moment of great uncertainty. America, and the American Jewish community, are rapidly changing. But, to quote Billy Joel, “the good old days weren’t always good, and tomorrow ain’t as bad as it seems.” The future awaits, and the past is only prologue.

As the New Year begins, let this moment of renewal and hope afford us the opportunity to renew our covenants with ourselves, with our people, with our great country, with our home, with our homeland, and with God. And may we recommit to our core principles, in order to sustain what came before us and build something new, ushering in the Silver Age of American Judaism. Shanah Tovah!