

**THE FUTURE OF THE JEWS; A PEOPLE AT THE CROSSROADS, David Vital**  
(Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1990).

The author is an Israeli who holds endowed chairs at Tel Aviv University and Northwestern University. Thus, he is familiar with the higher reaches of academia, both in Israel and the United States. In Israel he is a Professor of Diplomacy. In the United States he is a Professor of Jewish Civilization. *The Future of the Jews* is a provocative examination of both areas.

In the first third of the book, the author examines the origins of European Jewry through the French Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars, and the ultimate escape from the ghetto. This survey is worth reading, for its own sake. It is one of the clearest descriptions of the circumstances under which western European Jewry renounced its religious and social past, moving toward secularism and assimilation.

The rest of the book does not have the same clarity, though it is equally worth reading. Professor Vital gives us paragraph upon paragraph of chain-of-consciousness thought. Every line is saturated with challenging and debatable ideas. There is very little unity in this massive intellectual potpourri. It would be easy to imagine a competent professor challenging his classes to think by presenting the thesis of any of the paragraphs composed by Professor Vital.

The reader should be warned that anyone who is emotionally involved in the struggle for Jewish survival will find Vital to be gut-wrenchingly painful to read. In the forty seven years since Israel began its struggle for survival in a hostile world, Jews throughout the rest of the world have identified its survival with their own. Thus, there has emerged a kind of secular Jewish religion among western Jews who are no longer religious in the traditional sense. Jews who have no intention of ever living in Israel, and who may not even plan to visit the Jewish State, find themselves expressing their Jewishness through their involvement with Israel. That involvement may be merely charitable. It may also involve shouting advice to the Israelis across six thousand miles of ocean.

Vital is most caustic when he castigates those American Jews who offer gratuitous suggestions, which would entail the risk of Israeli lives, to the Government of Israel while the self-designated adviser stays safely out of harm's way. The author admits that an Israeli, a resident of Israel, might properly give the same advice within the framework of a vibrantly democratic society, but he would be prepared to bear the consequences if his advice proved to be bad.

In the end, Vital states that American Jews must anticipate facing the dilemma which would be imposed upon them if ever the United States Government turned against Israel. Would that be a fatal blow to the self-concept of those American Jews whose total Jewish identity is tied up in a vicarious Israeli existence? The author concludes that it is inevitable that Jews who rest their self-identification upon a philanthropic support of Israel are doomed to the loss of their Jewishness. He seems to believe that there is no future for the Jewish people outside Israel. They will simply be absorbed, and disappear.

Professor Vital is aware of the special role played by traditional orthodox religious belief, but he tends to underestimate it. He also puts all of the orthodox into one basket, categorizing them as detached from Israel (unless the State is created by the Messiah). He seems unaware of the national wing of orthodox Jewry which participates fully in Israeli life, serving in the army, settling on the dangerous frontier, and creating their own intellectuals ready to debate secularists like Professor Vital.

He mentions it only in passing, but he is sharply critical of American Jews for not having done enough to mitigate Hitler's Holocaust. He might better have omitted those bitter remarks because he does not tell the reader what American Jews might have done to save Hitler's victims from the gas chambers.

The book offers some modest bibliographic documentation, though most of the endnotes are devoted to fascinating and lengthy quotations in English and French. He does not really need documentation, however, because this thought provoking book is primarily engaged in tough intellectual exercise. That Vital regards the future of Jews outside Israel as doomed, is merely a challenge to debate.

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