

THE GOLDEN AGE OF AMERICAN JEWRY HASN'T ENDED. IT MAY HAVE JUST BEGUN

<https://mosaicmagazine.com/observation/history-ideas/2024/12/the-golden-age-of-american-jewry-hasnt-ended-it-may-have-just-begun/>

What Winston Churchill and Jerry Seinfeld can teach us about the challenges we face.

December 30, 2024 | Meir Soloveichik

About the author: Meir Soloveichik is the rabbi of Congregation Shearith Israel and the director of the Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought at Yeshiva University. His website, containing all of his media appearances, podcasts, and writing, can be found at meirsoloveichik.com.

This essay reflects on the inspiration that can be drawn from an unlikely pair of people: the first English, the second American. The first seemed destined from birth for heroism; the second exhibited courage in the face of surprising and terrible events. The first is Winston Churchill; the second is Jerry Seinfeld.

Let us begin with Churchill. In October 1941, Churchill visited Harrow, the school he had attended as a boy. The previous ten months had been the most perilous in Britain's history, when France fell, and Britain stood alone. In honor of Churchill, the students added a stanza to the traditional school song. It went as follows:

Not less we praise in darker days
The leader of our nation,
And Churchill's name shall win acclaim
From each new generation.

Moved by what he had heard, Churchill spoke about courage, human greatness made manifest, and then concluded:

You sang here a verse of a school song: you sang that extra verse written in my honor, which I was very greatly complimented by and which you have repeated



The sun illuminates the Statue of Liberty. *Lucas Franco via Wikimedia Commons.*

today. But there is one word in it I want to alter—I wanted to do so last year, but I did not venture to. It is the line: “Not less we praise in darker days.” I have obtained the headmaster’s permission to alter *darker* to *sterner*. “Not less we praise in sterner days.”

Do not let us speak of darker days: let us speak rather of sterner days. These are not dark days; these are great days—the greatest days our country has ever lived; and we must all thank God that we have been allowed, each of us according to our stations, to play a part.

What did Churchill mean? Were these not dark days? Were those past months not England’s darkest hour? Were there not countless dead. Was not England still without the United States? Did they not face the nightly terrors of the bombings of the Blitz?

Churchill, I think, had in mind those who wistfully looked back to the years between the wars as a time of peace and prosperity for England, and indeed for Europe. But Churchill understood that those purportedly blissful times were an age of illusions, that actually it was a time when evil was allowed to fester, when the seeds were sown for the danger and destruction that was to come, a time when his own prophetic warnings were ignored, culminating in the cheering of Neville Chamberlain at Buckingham Palace after he returned from Munich proclaiming “peace in our time.”

The age for which there was nostalgia, in other words, was a shameful period in British history, or as Churchill, still alone after Munich, declared in parliament, the British people must know

that we have passed an awful milestone in our history, when the whole equilibrium of Europe has been deranged, and that the terrible words have for the time being been pronounced against the Western democracies: “Thou art weighed in the balance and found wanting.”

He was saying, in 1941, that what was clear to him years ago had become clear to so many, and that meant that the current moment, which was seen by many as a dark time, was a time of clarity. Now so many understood what they were fighting for, and just as importantly, they understood what they were fighting against.

We do not find ourselves in World War II. But the year has been, for the Jewish people, one of great challenges. It is with this in mind that we may approach the assertion, made often in the past many months, that the golden age of American Jewry that made itself manifest in the second half of the 20th century now is no more.

What exactly made that period a Jewish golden age? Here is how it was described in the *Atlantic* magazine, in an [article](#) titled, appropriately, “The Golden Age of American Jews is Ending.”

Jews, who had once been excluded from the American establishment, became full-fledged members of it. And remarkably, they achieved power without having to abandon their identity. In faculty lounges and television writers’ rooms, in small magazines and big publishing houses, they infused the wider culture with

that identity. Their anxieties became American anxieties. Their dreams became American dreams.

That, according to the *Atlantic*, was what constituted the golden age of Jewry in America: Jews getting to write comedy shows and edit novels. This is to say that Jews became part of the cultural mainstream, a testament to American openness to be sure. But this did not in any way involve a genuine *Judaic* contribution to America.

If we wish to see what it meant to celebrate Jewish contributions to culture in the 1990s, we may look to an article in the *Yale Law Journal* in 1998 under the unusual title “Lawyer Shmawyer.” This article reported that, according to an online search,

the word *chutzpah* has appeared in 112 reported judicial decisions. Curiously, all but eleven of them have been filed since 1980. There are two possible explanations for this. One is that during the last thirteen years there has been a dramatic increase in the actual amount of *chutzpah* in the United States. This explanation seems possible, but unlikely. The more likely explanation is that Yiddish is quickly supplanting Latin as the spice in American legal language.

This is nice, certainly. But is the ubiquity of the word *chutzpah* an achievement for which we will be lauded in Jewish history? To ask this question is to answer it.

Meanwhile, during this purportedly golden age, much was not well, and the seeds were being sown for the dangers yet to come. The 1990s of my youth were indeed blissful; but as Charles Krauthammer wrote in 2003, “We are now paying the wages of the 1990s, our holiday from history. During that decade, every major challenge to America was deferred.” And what was true of America in general was true of American Jewry. During that period, so many American Jews ardently embraced and supported elite universities, even as intellectual rot was already festering there, giving us postmodernism and claims about colonialism; giving us Edward Said and Rashid Khalidi, anti-Americanism, hatred of the West, and much else.

At the same time, Jews, including many Jews with a genuine Jewish identity, were tempted by a fantasy that those who hate Jews could suddenly love them. So many embraced the mendacious mirage of Oslo and the ill-named peace process, the assurances of purportedly wise men that Gaza could become the Singapore of the Middle East. Like Chamberlain, so many of us celebrated and even helped advance the arming of Yasir Arafat and called it peace in our time. I grew up in this era, and it seemed nice—but some aspects of American Jewry at the time, we could say, were weighed in the balance and found wanting.

Now many of those illusions are gone; we have emerged from the cave of shadows. The past thirteen months have been difficult ones, but they have also been clarifying. We find ourselves in a moment of great challenges, and the clarity that comes with such a moment provides opportunities for courage and heroism.

It is with this in mind that we turn to our other inspiring figure, the Jew who perhaps achieved more cultural success than any other in America in the 90s.

It may seem odd in today's culturally fragmented world of Internet streaming, but I remember when millions across America gathered around their televisions to watch the *Seinfeld* series finale. It was perhaps the last mainstream popular-culture experience. By the standards of the *Atlantic*, this was the peak of the Jewish golden age in America. Jerry Seinfeld had truly conquered the writing room and made his anxieties America's anxieties. Had his life concluded in this manner, he would be known to Jewish and American history as a very wealthy man living the American dream on the Upper West Side.

But we now know that is not all that he is, and the path that he has taken after October 7 has been striking, especially when compared with other American Jews who have attained cultural stature and success comparable to his.

He stood with his people in their moment of crisis. He stood against the anti-Semites, and he did so fearlessly, as an American and as a Jew. He may sometime be heckled at his performances, but he readily responds. Upon being asked in an interview by the journalist Bari Weiss what his experience in Israel was like, he broke down and offered only his tears, but this answer was more eloquent than any other.

Thus I have seen, in my life, two sides of Seinfeld. Many of you are familiar with Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik's writings, which describe two sides of man, what he called Adam the first and Adam the second. Adam 1 is the man of the world; Adam 2 is the man of covenantal identity. We are called to embrace both, to be part of the world while embracing with courage the covenantal claims of Jewish peoplehood. But, for Rabbi Soloveitchik, this has not been the story of the Jews in the West. He writes:

The emancipated modern Jew has been trying, for a long time, to do away with this twofold responsibility which weighs heavily upon him. The Westernized Jew maintains that it is impossible to engage in both confrontations, the universal and the covenantal, which, in his opinion, are mutually exclusive.

This, Rabbi Soloveitchik suggested, is why so many Jews, seeking to succeed in the world, have lost the courage to embrace the covenantal claims of Jewishness. And so, building on the contrast between Adam 1 and Adam 2, I'd like to offer the parallel archetypes of Seinfeld 1 and Seinfeld 2.

Seinfeld 1 gave us one of the most popular television series in American history, and I will leave it to you to judge the value of that, but Seinfeld 2 has been the one we have seen in the wake of October 7. Seinfeld 2's most moving moment above all was captured in a clip that circulated the Internet thanks to an Orthodox Jewish Twitter account. This great assertion of Jewishness took place at the most unlikely of places: Citifield, home of the New York Mets.

A religious Jew was at the recent Mets playoff game, and saw Seinfeld, in a Mets outfit, standing in the box next to him. And this Jewish Mets fan had a brother who at the time was serving in the IDF, and who happened to be an ardent devotee of Seinfeld. He called out, "Jerry, my brother's watching from the Gaza border. Can I get a video for him?" One would expect Seinfeld to respond by saying "Go Mets!" But instead, he turned to the camera, held up his fist, and said: "Let's go IDF!"

Not many Jewish celebrities in America would have been willing to do that, and as I watched it I wondered which moment will be remembered as the golden moment in the American Jewish story of Jerry Seinfeld? When he achieved success in the writers' room and made his anxieties America's anxieties, or when he stood with the IDF, and with Jews in Israel and around the world?

We know what will be truly remembered, and we know what in the memory of the eternal Jewish people will truly endure. We know which achievements will truly matter. I first heard from Norman Podhoretz about the remarkable encounter in Jerusalem between [Saul Bellow](#) and [S.Y. Agnon](#), both Nobel laureates for literature. Bellow was by far more famous, but Agnon insisted that, because Hebrew was the language of an eternal people, only literature written or translated into Hebrew would survive. Here is Bellow's account of the meeting:

This spare old man, whose face has a remarkably youthful color, received me in his house, not far from the barbed-wire entanglements that divide the city, and while we were drinking tea, he asked me if any of my books had been translated into Hebrew. If they had not been, I had better see to it immediately, because, he said, they would survive only in the Holy Tongue. His advice I assume was only half serious. This was his witty way of calling my attention to a curious situation. I cited Heinrich Heine as an example of a poet who had done rather well in German. "Ah," said Mr. Agnon, "we have him beautifully translated into Hebrew. He is safe."

And if this is true about Saul Bellow's novels, then this is doubly true of Seinfeld's sitcom. As funny as episodes of *Seinfeld* may have been, an artistic achievement such as this will fade into the mists of time. But we are an eternal people, with an eternal memory. Next week we will mark and mourn the besieging of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, and now we are celebrating the heroism of the Maccabees. We remember our triumphs and our failures; we remember Jewish cowardice and we remember Jewish courage. And the simple poignancy of Seinfeld's "Let's go IDF!" reminds us that this moment has been one in which many Jews have suddenly been seized by the mysterious nature of their identity, responding with courage and conviction, standing on behalf of Israel and on behalf of the values of the West.

These acts of courage are not the same thing as achieving success in the writers' room or in the publishing house; they are better, more enduring as a Jewish achievement, and as a contribution to the future of America. For as Churchill reminded the students at his alma mater, clarity and courage are better, greater, than living in appeasement and illusion.

In standing courageously for their people, these Jews have been joined and supported the many non-Jewish Americans who care about the Jewish state.

We need to recognize what a blessing this is. During the recent debate over an anti-Israel resolution put forward in the Senate by Bernie Sanders, I imagined students in Israel, taking a class in American Jewish history a hundred years from now, studying the events of the last few weeks. What would their reaction be? Knowing Jewish history, these Jewish Israelis would, unfortunately, not be surprised to learn that Bernie Sanders submitted this travesty to the Senate, or that Jon Ossoff voted for it. And, sadly, given our history, none will be surprised

that the leaders of some of the world's foremost democracies expressed support for arresting the prime minister of Israel for war crimes.

But these Israelis, a hundred years hence, might well wonder and marvel at a speech given right before the vote by the incoming Senate majority leader, South Dakota's John Thune. Thune stressed that the Congress that would be sworn in on January 3, 2025, would ensure that Israel receives all the materiel it needs in its war against Hamas and Hizballah. He also insisted that the 119th Congress would seek to sanction the International Criminal Court if it did not cease targeting the Jewish state. "To our allies in Israel and to the Jewish people around the world," he went on, "my message to you is this: reinforcements are on the way."

Now it is safe to say that Jews are not a major constituency in South Dakota. Thune's remarks reflect the fact many millions of non-Jewish Americans care deeply about the well-being of Israel, and of Jews around the world. In this, many of them reflect a reverence for the scriptural story of the Jewish people. As Walter Russel Mead put it, Israel's endurance against its enemies remains, for these Americans, proof that "God exists; he drives history; he performs miracles in real time; [and that] God's word in the Bible is true."

Likewise, many of our fellow Americans see the American flags being desecrated at anti-Israel rallies in college quads and city streets. They know these monsters hate America as much as they hate Jews. They know that a defeat of the enemies of the Jews is a defeat of the enemies of America. And they know that victory over the enemies of the Jewish people here and overseas is a victory for America.

What all this means is that the stage is set not for darkness and despair, but for Jewish heroism in America, in alliance with so many who stand with us. We can embrace this calling in the knowledge of the miraculous nature of the Jewish story, the uniqueness of America, and the way one has inspired the other.

Recently I heard the former senator Ben Sasse give a speech in which he cited George Washington's letter to Newport Jewry. It is not widely known that this was not the first letter that Washington wrote to American Jews. The first was sent to Savannah's Hebrew Congregation, and its conclusion is even more incredible:

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 was saying, in effect, "Your story inspires our story. Your story of a providential planting in the promised land inspires our own efforts to create a country in *this* land." As Americans prepared to mark their country's bicentennial on July 4, 1976, they woke up to learn of the incredible IDF raid on Entebbe. But this is fitting, because the miraculous story of the Jewish people has inspired the American story in many ways—the miracle of one inspiring the remarkable nature of the other. Americans, as they marked their 200th year, read news of Jews who, as Washington said, had been planted by Providence in the promised

land. As we prepare to mark in 2026 the 250th anniversary of America, we should seize the opportunity to communicate to the next generation the exceptional nature of this country.

In light of everything we have seen over the past months, the lesson is clear. Don't speak of an age of American Jewish illusions as a golden age that is gone. To paraphrase Churchill, these are sterner days to be sure, but they are clearer days, and they are days when the illusions have evaporated, when the fantasies have failed; these are days when courage truly matters. This is an age when Jewish and American heroism is possible, and we must be grateful for being called, in our several stations, to play our part.

If, utilizing the freedom this glorious country affords us, we truly stand for all that is right, if we create and strengthen Jewish and civic institutions, if we work to defeat the enemies who hate the exceptional nature of America, and therefore hate the Jewish people whose Scripture gave rise to the exceptional way in which America sees itself, if we work courageously in defense of the Jewish people, and on behalf the America that we love, then the present time, not the 1990s, will be remembered as the golden age of American Jewry. Perhaps, one may say that this will be celebrated as our finest hour.

This essay has been adapted from a speech given on December 8, 2024 at the Jewish Leadership Conference in New York.