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A Modest Immigration Proposal: Ban Jews

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Until his dying day, my dad's Uncle Bern was a communist sympathizer. I remember him as an affable old man with a gracious wife who made a modest living selling antique lace. He probably wouldn't have hurt a fly. Yet he found much to admire in the most murderous ideology of the 20th century, responsible for tens of millions of deaths from the killing fields of Cambodia to the gulags of Murmansk.

If you're Jewish in America, chances are there's at least one Uncle Bern somewhere in your family tree. As the scholar Ruth Wisse noted last year in Tablet magazine, Jewish intellectual life in the 1930s and 40s was largely defined by one's stance toward one thing: The Party. Historians reckon that Jews accounted for nearly half the Communist Party's total membership in those years, while many other Jews were close fellow travelers.

Most of these people, like my great-uncle, were deeply misguided idealists who otherwise led quiet and decent lives. A tiny handful of others — including atomic spies Julius Rosenberg, David Greenglass, Harry Gold and Morton Sobell — betrayed America's most important military secrets to Stalinist Russia and did incalculable damage to the country and the world.

Here's a thought experiment: Would the United States have been better off if it had banned Jewish immigration sometime in the late 19th century, so that the immigrant parents of Rosenberg and Sobell had never set foot here? The question is worth asking, because so many of the same arguments made against African, Latin-American and Muslim immigrants today might have easily been applied to Jews just over a century ago.

Consider some of the parallels.

Crime? In 1908, the New York City police commissioner, Theodore Bingham, caused a public uproar (for which he later apologized) when he claimed that half the city's criminals were Jews. The truth was closer to the opposite: Jewish crime rates, at about 16 percent, were considerably lower than their roughly 25 percent share of New York's overall population. The same goes today, when, contrary to much Trumpian propaganda, incarceration rates for immigrants are nearly half what they are for native-born Americans.

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Racial desirability? Just as Donald Trump wants more Norwegian immigrants and none from "s-hole countries," the early 20th-century eugenicist, conservationist and immigration restrictionist Madison Grant was obsessed with protecting the "Nordic" races against those he termed "social discards" — including "the Slovak, the Italian, the Syrian and the Jew."

Assimilation? This week, Attorney General Jeff Sessions asked, in an interview with Fox News, “What good does it do to bring in somebody who’s illiterate in their own country, has no skills and is going to struggle in our country and not be successful?” That seems to be the general way of thinking in this administration.

Now compare that to a 1907 article in McClure’s magazine, titled “The Great Jewish Invasion,” which observed of Russian Jews, “no people have had a more inadequate preparation, educational and economic, for American citizenship.” Henry Adams, the great American patrician, wrote of “furtive Yacooob or Ysaac still reeking of the ghetto, snarling a weird Yiddish.” In 1914, Edward Alsworth Ross, the famous progressive sociologist from the University of Wisconsin, called Jews “moral cripples” whose “tribal spirit intensified by social isolation prompts them to rush to the rescue of the caught rascal of their own race.”

Subversion? During the campaign, Donald Trump said at a New Hampshire rally that Syrian refugees “could make the Trojan horse look like peanuts.” His campaign then infamously called for “a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States until our country’s representatives can figure out what the hell is going on.”

Similar charges have long been leveled at Jews. Henry Ford accused Jews of causing the First World War. A generation later, famed aviator Charles Lindbergh charged Jews with trying to inveigle the United States into war. Lindbergh was the leading champion in his day of “America First.” Still later, Jewish “neocons” somehow became the shadowy instigators of America’s wars in the Middle East.

O.K., you get the idea. And it’s worth acknowledging there are often kernels of anecdotal or statistical truth for nearly every ethnic stereotype. Jews were indeed overrepresented in radical political circles. Jewish gangsters — a.k.a. the “Kosher Nostra” — were nearly as notorious as their Irish and Italian peers in the early 20th century. There were Jewish students who rallied against the draft during the First World War, just as many more would rally against it over Vietnam.

Yet imagine if the United States had followed the advice of the immigration restrictionists in the late 19th century and banned Jewish immigrants, at least from Central Europe and Russia, on what they perceived to be some genetic inferiority. What, in terms of enterprise, genius, imagination, and philanthropy would have been lost to America as a country? And what, in terms of human tragedy, would have ultimately weighed on our conscience?

Today, American Jews are widely considered the model minority, so thoroughly assimilated that organizational Jewish energies are now largely devoted to protecting our religious and cultural distinctiveness. Someone might ask Jeff Sessions and other eternal bigots what makes an El Salvadoran, Iranian or Haitian any different.