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Ebraismo e antiebraismo:
immagine e pregiudizio

SESSIONE INTERNAZIONALE

FIRENZE - 18-20 marzo 1987

Address by Marc H. Tanenbaum
Director of
International Relations,
American Jewish Committee

"JEWISH REALITIES
IN THE UNITED STATES"

EBRAISMO E ANTIEBRAISMO:

IMMAGINE E PREGIUDIZIO

SESSIONE INTERNAZIONALE, FIRENZE, MARZO 18-20, 1987

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"JEWISH REALITIES IN THE UNITED STATES"

AMERICAN JEWISH

I bring you the warm and heartfelt greetings of the American Jewish community, in particular, the American Jewish Committee which is the oldest human relations organization in the United States. Since our founding in 1906 in response to the Kishinev pogroms, we have recognized the interdependence in fate and destiny of Jews everywhere. We have, therefore, been dedicated to upholding the civil, political and religious liberties of all Jews and are committed to strengthening constitutional democracies and human rights of all peoples, for we believe the cause of Jewish liberties is inseparable from the cause of all human liberties.

In particular, I express our deeply-felt solidarity with the Italian Jewish community, the oldest Jewish center in the Western world which has contributed so magnificently to the permanent enrichment of universal Jewish culture and moral spirit. Immanuel of Rome, the Soncino family, Don Isaac Abrabanel, Rabbi Leon of Modena, Elijah del Medigo, Prime Minister Luigi Luzzatti, have all illuminated the Italian and Jewish firmaments. Thus, Italian humanist culture and world Jewry remain forever in your debt for this noble historic past, but as well for your continuing heroic efforts to maintain the great Italian Jewish continuities.

My assignment is to share with you some observations about "Jewish Realities Today in the United States." As many of you know, the United States is a very large country, with a complex religious, racial, and ethnic population of some 240 million people. The Jewish community in the United States, which numbers some 5,900,000 members -- the largest Jewish community in the world -- is complex like the rest of America, and, as is the case with everything Jewish, is even more so. To try to analyze so much complexity in this brief presentation necessarily involves distortion through generalizations and over-simplifications. I hope you will compensate for that by reading more detailed studies of American Jewry which are available in great abundance. The literature

is enormous and unending (and I will be glad to make available our publications catalog.)

In May 1986, the American Jewish Committee sponsored a "Conference on New Perspectives in American Jewish Sociology" in New York. This consultation brought together some 50 leading Jewish historians, social scientists, demographers, rabbis, writers, and editors from major universities, institutes and journals in the United States, and reactions from several Israeli scholars.

At the outset, the conference acknowledged that there is scholarly disagreement about the future of the American Jewish community. There is an ongoing debate between various American Jewish scholars; there is an even sharper controversy between U.S. Jewish intellectuals and leaders and a number of their Israeli counterparts who are concerned about American Jewish life.

The scholarly debate over American Jewish life takes place mainly between two schools of thought -- the "assimilationist" and the "transformationists."

The "assimilationists" see American Jews becoming gradually less Jewish and indistinguishable in their identity from their non-Jewish neighbors. The "transformationists" claim that the nature of Jewishness may be changing but that it is not eroding. They point to an impressive body of Jewish scholars and scholarly publications, and the secular universities sponsorship of some 230 chairs of Jewish studies. Much creative vitality in Judaism is also centered in the rabbinic seminaries, yeshivas, and universities of modern Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform Jewry.

Both schools acknowledge that "erosion and renewal is going on simultaneously in different parts of the community." Assimilationists see transformation and renewal going on, while transformationists are aware of assimilationist threats. Thus, Prof. Nathan Glazer of Harvard University observes that "despite a drop in the last few decades in the percentage of Jews in the total American populations, Jews will be a relatively large minority in the United States for the foreseeable future."

Dr. Calvin Goldscheider, a prominent demographer of Brown University, similarly concludes that "the American Jewish population will remain stable well into the 21st century despite low fertility rates, high geographic mobility, intermarriage and assimilation." There will be some gains, some losses, but the population will be stable.

Dr. Glazer adds that even in the face of all those concerns "our institutions are stronger and political influence greater than ever before."

While trying to avoid either alarm or complacency, both the

assimilationist and transformationist schools have a deep concern over challenges posed by biology and values to the body and spirit of American Jews.

They point to the following demographic data:

- 1) There is a real danger of a shrinking birthrate. Since the 1920's, Jewish women gave birth to an average of two children; today it is down to 1.5%. (There are many more marriageable women than men, and it is hard to find Jewish husbands.) Thus, Jewish fertility will not exceed the replacement level, and may fall below it.

Counterbalancing those trends are the following: Orthodox Jews are committed to large families and may offset the low fertility rates (the Lubavitcher movement subsidizes large families.) While the Jewish divorce rate is near the national average, the remarriage rate of Jewish divorcees is higher than for non-Jews. And Jewish professional women - more than their non-Jewish counterparts - tend to believe that success is being married, having children, plus a career.

- 2) Owing to higher mortality rates, elderly Jews will become a greater percentage of the Jewish population, and deaths will outnumber births in the years to come. This will have many implications for synagogues, schools, marriage, leadership recruitment, and other issues.
- 3) Large-scale Jewish immigration is unlikely (even should Soviet Jews come to the U.S. rather than to Israel, and if, God forbid, a crisis forces some of the 120,000 South African Jews to emigrate, the demographic consequences will be minor.)
- 4) Intermarriage is estimated nationally at 30% and remains a continuing concern, but scholars differ about its data and meaning. Dr. Goldscheider says we know very little about intermarriage; who intermarries and why, and -- in the absence of facts -- we cannot know whether intermarriage results in losses for the community or gains.

However, Dr. Steven Cohen of Queens College recently conducted an analysis of the impact of intermarriage on the Jewish community of New York (1,800,000 people, largest Jewish community in America). He reports that after a rapid climb in the 1960s, the intermarriage rate is leveling off. It is the peripheral Jews -- those with a low rate of Jewish affiliation and practice -- who intermarry. When the non-Jewish spouse converts to Judaism, the Jewish life of the family replicates that of natural (endogamous) Jewish families.

In New York, the study notes, about one-half of the Jews married to non-Jews observe two or more important Jewish rituals, such as Pesach and Yom Kippur. Generally, they have mostly close Jewish friends.

According to Dr. Cohen, intermarriage does not necessarily mean alienation from the Jewish community.

While the intermarriage estimates for New York are low, they are higher in the Western states. By the year 2,000, one-quarter of all American Jews will be living in these states. In Dr. Glazer's view -- which I share -- such intermarriages are not a strong basis for Jewish continuity.

- 5) Geographic mobility is gradually eroding old, established Jewish communities. Thus, Baltimore Jewry is down 10% since 1968. The rise of substantial communities in the Sunbelt states may offset this decline.

Responding to this data, two eminent Israeli demographers, Profs. U.O. Schmeltz and Sergio Della Pergola of Hebrew University, came to quite pessimistic conclusions. They argue that low fertility, prolonged singlehood among young Jews who are postponing marriage, the 30% intermarriage rate with many children who do not identify as Jews, and other factors are leading to a Jewish population decline in the United States that will continue unless there is a large-scale immigration or a baby-boom, neither of which appears likely. The "quality" of American Jewish life, they warn, cannot make up for the demographic erosion.

Among the reactions to that Israeli pessimism were some rather sharp comments. One scholar said that some Zionists, Israelis, Orthodox Jews, and some Jewish organizations have vested ideological or institutional interests in portraying American Jewish conditions in a bad light. Shililat Ha-Golah is alive and well, they say.

Dr. Egon Mayer, well-known sociologist, contends that demographic analysis provides no meaningful definition of 'Jewishness,' and therefore measures nothing tangible of the Jewish moral will. He advocates an anthropological approach that would go beyond quantitative analysis, and examine what participation in Jewish life means to the people involved, to study the diverse ways in which people identify as Jews.

That approach was illustrated by references to recent National Surveys of American Jews. One observer commented that "many more Jews acknowledge and assert their Jewishness than in the past," but he questioned whether new forms of Jewishness can preserve Jewish identity the way religious tradition did, particularly in the face of an overpowering and seductive American culture.

Nevertheless, observers persist in stating that Jewish life has a higher quality than used to be the case. Jews today are assimilated in language, dress, and culture but ideological assimilation is largely gone. There is little sign of efforts to obliterate Jewish identity as in the past. There is little self-hate evident among young Jews. Unlike the 1930s and later, American Jews now advocate universalistic concerns without abandoning their Jewishness.

There is a very high level of identification with Israel. In Dr. Steven Cohen's survey, 77% of the respondents say they would want their children to visit Israel. 85% say they pay special attention to articles and newspapers about Israel. 40% have friends or family members who have moved to Israel. It is clear that large numbers of American Jews visit Israel, keep well informed about her, and care passionately about her welfare -- but do not make aliyah in significant numbers.

But this survey also indicates that while Orthodox attachment to Israel intensifies, there is a growing alienation, especially among Conservative and Reform Jews. Unless something substantial is done and soon about ultra-Orthodox hostility and repression, that alienation toward Israel could grow and expand. The conflict between Orthodox and non-Orthodox in Israel has already had negative impact on the unity of American Jewry, and efforts are being made to contain that erosion.

Paradoxically, ordinary Jews remain concerned about anti-Semitism, while Jewish leaders seem to be less so. A 1986 national survey discloses that 67% of the respondents believe that anti-Semitism in America may, in the future, become a serious problem for American Jews. The remarkable high level of economic well-being of American Jews may underscore this anxiety at having their social and financial security possibly endangered.

American Jews worry about the Moral Majority, and a network of similar radical right-wing groups, who advocate "a Christian America," uninhibited laissez-faire capitalism, rabid anti-Communism, and the imposition of their Puritannical/Sectarian morality through legislation. For theological reasons, the Moral Majority are strong supporters of Israel, whose existence is a precondition for the Second Coming of Jesus. Jews are troubled by having to choose between their strong pro-Israel support which is welcomed and their threat to America's democratic pluralist society.

On the left, the 1984 Presidential campaign of the Reverend Jesse Jackson deeply upset American Jewry. His anti-Jewish references to "Hymie - Town," his alliance with the Rev. Louis Farrakhan, the viciously anti-Jewish and anti-Israel Black Muslim leader, troubled American Jews and caused much Black-Jewish tension. Jesse Jackson is running again for U.S. President in 1988, and is making efforts to establish friendly relations with Jews and Israel, while maintaining his pro-Palestinian, pro-third world stand.

Among the mainstream of Americans - Catholics, Protestants, Evangelicals, and Greek Orthodox - anti-Semitism remains at a low level. An indication of this is suggested by a recent poll in which 82% of the American people indicated they would vote for a Jewish candidate for the President of the United States. Most recent polls also demonstrate that there is a consistently high support for the State of Israel, with some 67% of the general population being favorable to the Jewish State, while

being overwhelmingly opposed to the PLO's terrorism and violence.

In recent months, one can sense a growing anxiety among most American Jewish leaders in response to a convergence of stresses between the United States Government and Israel. Efforts to scapegoat Israel for the Iran-Contra affair; the terrible Pollard spy scandal, the provocative elevations to high position of Rafael Eitan and Colonel Sella, the forthcoming U.S. Government report on military transfers between Israel and South Africa have reached a crescendo of concern and feeling

The right-wing and left-wing press have had an anti-Semitic, anti-Zionist field day with these revelations. The issue for American Jewish leaders is now damage control, and how to keep further mistakes and alienations from taking place.

While facing forthrightly all these issues -- their pluses and minuses -- the scholars concluded their deliberations with a consensus statement which I believe is a fair summary of the American Jewish condition today

"We are comfortable neither with predictions of decline in the quality of American Jewish life nor with projections of impressive cultural renewal. Rather, we see the ongoing reformulation of Jewishness within the framework of basic stability."

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MERCOLEDÌ 18 MARZO - ore 9,30 e 15,30

Palazzo Vecchio, Salone dei Duecento

Saluti delle Autorità

TRA DIVERSITÀ E PREGIUDIZIO

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Detlev Claussen

La teoria critica dell'antisemitismo

Leslie Fidler

Il mito dell'ebreo come nemico da Shylock a Trotsky

Bernd Marin

L'antisemitismo senza antisemiti

Furio Cerutti

Sterminio e stermini

MERCOLEDÌ 18 MARZO - ore 21

Sede dell'Istituto Gramsci Toscano

L'ANTISEMITISMO IN ITALIA OGGI

Tavola rotonda con

Enrico Finzi, Adriana Goldstaub, Giovanbattista Novello Paglianti, Renato Mannheimer

GIOVEDÌ 19 MARZO - ore 9,30 e 15,30

Palazzo Medici Riccardi, Sala Luca Giordano

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Pierre Sorlin

Il caso tedesco

Nicola Tranfaglia

Il caso italiano

GIOVEDÌ 19 MARZO - ore 21

Palazzo Medici Riccardi, Sala Luca Giordano

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REALTÀ EBRAICHE OGGI

Interventi e relazioni di

Marc Tannenbaum

Gli Stati Uniti

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L'Italia

Albert Memmi

Il mondo arabo

Shmuel Eisenstadt

Israele

Schlomo Avineri

La diaspora vista da Israele

Proiezione di Ebrei attraverso il tempo: Rue des Rosiers, un film di Pierre Sorlin

Durante i lavori del convegno funzionerà un servizio di traduzione simultanea nelle lingue inglese, francese e italiano



COMUNE DI FIRENZE
ASSESSORATO ALLA CULTURA



ISTITUTO GRAMSCI TOSCANO

L'antisemitismo Un progetto politico, un modo di pensare, una « cosa » che si nasconde in menti inconsapevoli?

L'antisemita Un militante o il portatore sano di un pregiudizio pronto a colpire?

E cos'è il pregiudizio antisemita? Uno dei tanti o il pregiudizio per eccellenza?

Domande scomode che rivolgiamo a personalità provenienti da discipline diverse, per proiettare luci da più posizioni su un problema così delicato

Risposte non scontate che non potranno eludere tematiche tutte da sviluppare su

- **la tolleranza** Quando ci chiediamo se essa sia una rendita di posizione oppure il valore che attiva il diritto alla differenza,
- **le realtà ebraiche oggi e Israele come parte di queste realtà,**
- **l'antisemitismo in Europa**, per ciò che è stato, per ciò che esso è ancora oggi, nonostante le dichiarazioni di morte dopo la fine dei fascismi

COMITATO SCIENTIFICO

Franco Belgrado

Ugo Caffaz

Roberto Finzi

Adriana Goldstaub

Giorgio van Straten

in collaborazione con il
Centro di Documentazione Ebraica Contemporanea
di Milano

Ebraismo e antiebraismo: immagine e pregiudizio

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ISTITUTO GRAMSCI TOSCANO
Piazza Madonna Aldobrandini, 8
50123 Firenze - Tel (055) 263957