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The Second Annual Yale Jewish Alumni Forum

"Jewish Life at Yale: Then and Now

Reunion Weekend - May 30, 1992

Battell Chapel

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REMARKS OF JUDGE HOWARD M. HOLTZMANN '42\*

Let me at the outset identify myself for you in the chronology of social history. I am a man who in all of his school years -- kindergarten, private school in New York City, and Yale College -- never sat in a classroom with a girl, a black, more than 10% Jewish students, or a Jewish teacher. Sounds archaic doesn't it? Thank God it is archaic.

According to Dan Oren's remarkable book, Joining the Club: A History of Jews at Yale, the Class of 1942 in Yale College had barely 8% Jewish students, the lowest percentage in some thirty years before, and just about the record low in any year thereafter. What was it like to be part of that 8%?

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\* Delivered in a panel discussion moderated by Dan A. Oren '79 M.D., and including also members of the Yale Classes of '52, '62, '72, '82 and '94.

Nothing I am about to say will be news to anyone who has read Dan Oren's book, but, perhaps, it may be useful to have an eye-witness report.

For one thing, the 8% tried as hard as possible to be like the 92% -- to act like them, to speak like them, to dress like them. When I went to New York on week-ends in my upperclass years, I wore a derby hat and yellow string gloves, like the more fashionable of the 92%, but I did not have in my pocket an engraved invitation to a debutante coming-out party such as were routinely sent to members of Yale fraternities, which then largely excluded Jews. Some in the 8% tried to hide their Jewish identity, while others acknowledged being Jewish. Note that I said "acknowledged", not "proclaimed", for even those of us who acknowledged our background adopted as much protective coloration as possible.

Most of us did not perceive ourselves as living in a ghetto. The picture is much more complex, and there are aspects of it that may appear inconsistent to you. Thus, while most of our roommates were Jewish -- the University typically assigned only Jews to live with Jews -- many of our best friends were not.

And consider this inconsistency: I knew it was virtually impossible for a Jew to become a member of the Editorial Board of the Daily News, so I did not enter the competition for that. But I could, and did, have my name on the editorial page as a weekly columnist with a by-line, a

position for which I did not have to compete, but which was assigned by a Board for which I could not realistically compete.

The Dramat was different. Jews were occasionally elected to its Board, so it was worth the gamble to enter the competition. In my year, two of us made it.

Although there were only 8% Jews in the Class of 1942, more than twice that percentage were admitted to Phi Beta Kappa. In sharp contrast, the number of my Jewish classmates elected to the boards of the extracurricular activities considered important enough to be listed in the 1942 Class Book was quite bleak: Yale Daily News Board - 0; Dramat, as I have said - 2; Political Union - 0, Community Council, the social service agency - 0; Budget Drive, the campus charity collection - 0; Yale Banner, the yearbook - 0; Yale Literary Magazine - 2 (but election was automatic if you had five pieces accepted for publication); WOCD, the new campus radio station - 1. Dwight Hall (Protestant) and the Thomas More Society (Catholic) were listed in our Class Book as extracurricular activities -- Hillel (Jewish) was not. And it is typical that when I listed all my extracurricular activities in my biography in the Year Book, I did not include Hillel. Looking back, I am not very proud of that.

~~And~~ consider this: I won a major speaking prize in each of my upperclass years -- the Buck Prize in sophomore year, the Ten Eyck 2nd prize in junior year, and the deForest

Prize in senior year. Yet, I was not invited to be one of the speakers on Class Day in 1942. I was not surprised. The speakers were all members of senior honor societies, whose doors were, of course, closed to me.

Has the situation in the Class of 1942 changed in fifty years? I checked our 50th Reunion Class History. Here is the Jewish scoreboard: Class Officers - 0; Executive Committee - 1 out of 25; Class Agents - 0; Reunion Committee - 1; Reunion Gift Committee -- 2. I am confident, however, that in 1992 this is coincidence, not a conscious process of adverse selection.

The 8%, for the most part, look back on our student years with fondness, continue to be loyal to Yale, and, I suspect, provided more than 8% of our 50th Reunion Class Gift.

Let me close by quoting to you from my own biography in the 50th Year Class Book. I wrote that "it seems a strange Yale that I attended so enthusiastically, and so docilely. It never occurred to me to picket President Seymour's office ... to complain that the faculty included not a single identifiable Jew." Later, in the same piece, I wrote that, looking at Yale today, "I like what I see: a Yale hospitable to a widely diversified multicultural group of students (some of them even majoring ~~in~~ Judaic Studies)". Mal Bfenfield also wrote about being Jewish at Yale, noting that he never had dinner in Mory's until he was a member of the Medical School faculty. And Paul

Levine also mentioned the "J" word in his contribution to the 50th Reunion Class Book. This outspoken mention of Jewishness is something I would not have written in 1942, or for my 25th Reunion. That I could do it now, is no tribute to the boldness of advancing years, but rather to what younger classes -- and Hillel -- have accomplished in changing the atmosphere at Yale. I thank you all.

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Afterword: These remarks, having been made on Saturday, May 30 could not record that on the next day at the Fiftieth Reunion Memorial ~~Service~~ of the Class of 1942 in Battell Chapel, Paul Levine '42 was invited to read, in English, the traditional memorial prayers, "El Mole Rachimim" and "Kaddish". Jewish classmates were deeply moved by this sensitive innovation.