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Daniel J. Elazar, Editor and Publisher • David Clayman, Executive Editor

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JEWES ON THE MOVE:  
THE NEW WAVE OF JEWISH MIGRATION AND ITS  
IMPLICATIONS FOR ORGANIZED JEWRY

Daniel J. Elazar

One hundred years after the beginning of the great migration of European Jewry to new worlds, the Jewish people confront a mass immigration of Jews nearly parallel in size and scope. Millions of Jews are once again on the move, most propelled this time by the positive attractions of new locations - France, the United States, the sunbelt, or what have you - rather than pushed by unbearable conditions in their countries or communities of origin. While this new great migration lacks the drama of its earlier parallel, its implications for Jewish life are no less great.

### Migration: A Central Theme of the Jewish Experience

Migration must be considered one of the central themes of the Jewish experience. No other people, not even the American people, has been so thoroughly shaped by migration, or so fully embraced migration as a means to deal with its problems of survival and even development. Jewish history can be read as a kind of point-counterpoint between the historical realities of Jewish existence and the idealized expectations of finding a place -- Eretz Israel -- which is intended to serve as a final destination to break the migratory cycle. The dialectic of these two themes remains with us today as before, this despite the realization of the first plateau of the Zionist dream, namely the reestablishment of the State of Israel as the place where Jews should be able to come to rest forever.

As in the case of every new society, Jewish history begins with a migration, that of Abraham from Canaan to Eretz Israel, in a deliberate effort to break with his past environment in order to begin to build the new society. The Bible puts it thus: "Go thou from your land, your kith, and your father's house to a land that I (God) will show you." The establishment of the Jewish people on constitutional foundations was associated with the second migration, the exodus from Egypt. Indeed, the migratory process was a major element in bringing about the reconstitution of the people at that time, as the slave element was purged through 40 years' wandering in the desert. Then for over 600 years the Jews had a haven in their land and migration virtually ceased to be a factor in Jewish life. The one migration that took place in

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that period, the forced exile of major elements of the ten northern tribes, represented a migration out of the Jewish fold.

As a result of the destruction of the First Temple, however, the Jews revived their ability to turn migration to useful ends and, as a result of their migration to Babylonia and then the return of a percentage of them to Eretz Israel, managed to create a new theological perspective and socio-religious base with a new set of institutions, especially the synagogue, embodying both, which enabled the Jewish people to continue to survive and develop. In a real sense, the migration surrounding the first exile and return are paradigmatic of the impact of migration on the Jewish people in subsequent epochs whereby migration comes about out of necessity more than choice but the Jews capitalize upon that necessity to undertake the institutional and ideational adaptations required for their continued existence as a creative and dynamic people.

From then on, migration became a regular feature of Jewish life. In the epoch immediately following the return, Jews began to migrate voluntarily as well as out of necessity in their search for opportunity, establishing communities throughout the ancient world by utilizing the patterns developed through the Babylonian experience. The mixture of migration by choice and migration by necessity became a standard feature of the Jewish experience and has remained such to this day.

### Migration and Jewish Public Policy

By and large, migrations, whether voluntary or out of necessity, occurred as a result of forces or circumstances external to the Jews involved. At certain periods, however, migration became an instrument of Jewish public policy. Thus at various times during the Middle Ages, when Jews were settled in relatively small political entities whose rulers vacillated between friendly and hostile policies towards their Jewish subjects, the Jews themselves encouraged migration to keep their options open and to protect themselves against these vagaries of mood and behavior. In the modern period, Jews adopted a policy of encouraging migration once efforts at local emancipation failed to achieve full rights and equality for Jews. In addition, there has been an enduring Jewish policy commitment to encourage migration to Eretz Israel. This remains a sine qua non of Jewish public policy, as it has since the beginning of Jewish history.

The modern epoch, which lasted from the middle of the 17th to the middle of the 20th centuries, was one of almost continuous mass migrations for the Jewish people which reached its climax in the last two generations of the epoch, from the late 1870's until just after the establishment of the State of Israel. During that time, as we all know, the geography of the Jewish world was radically transformed in what can only be described as a paroxysm of intercontinental movement. When the dust settled early in the 1950's, there was a general feeling in the Jewish world that the era of great migration had come to a close and that migration would decline as a significant factor in Jewish life.

### The Resumption of Mass Migrations

In fact, while there has been a reduction in the number of migrants in any single year, again today migration has become significant for the Jewish polity. In the 1960's mass migrations resumed, first with the exodus of North African Jews to France after the French evacuation of Algeria, followed by the successful effort of world Jewry to open the doors of the Soviet Union and other East European countries. A third source of migration in the past twenty years consists of Jews from certain countries of the southern hemisphere (e.g. Argentina, Chile, Zimbabwe, South Africa) seeking safer homes. A fourth is the relatively small but still significant aliyah of Jews from the West. There is the migration of Israeli yordim which assumed mass proportions in the later years of the 1970's. Most recently, there has been the migration of Iranian Jews from that country

as a result of the Khomeini revolution. Except in the case of the Western olim and Israeli yordim, these intercontinental moves involve migration out of felt necessity.

All told, in the last two decades hundreds of thousands of Jews have migrated from one country to another; indeed the total number of migrants can be estimated in the vicinity of one million. The Table offers low and high estimates of the number of migrants in each category.

Estimated Jewish Intercontinental  
Emigration Since 1960

| <u>From</u>                  | <u>Low Estimate</u> | <u>High Estimate</u> |
|------------------------------|---------------------|----------------------|
| 1. North Africa              | 320,000             | 320,000              |
| 2. U.S.S.R. & Eastern Europe | 350,000             | 460,000              |
| 3. Southern Hemisphere       | 70,000              | 80,000               |
| 4. Western Countries         | 50,000              | 70,000               |
| 5. Israel                    | 205,000             | 300,000              |
| 6. Iran                      | 60,000              | 70,000               |
|                              | <u>1,055,000</u>    | <u>1,300,000</u>     |

While based on the best data available, they are no more than estimates.

In addition to the intercontinental migrations, there is the phenomenon of voluntary intracontinental migration. In North America, for example, the movement of Jews from the northeastern United States to the South and West has taken on mass proportions in the last decade. Parallel to it is the migration from Eastern Canada to the Canadian West or to the United States sunbelt. While accurate figures are hard to come by, no less than 600,000 and perhaps as many as a million Jews have been involved in such migrations since the end of World War II. A similar phenomena is taking place in a more modest way in Europe, with Jews from the cold climates of northern and western Europe retiring to the warmer climates of southern Europe.

Nor would any discussion of contemporary migratory trends be complete without reference to the interurban migration which is characteristic of the metropolitan frontier. In North America, this manifests itself in the movement from the erstwhile central cities to the suburbs and from suburb to suburb or from suburb to exurb. Within Israel there is a similarly extensive migration from city to city within the major metropolitan regions in the Israeli's perennial search for better housing. The same phenomena are manifested in Europe, Latin America, South Africa and Australia, although perhaps in a slightly slower paced way. Those migrations account for several million more Jews.

There is every reason to believe that only a small minority of the Jewish people have not changed their place of residence in some significant way in the past two decades.

Implications

The implications of all this for those engaged in the governance of the Jewish

community are exceedingly important. How much communal time is taken up in dealing with the consequences of migration? How many institutions have been created, adapted or reconstituted as a result of migration? How much of the social fabric with which we are familiar and upon which we have counted for the maintenance of Jewish life has been rent by migration? While we do not have precise answers to these questions, in the larger sense we all know the answer.

We can classify our responses to this phenomenon in three broad categories:

- (1) institutional responses to the migrants themselves - that is to say, what is done, if anything, to help them migrate and to absorb them in their new homes when they arrive;
- (2) social adaptations as a result of migration - that is to say, changes in the way Jews live as a result of changing their place of residence;
- (3) constitutional and institutional adaptations - that is to say, how we transform our institutions to cope with the changes brought about by migration.

Each of these is a subject in and of itself. Here we can only mention certain highlights in connection with each. Take the first. Over the past century there has developed a network of organizations within the Jewish polity whose function it is to handle the problems of "recognized" Jewish migrants, whether with securing the right to migrate, helping transfer the migrants, or absorbing them at the end of their journey. Jewish leaders make their careers in these organizations and a substantial civil service has developed to run them. Indeed, the Jews have become so good at handling such immigrants that over the past two decades American Jewish organizations have been called upon by the U.S. Government to second personnel to assist it in refugee absorption. I will gainsay that there is no more experienced body of people in the world than the Jewish civil service engaged in this enterprise.

While the tasks of dealing with migration and absorption are principally assigned to specialists within the Jewish world, dealing with social and institutional adaptations is a task that touches all Jewish leadership and every aspect of the Jewish civil service, whether perceived as such or not. Every rabbi, every social worker, every Jewish educator, every communal professional is involved in the task of adaptation - in new communities or communities with large numbers of new residents, to deal with the effects of in-migration, and in old communities, to deal with the effects of out-migration.

With regard to social adaptation, migration in the diaspora has been a major factor in the transformation of Jewish life from its traditional organic basis to an associational one, whereby Jews function as Jews through joining Jewish institutions rather than through living in an organic Jewish setting. We are all aware of the disappearance of the "Jewish street" and its replacement, to a greater or lesser degree, by institutional ties. Migration has had a major role in stimulating this process.

More recently, migration has taken many Jews beyond associationalism, to cut them off from any serious institutional ties to the Jewish community because of where they have settled. Associational ties can survive without the Jewish street but to be sufficiently "dense," to be meaningful, do require a Jewish neighborhood, which is what replaced the Jewish street for a while. Recent migrations, however, have even destroyed Jewish neighborhoods in many parts of the diaspora. This is a matter that must be of serious concern to the Jewish community. A major task of Jewish leadership is to motivate people who no longer live with other Jews to maintain or restore their ties with the Jewish community.

Lines of Response

In that connection, the tasks of Jewish leadership and, most particularly, the Jewish civil service are to build and maintain an appropriate institutional framework to accommodate our migrating people and to develop ways and means to better cope with the phenomenon of migration. At the very least, the Jewish leaders and the Jewish civil service must learn to understand the phenomenon and must build into communal plans ways and means to deal with it. Doing so is all the more necessary now in an age in which public institutions have taken responsibility for dealing with human problems far beyond what was customary a century ago. The days of the great migrations were, by and large, days of laissez-faire when individuals and families had to shift for themselves. The fact that even then Jews responded beyond the demands of laissez-faire to help their brethren gave us a head start in dealing with the present situation in which it is accepted public responsibility not only to deal with migrants but with migration as a phenomenon.

The basic institutions of Jewish life have long since been adapted to the migratory facts of Jewish life. The synagogue, which was developed as a result of the migration to Babylonia 2,500 years ago, is a preeminent example of this. It is an eminently portable institution designed to accommodate a migratory people, easily established and easily moved. Indeed, the greatest limitation to congregational mobility in Jewish history is probably that of the last 150 years, generated by the emphasis on large edifices which create an investment in a particular place and become costly to replace.

The Jewish community itself is equally portable. According to Halachah, any 10 Jewish males can come together and constitute a community (while 10 males are needed, the community is actually constituted by the men, women and children who assemble together). Nothing can be more portable than that. In fact, the Jewish people in its organized capacity is known (in Hebrew) as Adat Bnai Israel, the congregation (edah) or assembly of the Children of Israel. The phrase itself signifies the way in which Jews organize themselves, by congregating or assembling, while the history of the edah attests to its portability. Every local community constituted by a minyan or more of Jews is a replica of the edah as a whole. It may or may not be co-terminus with the Bet Knesset. If it is not, every bet knesset is a further manifestation of this capacity to come together and establish a community.

Beyond the basic institutions of congregation and community, each segment of the Jewish polity must develop its own institutions for each time and place. There is little question, for example, that the havurah which has developed in the United States in the last two decades is one institutional response to the needs of a migratory population, a means to create ties that go beyond the merely associational in an effort to provide surrogate familial links for people who are far away from their organic families. But it is only one device for coping with migration.

By and large, our efforts to deal with Jews on the move other than organized migrations have been ad hoc. That does not mean that they have not worked well, but it also does not mean that we would not profit from a serious and systematic study of the contemporary situation with regard to Jewish migration. Given the size of the present migrations and their highly individualistic character, it is critical that we at least find out who is moving where, when and how, and what they are doing Jewishly when they get there. Studies of this kind would be a first step toward developing appropriate responses to this new wave of wandering Jews.

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Daniel J. Elazar is Chairman of the Center for Jewish Community Studies and Senator N.M. Paterson Professor of Intergovernmental Relations at Bar-Ilan University.