**Our Promised Land:**

**Central Park, Cultural Pluralism and American Jewish Flourishing**

**1. Henry James, *The American Scene* (1905)**

There is no swarming like that of Israel when once Israel has got a start, and the scene here bristled, at every step, with the signs and sounds, immitigable, unmistakable, of a Jewry that has burst all bounds. . . . [With] the exception of some shy corner of Asia, no district in the world known to the statistician has so many inhabitants to the yard.

**2. Adam Gopnick, “Olmsted’s Trip” *The New Yorker* (1997)**

For Olmsted, building a better park was a way of helping to shelter commonplace civilization. A liberal society couldn’t tell people what games to play, but it could build a park where they could play them.

The plan of the Park seems disordered. The Mall is oriented toward nothing much and goes nowhere in particular. The lakes and ponds are all nestled in their own places, and are not part of a continuous waterway. The main areas are not neatly marked off but dribble away into one another. There is a deliberate absence of orientation, of clear planning, of a familiar, reassuring lucidity.

Some of the wealthy New Yorkers who were involved in the project hated it; the slack structure drove them crazy. In the years from 1858 to 1861, as the Park was being built, most of Olmsted’s energy was spent in resisting the steady, sometimes overwhelming pressure to make the Park look like a park: to give it a shape, a layout, a fixed form. August Belmont, one of the richest and most powerful men in New York, seconded a plan, created by another rich man, Robert Dillon, to have a grand “Cathedral avenue,” a single central allée of trees, run, Versailles style, from end to end of the Park. Olmsted’s objection was not merely that such an allée would break the illusion of a forest in the middle of the city but that it would give a false, forced, European-style unity to what was meant to be a non-centered, American design. Unifying elements were exactly what wasn’t wanted. He wrote, “A simple and unartificial treatment with variety and some degree of intricacy, seems to be preferable in a City-Park to straight lines of trees or stately architecture. These belong not to parks for the people but to palatial gardens.” The Park remained “communicative,” not ceremonial.

Olmsted and Vaux . . . decided to build, on approximately seven hundred and seventy acres of smelly swamp and rocky outcroppings and weedy trees, an orchestrated fantasy of nature—meadows and rock bluffs, ponds and wooded hillsides, memories of London Fields co-existing with intimations of the Palisades. Even the materials for the Park’s bridges were “inauthentic”—Nova Scotia stone and Philadelphia brick. The Park was made, not found.

Olmsted’s greatest accomplishment was to make a park that is a playground, but where the play doesn’t interfere with the parkness and the park doesn’t interfere with the play. The Park’s 1863 Annual Report dismissed the notion that it ought to be given over to a single, fixed kind of “American” pleasure:

The Park is an enclosed ground devoted to such popular amusements as can . . . be enjoyed in the open air. This area is situated in the centre of the city, having a population not altogether homogenous, reared in different climes, and bringing to the society of the metropolis views of labor and ideas of social enjoyment differing as widely as the temperature of the various countries of their origin. A day’s work in the large cities of Europe, and a day’s work in New York, are not the same; the amusements and routine of the daily life of the Sicilian and the Scotchman are dissimilar. Each brings with him the traditions and the habits of his own country. The work of fusing the people of differing nationalities into a homogenous body can be accomplished only during the life of two or three generations, and it would be difficult to prescribe rules that would satisfy these dissimilar tastes and habits. The most that can be attained at the Park, is to afford an opportunity for those recreations or entertainments that are generally acceptable.

There is a sadness hidden in Central Park; you confess it reluctantly only to discover that everybody shares it. In plain English, it’s a very hard place to find your way around. That’s the price of Olmsted’s resistance to over-regimentation. How far is the Carousel from the Lake? What’s the quickest path from the Wollman Rink to the Boathouse? Exactly where *is* the Ramble? You learn how to get around Central Park by experience. There’s no fixed path to take you where you want to go.

If Olmsted’s Park expresses liberal virtues, it also expresses some of the limitations of liberalism. Olmsted resisted a central allée, with the result that there is no central allée. In Central Park, you are never alienated, but you are often disoriented. The Park is never, quite, all yours. It adapts itself to you, but it never remembers you.

Unrequited love is the melancholy of liberal society.

Olmsted wanted to make an American park, and he did, and to walk in his Park is to walk through a particular kind of American experience. We are often told that one of the problems with liberalism is that it brings nothing to the cultural table but a level playing field.

Liberalism *has* made some beautiful things, though—bridges, arts centers, parks—that have their own balance and logic. Perhaps what liberalism brings to the cultural table is not level and featureless, like a playing field, but adaptable and absent-minded, like a park—a park like Olmsted’s, where everybody goes to play and nobody leaves a footprint.

**4. Horace M. Kallen (1882-1974), *From* “Democracy Versus the Melting Pot” (The Nation, Feb. 25, 1915)**

More than any other present-day immigrant group, [the Jews] are in flight from persecution and disaster; in search of economic opportunity, liberty of conscience, civic rights. They have settled chiefly in the Northeast, with New York City as the center of greatest concentration.  . . . But they differ from the subjugated Slavic peoples in that the latter look backward and forward to actual, even if enslaved homelands; the Jews, in the mass, have thus far looked to America as their home land. . . .

They come from lands of sojourn, where they have been for ages treated as foreigners, at most as semi-citizens, subject to disabilities and persecutions. They come with no political aspirations against the peace of other states such as move the Irish, the Poles, the Bohemians. They come with the intention to be completely incorporated into the body-politic of the state. They alone, as Mr. H.G. Wells notes, of all the immigrant peoples have made spontaneously conscious and organized efforts to prepare themselves and their brethren for the responsibilities of American citizenship. . . .  Yet of all self-conscious peoples they are the most self-conscious. Of all immigrants they have the oldest civilized tradition, they are longest accustomed to living under law, and are at the outset the most eager and the most successful in eliminating the external differences between themselves and their social environment. Even their religion is flexible and accommodating, as that of the Christian sectories is not, for change involves no change in doctrine, only in mode of life.

Yet, once the wolf is driven from the door and the Jewish immigrant takes his place in our society a free man and an American, he tends to become all the more a Jew. The cultural unity of his race, history and background is only continued by the new life under the new conditions. Mr. H.G. Wells calls the Jewish quarter in New York a city within a city, and with more justice than other quarters because, although it is far more in tune with Americanism than the other quarters, it is also far more autonomous in spirit and self-conscious in culture. It has its sectaries, its radicals, its artists, its literati; its press, its literature, its theater, its Yiddish and its Hebrew, its Talmudical colleges and its Hebrew schools, its charities and its vanities, and its coordinating organization, the Kehilla, all more or less duplicated wherever Jews congregate in mass. Here not religion alone, but the whole world of radical thinking, carries the mother-tongue and the father-tongue, with all that they imply. Unlike the parochial schools, their separate schools, being national, do not displace the public schools; they supplement the public schools. . . In sum, the most eagerly American of the immigrant groups are also the most autonomous and self-conscious in spirit and culture.

Men may change their clothes, their politics, their wives, their religions, their philosophies, to a greater or lesser extent: they cannot change their grandfathers. Jews or Poles or Anglo-Saxons, would have to cease to be. The selfhood which is inalienable in them, and for the realization of which they require "inalienable" liberty, is ancestrally determined, and the happiness which they pursue has its form implied in ancestral endowment. This is what, actually, democracy in operation assumes. . . . . And as intelligence and wisdom prevail over "politics" and special interests, as the steady and continuous pressure of the inalienable qualities and purposes of human groups more and more dominate the confusion of our common life, the outlines of a possible great and truly democratic commonwealth become discernible:

Its form is that of the Federal republic; its substance a democracy of nationalities, cooperating voluntarily and autonomously in the enterprise of self-realization through the perfection of men according to their kind. The common language of the commonwealth, the language of it great political tradition, is English, but each nationality expresses its emotional and voluntary life in its own language, in its own inevitable aesthetic and intellectual forms. The common life of the commonwealth is politico-economic, and serves as the foundation and background for the realization of the distinctive individuality of each *natio* that composes it.

Thus "American civilization" may come to mean the perfection of the cooperative harmonies of "European civilization," . . . a multiplicity in a unity, an orchestration of mankind. As in an orchestra, every type of instrument has its specific timbre and tonality, founded in its substance and form; as every type has its appropriate theme and melody in the whole symphony, so in society each ethnic group is the natural instrument, its spirit and culture are its theme and melody, and the harmony and dissonances and discords of them all make the symphony of civilization, with this difference: a musical symphony is written before it is played; in the symphony of civilization the playing is the writing, so that there is nothing so fixed and inevitable about its progressions as in music, so that within the limits set by nature they may vary at will, and the range and variety of the harmonies may become wider and richer and more beautiful.

But the question is, do the dominant classes in America want such a society?

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