On Gerson Cohenâ€™s â€œBlessing of Assimilationâ€• a Half Century Later: Editorâ€™s Introduction

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FORUM

On Gerson Cohen's "Blessing of Assimilation" a Half Century Later

Editor's Introduction

The editors of *JQR* relish the prospect of adding forums such as this one to the regular mix of articles and review essays. The forum is often an opportunity to identify important new trends in Jewish studies or call attention to paradigm-shifting books in the field. Sometimes the forum serves a different function, though, allowing us to look back to the past for a particularly incisive or consequential piece of work.

It is the latter purpose that animates this forum devoted to Professor Gerson D. Cohen's memorable essay "The Blessing of Assimilation in Jewish History." Delivered as a commencement address to the graduating class at Hebrew Teachers College in Brookline, Massachusetts, in 1966, this essay takes on a theme of major concern to Jews in Cohen's day and subsequently—and turns it on its head. As Keren McGinity shows in *Still Jewish: A History of Women and Intermarriage in America*, the 1960s were a period of "rising alarm within the Jewish community," principally owing to the specter of elevated rates of intermarriage. Jewish communal leaders and social scientists weighed in with a bevy of quantitative and qualitative studies intended to diagnose and forestall the rapid onset of assimilation.

Against the backdrop of that discourse, Gerson Cohen, successor to Salo Baron at Columbia University and soon to become the chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, upended convention by declaring to his audience that "assimilation properly channeled and exploited *can* become a blessing." It must have made for a singularly unsettling moment for the future Jewish educators who had been trained precisely to guard against assimilation.

Although only forty-two at the time of the address, Cohen was hardly a naïf. He understood that there would always be those Jews who "identify with the majority and have slipped away from the Jewish commu-

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nity." This marked an unhealthy version of assimilation, but not the only one. There was another version of assimilation at work in recent centuries that enabled nothing short of "all the great changes and developments that characterize modern Jewish history"—from the rise of critical Jewish scholarship to the advent of Jewish nationalism.

Cohen's sunny view of the creative potential of assimilation reached its most provocative when he turned his attention to premodern Jewish history. Here he challenged deep-seated wisdoms while attempting to get at the core of the assimilatory process—and by consequence, at Jewish survival itself. Religious traditionalists often declared that Jews survived because of their steadfast resistance to changes to their names, language, and dress (the letters beginning the Hebrew words—*shem*, *leshon*, and *malbush*—created an acronym, ShaLeM, indicating wholeness). In fact, Cohen noted that Jews survived by repeatedly changing their names, languages, and dress, as a result of which they could successfully adapt to their surroundings. While unrestrained absorption into the surrounding world would lead to disappearance, resistance to all forms of adaptation had its own severe consequences: "withdrawal and fossilization." Cohen marveled at the ability of Jews to adapt to their host societies and thereby permit the ongoing rejuvenation of their cultural habits—without losing all traces of their distinctiveness. He saw this extraordinary balancing act operating in every period of Jewish history—from ancient Alexandria to medieval Baghdad to modern Berlin and Tel Aviv. In capturing this balance, he summoned forth the image of the nineteenth-century Galician thinker Nachman Krochmal, for whom the Torah was "like a path that is beset on one side with freezing cold and on the other with consuming fire."

The concentrated erudition and pungency of Cohen's observations call to mind another Galician Jew, his predecessor and teacher at Columbia, Salo Baron. Writing nearly forty years earlier, the thirty-three-year-old Baron produced his own precocious and lapidary judgment in an article in the *Menorah Journal*, "Ghetto and Emancipation" (1928). There he set out to challenge common depictions of the darkness of medieval Jewish life, which he famously described as overly "lachrymose," while also questioning the widely assumed beneficence of modernity for the Jews.

Essays such as Baron's and Cohen's have had an impact on the field of Jewish studies that belies their brevity. Far more than lengthier monographs, they abruptly force their readers out of their usual habits of mind. It thus seems fitting, on the occasion of its fiftieth anniversary, to see how and whether "The Blessing of Assimilation" speaks to us. The forum that

follows provides a series of incisive responses from scholars covering a range of time periods and methods.

Charlotte Fonrobert opens the forum by juxtaposing Cohen's erstwhile optimism about the fruitfulness of Jewish/non-Jewish cultural interaction to Gershom Scholem's well-known belief that there never was a meaningful German-Jewish dialogue. She continues in Cohen's path by noting how Jewish history is replete with examples of productive cultural exchange, including in the rabbinic era to which she devotes her own research. Fonrobert suggests that the project of renewing "tradition" through adaptation to surrounding diaspora cultures has proceeded from the rabbinic period up to the present. This is an important point in two regards: first, as a matter of historical accuracy; and second, as a charge to contemporary Jewish educators "to continue to make the tradition relevant," as Cohen himself insisted. Fonrobert sees signs of that ongoing renewal in North America today, especially through the creative force of feminism. At the same time, she doubts whether assimilation per se remains apt or accurate in describing the complex process of cultural revitalization.

Sarah Benor offers an appreciative reading of Cohen's "Blessing" through the lens of her specialty, the study of Jewish languages. But she seeks to add an important caveat. Jews survived over millennia, she maintains, "not only because they integrated culturally into the societies around them but because they simultaneously maintained a degree of cultural distinctiveness." Jewish languages dwelt at the border of integration and distinctiveness, drawing on the local vernacular but recasting it in a singularly Jewish frame. Even casual observers are familiar with the cases of Yiddish, Ladino, Judeo-Arabic, and Aramaic. Benor argues that the same quest to preserve a measure of distinctiveness can be found in what she calls "Jewish English." Even in today's world, when community leaders inveigh against the perils of unhealthy assimilation, Benor identifies traces of a push toward cultural distinctiveness among American Jews, particularly in their choice of children's names and their use of Jewishly inflected language. Both betray the opposite of Cohen's insight about assimilation; that is, the impulse is less to borrow from the surrounding culture than to "return" to a sort of Jewish nativism. While this phenomenon is especially pronounced among the Orthodox, Benor concludes, in nodding to Krochmal, most Jews have followed a middle path.

If the first two essays in the forum see reason for some measure of optimism fifty years after "The Blessing of Assimilation," the next two highlight the serious challenges plaguing contemporary history. Arnold

Eisen, who followed Cohen's path from university professor to chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, reads "The Blessing" along with a number of later Cohen essays as part of a coherent diagnosis of—and cultural prognosis for—his day. Undergirding Cohen's program is the imperative of a strong relationship between "a healthy and creative Diaspora" and a "healthy Israel," one that moves beyond the dominant Zionist instinct of *shelilat ha-golah* (negation of the diaspora). Not surprisingly, another key foundation is a deep commitment to "the legitimacy and vitality of Conservative Judaism against Orthodox attacks on the movement's authenticity and prospects." And yet, Cohen, with Eisen in his wake, expresses concern that "self-doubt" has diminished the ability of American Jews, including Conservative Jews, to engage in the age-old practice of renewing tradition. Indeed, they have not yet laid down the four key "cornerstones of Jewish life" that other great diaspora communities had: Jewish law, a vision of eschatology, a body of liturgy, and a new educational curriculum. Eisen closes his essay with a recommendation that affirms an observation of Cohen from "The Blessing": focus less on venerating the past or assuring your legacy in the future and more on the demands of the present.

The final contribution by David Ruderman places "The Blessing of Assimilation" in conversation with a later Cohen essay from 1984, "Mending the Shattered Tablets." Akin to Eisen, Ruderman draws out the more critical features in Cohen's thought. The 1984 piece marks a turn from optimism to "anger and frustration," as Cohen confronts the prospect that an excess of assimilation has led to "shattered tablets" that place Jews "in a bad way." The continuous chain of cultural transmission, evident as recently as the late nineteenth century in Isaac Hirsch Weiss's multivolume collection *Dor dor ve-dorshav*, has been broken. In his own day, both the turn away from the enlightened roots of Zionism in Israel (two years after the First Lebanon War) and the lack of intellectual imagination among American Jews bespeak the impoverished state of the present. But rather than succumb to despair, Cohen declared that Jews "must re-create a process of midrash for ourselves." And America, because of the "profound experience of freedom" in it, could and must take the lead by reinstituting the long tradition of fruitful cultural interactions in the present. Ruderman concludes his response and our forum by posing his own haunting question: have the causally linked factors of Jewish illiteracy and social comfort in America created a new world in which the blessings of healthy assimilation can no longer be discerned?

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