

# Jerusalem Letter

## Jerusalem Center For Public Affairs

JERUSALEM INSTITUTE FOR FEDERAL STUDIES • CENTER FOR JEWISH COMMUNITY STUDIES

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

ISSN: 0334-4096

JL: 71 19 Sivan 5744 / 19 June 1984

### ISRAELI EMIGRES AND THE NEW YORK FEDERATION: A CASE STUDY IN AMBIVALENT POLICYMAKING FOR "JEWISH COMMUNAL DEVIANTS"

Steven M. Cohen

*Communal Deviants: Problematic Groups for American Jewry / Seven Reactions to Communal Deviants / A Policy Emerges: Cultural Services for Israelis / Lessons and Implications*

In the Spring of 1983, concluding a year of intensive deliberation, the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies of New York adopted a comprehensive policy to provide a limited array of services to Israeli emigres living in New York. The considerable controversy which preceded that decision reflected deep value conflicts within the Federation about the propriety of serving a very special group of Jews in need. It aroused passionate feelings of ambivalence, embarrassment, and anger.

But the case of policymaking for Israeli emigres should not be seen in isolation. In fact, it can be placed within a larger context of communal decision-making about several sub-populations in American Jewry, all of whom may be referred to as "Jewish communal deviants."

#### COMMUNAL DEVIANTS: PROBLEMATIC GROUPS FOR AMERICAN JEWRY

"Communal deviants" are those whose behavior (even if "through no fault of their own") departs — or deviates — from the expectations of the organized community. They include such unconventional family types as never-married adults, childless couples, the intermarried, and the divorced. They also include young adults who move to areas of sparse Jewish settlement in order, according to some, to escape from their Jewishness. Many communal leaders have, in effect, also termed deviant (or worse) those Russian

The Jerusalem Letter is a periodic report intended to objectively clarify and analyze issues of Jewish and Israel public policy.  
Subscriptions: Individual: \$35 per year; Institutions: \$50 per year. © Copyright. All rights reserved.

New Address: 21 Arlosoroff St., Jerusalem, 92181, Israel  
Temporary Telephone: (02)632017

emigres who settle in the United States, allegedly for mere material reasons, instead of heading for Israel, as many of their more praiseworthy Zionist predecessors did (some call the former Russians *noshrim* or dropouts). Communal deviants also include emigrating Israelis (some call them *yordim*, or descenders, in contrast with the more admirable *olim*, ascenders, those who migrate from the diaspora to Israel).

In the ideal world of organized Jewry, Jews should marry Jewish spouses of the opposite sex, stay married, and have children quickly (and plentifully). The American-born also should live in areas of high Jewish density with established networks of community services which they ought to use and support. The international refugee, though, ought to settle in Israel. When significant numbers of Jews fail to conform to these expectations, lay and professional communal leaders typically manifest a variety of now classic reactions. Many of these reactions, in fact, emerged among communal leaders in New York and elsewhere when the migration of Israelis to the United States became noteworthy.

We may identify at least seven broad types of reactions to Jewish communal deviants generally. Some are cognitive, having to do with the image of the group in question. Others are action-oriented, having more to do with communal policy towards the group. The three cognitive reactions are (1) denial, (2) cover-up, and (3) exaggeration. The four policy-oriented reactions are: (4) malign neglect, (5) benign neglect, (6) containment, and (7) accommodation. Each reaction bears elaboration, both in general terms and in the specific case of providing services to Israelis in New York.

#### SEVEN REACTIONS TO COMMUNAL DEVIANTS

(1) *Denial*: One of the first reactions many communal leaders have to the initial presentation of a problem of growing numbers of communal deviants is to deny the problem exists, to try to refute the notion that large numbers of Jews might be contravening conventional notions of how Jews should behave. If Jews are family-oriented, then it is hard to believe they are staying single longer, or divorcing, or emerging as homosexuals. If the Jewish State is so wonderful and Israelis are so heroic and committed to her survival, then the very presence of Israelis in the United States runs contrary to the idealistic and idealized images of the Zionist endeavor. In the early 1970s in particular, several communal leaders reacted to the reports of a slow but mounting Israeli migration to the United States by denying the veracity of the claim, or by denying that Israeli emigres constituted a social problem worthy of communal attention.

(2) *Cover-up*: A second typical response entails conceding that the communally deviant group may indeed exist in some notable number, but that attention to the group can serve only to impugn the character of the Jewish community. Of course, this reaction does not characterize all groups, only those whose existence might in some way serve to diminish Jewish communal influence or its putatively positive image in the eyes of impressionable Jews or Gentiles. Particularly embarrassing groups which have been the object of such a reaction include drug and alcohol abusers, child abusers and violent spouses, non-elderly Jews needing public assistance, and, in an earlier era, criminals.

To this fairly standard list of genuine social deviants we can add a special, admittedly less serious case, that of Israeli emigres. As noted, for some, the appearance of many Israelis in the United States constituted an embarrassment, a threat, an indictment of the quality of life in Israel and a rejection of Zionist values. Many communal leaders believed emigrating Israelis represented to elected officials and other American influentials a sign of weakening resolve in the beleaguered country. To their fellow Jews — especially those whose commitment to Israel may be subject to wavering — leaders thought Israeli emigres might provide a rationale for diminished financial and political support for Israel. After all, if *sabras* who are closest to

Israel and her problems can reject the Jewish State, then why should American Jews invest considerable time, money, and energy in her support?

Despite determined and insistent efforts at cover-up, if the communally deviant group is large and enduring enough, the tactic is doomed to failure. Members of the group — especially if they feel stigmatized — need to demonstrate that their individual decisions have been replicated by many others. Journalists, social workers, and communal leaders whose area of interest and involvement focuses on the group, have compelling interests not only in placing the group on the agenda of organized Jewry, in resisting efforts at cover-up, but even in magnifying the dimensions of the group and the problems it allegedly presents.

(3) *Exaggeration*: When organized Jewry officially discovers a new group of communal deviants and admits to its presence, one typical reaction is to exaggerate its size. Lay and professional leaders, eager to call attention either to the problem group or to themselves, are quick to focus on the most shocking and startling piece of evidence.

For example, many people have the impression that half of all Jews marrying today are intermarrying. One source for this figure derives from the National Jewish Population Study which found that 48 percent of new couples involving Jews in the late 1960s were indeed mixed *couples*, but this meant that less than a third (32 percent) of Jewish *individuals* were marrying born non-Jews. (Some Israeli demographers, in reanalyzing the data, suggest that less than one quarter may be a more accurate figure for the individual rate.) Similarly, evidence of a decline in Jewish fertility prompted one author to predict in a *Midstream* magazine article that the United States Jewish population will dwindle to about ten thousand in the next century. Following this piece of “yellow demography” came a more reasoned and better documented article by two reputable demographers in the same journal. They projected a slight increase, in fact, in the Jewish population because of the bulge in new parents owing to the post World War II “baby boom,” followed by a decline — assuming quite low birthrates — to a little over four million in the next century. The doomsday article received far more attention than did the subsequent less spectacular presentation. Still another self-serving and distortionist example is provided by a prominent Orthodox rabbi's comments upon making aliyah. After years of unusually successful work in building a vibrant Orthodox community around several institutions, he declared American Jewry doomed. In remarks published in the *Jerusalem Post*, the new *oleh* cited as proof-text the high interreligious cohabitation rate among a small sample of young adults in a study of an isolated and very recently settled mountain states Jewish community.

The phenomenon of exaggeration also emerged in the case of Israeli emigration. An Israeli official in the late 1970s, anxious to draw attention and money to his portfolio — the cause of dissuading emigration or promoting reimmigration of Israelis abroad — trumpeted the figure of 500,000 to 600,000 Israelis in the United States. At the same time, demographers at Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics were saying that no more than 300,000 Israelis were living abroad throughout the world. Where some in Los Angeles suggested that its Israeli population numbered about 100,000 — which would mean that one Los Angeles Jew in five was Israeli — a detailed and careful academic study of diverse governmental records as well as the recent Los Angeles Jewish population study suggested a figure closer to 15,000 to 20,000. Where some had estimated the New York Israeli population in excess of 200,000, the Federation's population study found somewhere between 50,000 and 85,000, depending upon the definition of Israeli.

Interestingly, the phenomenon of exaggeration also extended to the images of the Jewish identity of Israelis. Most communal leaders assumed that Israeli emigres' identity is quite weak (otherwise, if they were good Jews and good Zionists, why didn't they stay in Israel?). Research has demonstrated that, in many respects, most Israeli emigres' Jewish identity is far stronger than that of the typical American Jew.

Moreover, it shows that the emigres' overall Jewish commitment profile — at least in New York where many Hassidic and other Orthodox Israelis settle — parallels that of Israeli society generally (in other words, observant Israelis are as likely to emigrate as the non-observant). The one exception to these generalizations is that recently arrived Israelis are far less likely to join American Jewish organizations and they are far, far less likely to support the UJA/Federation campaign. Campaign leaders encountering stiff Israeli emigre resistance to their entreaties for support reasoned that there must be something woefully amiss with the Israelis' Jewish identity. This assumption underlies one policy-oriented reaction to Israelis and other communal deviants; a reaction we can call, "malign neglect."

(4) *Malign Neglect*: As noted, this policy arises from the assumption that communal deviants are bad Jews. Thus, intermarriers are rebelling against their parents and their Jewish upbringing. Childless couples must be unaware of their demographic responsibilities to the Jewish people. Migrants to outlying communities with few Jews are trying to escape their Jewish roots. Russians coming to America are rejecting Israel which has done so much for them and needs additional manpower desperately. And Israeli emigres are, objectively if not subjectively, anti-Zionists.

The malign neglect argument maintains that organized Jewry should have nothing to do with the deviant group because they are such terrible Jews. The Israeli government has, for years, pressured HIAS not to assist Russians heading for America. When one high Cabinet official was informed that they may turn to those Christian charitable agencies which also administered per capita United States government relief funds, he was said to respond, "Any Jew who turns to Christian agencies we don't need anyway."

Some Israeli officials and American Jewish communal leaders reacted in a similar way to Israeli emigres. One top Israeli government official referred to the emigres as *zevel* (garbage) and urged consulates worldwide to have little if anything to do with them. Since the early 1970s, the New York Consulate repeatedly urged the Federation to provide no special services to Israelis. Consular officials and their UJA/Federation supporters took the view that Israelis in New York were the province and responsibility of the Israeli government and not of the local organized Jewish community. When Federation ultimately resisted this approach, the Consulate shifted to a second argument — one which found considerably more support among lay leaders — that of "benign neglect."

(5) *Benign Neglect*: Opponents of special services for communal deviants argue that the provision of such services will have at least two adverse effects. First, they will call attention to the emergence of the deviant group causing embarrassment to the Jewish community. Second, the very provision of service will be taken as a symbol of legitimacy.

Some Orthodox communities, until recently, resisted the institution of special services for young singles on the grounds that such programs would detract from the image of strong and secure Orthodox familialism. Many synagogues, congregational movements and others have been struggling with the issue of intermarriers and how to cope with them, their Gentile spouses, and their children. Certainly one impediment to involving them in Jewish communal life is the fear that such action will further lower normative inhibitions to intermarriage. Homosexual Jews, even those organized affirmatively as Jews in their own synagogues and the like, have also encountered fear, aversion, and exclusion. Opponents of gay synagogues have argued that homosexuals should participate as individuals in Jewish communal life, but that the establishment of formal gay Jewish institutions is an unwarranted and unsupportable claim to legitimacy.

Those against extending any special service to New York Israelis likewise argued that the emigres are as free to avail themselves of community services as any other Jewish New Yorkers. The very act of extending

specially tailored services to them — as had been provided to recent Russian and Iranian immigrants — might be taken as a sign of approval of their decision to migrate and might actually stimulate more emigration. Rather than promoting Israeli migration to New York, they argued, Federation policy ought to staunch the flow of immigrants and even reverse it. That is, rather than serving the Israeli immigrants, some preferred to “contain” the phenomenon.

(6) *Containment*: One frequent reaction to the emergence of a Jewish communal deviant group is the urge to combat the social trends that gave rise to the group in the first place. The policy of containment, as I call it, has many illustrations in Jewish communal life. Numerous conferences have sought to devise incentives for Jews to have more babies. Several cities have started new programs to introduce marriageable Jewish singles to one another so as to curb singlehood and intermarriage. Several neighborhood groups have tried to entice young Jews to move into declining Jewish residential areas. These efforts remind one of the Jewish Agency’s efforts to persuade Russian emigres to choose Israel rather than the United States as their ultimate destination.

Consular and other Israeli officials have taken some tentative steps to encourage the reimmigration of Israelis to their homeland. Federation officials felt that such activities, though admirable, were both beyond Federation’s competence and philanthropic philosophy. Moreover, research on international migration in general and on Israeli emigration in particular supports the view that kinship and friendship networks along with push and pull market factors are the dominant influences on the decision to migrate. The notion that the provision of Federation services to emigres will stimulate further emigration, or that its denial will retard emigration, is ludicrous in light of this research.

My own view is that communal efforts to alter Jewish demographic trends in a significant way are doomed to failure. Entire governments have struggled to alter birthrates with marginal effect at best (and that effect is the subject of dispute among reputable demographers). Parents do all they can to persuade their children to marry Jews quickly and have children. If persuasion and motivation are the missing ingredients in understanding allegedly disappointing Jewish marriage and childbearing behavior, then certainly parents have more opportunity to influence their offspring than does the voluntary formal Jewish community, especially in light of the low affiliation rates among singles and childless couples. (All of this is not to argue against social programs for singles, counselling for troubled marriages, or day school tuition. These are admirable programs which should be enacted for their own sake, but not with the expectation that they will alter rates of marriage, divorce, or births.)

While “demographic jawboning” (trying to persuade Jews to change their familial, professional, or migratory decisions) may well be effective only in affirming communal principles, organized Jewry does frequently come around to accommodate a newly or recently emergent group of deviants. Often, it stops viewing them as an embarrassment or a social problem subject to some sort of conversion and adopts an “accommodationist” approach. This type of policy seeks to bridge the gulfs that often separate communal deviants from Jewish institutional life.

(7) *Accommodation*: The typical profile of communally active Jews embraces the following characteristics. They are married, have schoolchildren home, have lived for many years in the same town or neighborhood, and are American-born, college educated, and reasonably affluent. Those who depart from this paradigm in any way are less likely to be active in Jewish communal life. Those who deviate in many ways — such as single mothers with modest incomes — are even less likely to participate in Jewish institutional life.

As I see it, the central task of organized American Jewry vis-a-vis its potential constituency, is to extend formal Jewish communal life to several communally deviant groups now standing on the periphery of the institutions. Research I conducted demonstrated that not only have singles, childless couples, intermarrieds, and divorced grown in number, but they are more distant from conventional Jewish life than were their counterparts in the mid-1960s.

Accommodation to these and other deviant groups has taken either or both of two directions. One entails the creation of Jewish networks and institutions composed primarily of the communally deviant. Examples include *havurot* geared for the young single or couple and several *landsmanschaft*-like structures among Israelis in New York. The other course involves fully integrating the communal deviants into conventional structures such as Y's and synagogues.

My own sense is that we need both separationist and integrationist options and that the former are, in fact, a prelude to the latter. My experience with Federation leaders, however, uncovered a strong bias against fostering new networks or organizations outside the established communal infrastructure. Federation leaders were hard put to understand why Israeli Jews would prefer their "own" institutions. Many were honestly concerned about the proliferation of institutions in a heavily institutionalized community. Others viewed Israeli-only organizations (which, significantly, Federation could not control) as an implicit rejection of the New York Jewish community and as a precursor of permanent alienation of Israeli emigres from the rest of New York Jewry. Paradoxically, then, some Federation leaders reject the institutional expression of pluralism within local Jewry, even as they insist that American Jews can and should maintain their own voluntary network within a multi-ethnic and multi-religious American pluralistic society.

#### A POLICY EMERGES: CULTURAL SERVICES FOR ISRAELIS

Despite these sentiments, the New York Federation lay committee on services to Israelis agreed on a general policy statement, one which successfully bridged conflicting ideological differences and obtained consensual support, albeit at times hesitant, tentative, and wary.

In the Spring of 1982, as a prelude to the establishment of this committee, several Federation lay and professional leaders collaborated on a "Mandate Statement" which would serve as a charge to that committee. The statement had to elicit the support of a wide circle of Federation leaders. In so doing, it had to maneuver between two basic orientations — the "proto-Zionist" and "liberal philanthropic" positions — at least one, if not both of which, could be interpreted so as to preclude any special services to Israeli emigres. The policy options these two orientations generated were as follows.

(1) *The Proto-Zionist Option:* This option combined elements of several reactions outlined above, particularly malign neglect. Several UJA/Federation leaders, particularly those heavily involved in the campaign, were highly sensitive to the objections of Israeli consular officials to any sort of special service to Israeli emigres. In their view, the provision of such services would have several adverse effects including encouraging additional emigration, legitimating such emigration, and, not least, causing unnecessary friction between campaign leaders and the Consulate. Thus, initially, the proto-Zionists forcefully opposed the provision of any special service to Israeli emigres.

(2) *The Liberal Philanthropic Option:* A fundamental element of Federation's philosophy prescribes service to all Jews in need regardless of their Jewish orientation. In recent years, Federation had provided special services to Iranian and Russian immigrants. By logical extension, the liberal philanthropic philosophy meant

that Israeli emigres should receive the same high level of attention commensurate in nature and extent with their special needs. Liberal philanthropists could argue — although few ever did — that this might mean Federation advocacy in obtaining “green cards,” the Immigration and Naturalization Service document which permits resident aliens to work in the United States. Or, they might argue, as some did, that Israelis in need can and should avail themselves of preexisting services, using established mechanisms available to all Jews (i.e., benign neglect).

(3) *The Option 3 Option:* *New York Times* columnist William Safire wrote, “In bureaucratic...manipulation, Option 3 is always set up as the choice between extremes” (*New York Times*, Sunday, October 16, 1983, Section 4).

The Mandate Statement and the subsequent directions of the committee on Israelis maneuvered between, and in fact drew upon elements of, the proto-Zionist and liberal philanthropic options. The committee advanced the view that Israelis should indeed receive special services (in accord with the liberal philanthropic philosophy), but those services should focus on their children’s Jewish education and the parents’ Jewish cultural and communal involvement. Few proto-Zionists could argue against Jewishness. Even the Consulate genuinely had no objections to Jewish education for Israeli youngsters, although it did quietly voice reservations about special communal outreach efforts to Israeli adults.

Most Federation leaders favorably received the proposed policy orientation, although the proto-Zionists still wanted to be reassured that the Consulate was not forcefully objecting to the approach. The liberal philanthropists, with less of a stake in the outcome, merely wanted something to be done for Israeli emigres in New York.

Following adoption of the Mandate Statement, the Committee on Services to Israelis, meeting over several months, recommended establishing, expanding, and replicating several educational and cultural programs for Israeli emigres. Some examples include a Hebrew language day school with relatively little emphasis on traditional observance as well as an afternoon school teaching the Israeli school curriculum to prepare youngsters for Israel’s pre-college matriculation (*bagrut*) examination. Others entailed a Hebrew community library, Hebrew worship services in synagogues, and Israeli/American social events in certain Y’s. At this writing, these and other projects seem to be advancing within the Federation organizational infrastructure.

Thus, while Israelis may not need Jewish cultural or educational services much more than the typical Jewish New Yorker, their very presence prompted Federation to expand its commitment to fostering Jewish identity in New York. For those interested in moving Federation away from a predominant commitment to philanthropic social services for the down-and-out and towards what some have called “community-building,” the case of policymaking for Israelis in New York emerges at least as a step in the right direction.

## LESSONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Both members of and advocates for communally deviant groups have often complained that organized Jewry is slow to respond to their special needs. This paper has tried to give some flavor to the nature of the inhibitions and objections to recognizing and serving the diverse cluster of groups called Jewish communal deviants. Yet, while cognizant of the community’s inhibitions, there is good reason to end on an optimistic note. Like all bureaucracies and formal organizations, organized Jewry initially resists innovation

and responding to new external constituencies. But all is not bleak. If, indeed, enough members of a communally deviant group emerge, they are likely to form their own networks and institutions of a Jewish character. These in turn attract not only attention and advocates, but some measure of legitimacy as well. Moreover, communal deviants and their allies come to exert influence within established institutions. (For example, it is no accident that Reform Judaism, with the largest percentage of intermarriers of the three major denominations, has adopted the most welcoming official policy to Jewish out-marriers, their spouses, and their children.)

This is not to say that all communally deviant groups will eventually receive substantial recognition, legitimacy, and service. It is to say that a Jewish community vitally concerned with its survival and participation rates will not want to long ignore any potential constituency, even those which at first blush appear objectionable or embarrassing. Thus, although in response to current and emerging groups of Jewish communal deviants we will undoubtedly witness expressions of denial, cover-up, exaggeration, malign neglect, benign neglect and containment, we will also eventually see sure signs of accommodation as well.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Steven M. Cohen, on sabbatical in Israel from Queens College, CUNY, is a visiting scholar at JCPA and the Melton Center for Jewish Education in the Diaspora at Hebrew University for the current academic year. Dr. Cohen is the author of **American Modernity and Jewish Identity** recently published by Tavistock Press, NY. This paper was originally delivered at a conference on Israelis in the United States sponsored by the Center for Jewish Studies, CUNY.*