

My view: Jews in American politics

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I've been thinking all summer about a lecture I've been asked to give this fall at our college, SUNY New Paltz, on "Jews in American Politics." What to talk about? The topic's so big, it could be anything.

How about Jewish Firsts? The first Jewish governor? (David Emanuel, Georgia, 1801) The first Jewish U.S. Senator? (David Lee Yulee, Florida, 1845). The first U.S. Supreme Court Justice? (Louis Brandeis, 1916). The first Jewish major party candidate for national office? (Joseph Lieberman, Connecticut, 2000).

When I was growing up in the '50s in Brooklyn, I'd walk down the street with my dad and he'd point to a truck or a bank branch office and say: "They won't let us work for them." Firsts seemed very important then. They showed we were being included.

Now being Jewish is hardly mentioned when people get top jobs in business and public life. Their achievements are routine. Consider my experience in academe. I started my career as a Jew, discriminated against. Now I'm an "advantaged white male." That's inclusion.

Or Jewish Differences? We Jews are far more persistent than other European origin immigrant groups in counting ourselves as liberal and sticking with the Democratic Party. But lately we've been more willing to call ourselves conservative with a small "c;" have been divided on so-called "progressive" issues, like Affirmative Action; have provided neoconservative intellectual leadership. I myself was elected six times as a Republican. So again, we're more like others.

Or Jewish Influence? We are 2.2 percent (7.1 million) of America's people, yet we hear of the excessive influence of Jews in politics. Maybe it's just that we Jews have stopped being afraid of being noticed and are energetically engaged in public life, as we are told that all Americans can and should be. More evidence of our integration in the mainstream.

I spent a recent Saturday morning walking through Hungarian holocaust history in Budapest. Brass shoes arrayed along the Danube's shore, in memory of Jews murdered and thrown into the river. Protest displays confronting the failure of the Hungarian government to acknowledge that the Nazi murderers were mostly Hungarians, and the 600,000 victims almost all Jews.

Later the same day I saw pictures of Nazis marching with torches beneath swastikas, chanting "Jews will not replace us." And a video of a murderous terrorist attack by an automobile driven by a Nazi. These were American Nazis, in Charlottesville. Home grown. Like those Hungarian Nazis.

There followed from Donald Trump, our first president with a Jewish daughter and Jewish grandchildren – two firsts - a frightening, torturous, politically calculated failure to condemn fascism.

Then a group of business leaders who had already accepted an advisory role in the Trump government disassociated themselves from his views and his administration. And in a dramatic departure from traditional practice, all members of our military's Joint Chiefs of Staff publicly condemned racism and extremism. Principled stands for sure. But also pragmatic acknowledgment and defense of an irreversibly diverse and inclusive America.

So now I know that I will talk about this fall. I am going to tell the story of the willingness of a minority, persecuted elsewhere, to believe in America, to put aside fear, to confront bias, to engage, embrace and achieve inclusion. And I am going to say that we Jews need to continue to contribute more than proportionally to our beleaguered democracy at every level, to continue to help build the resiliency in our institutions that will assure their transcendence in this horribly ugly moment in our history.

-Gerald Benjamin is a Distinguished Professor of Political Science, associate vice president of regional engagement and director of The Benjamin Center.

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