

# JERUSALEM LETTER / VIEWPOINTS

JERUSALEM CENTER FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS  
REGISTERED AMUTA



המרכז הירושלמי לענייני ציבור ומדינה  
עמותה רשומה

No. 389 10 Elul 5758 / 1 September 1998

## VIRTUAL REALITY COMES TO CANADIAN JEWRY

Ira Robinson

**The Electronic Age and the Jews / Canadian Jewish Congress (CJC) / Declining Importance of the CJC / Staging a Plenary / The Plenary as Talk Show / If the Medium is the Message, Then What is the Message?**

### The Electronic Age and the Jews

It is practically a given in these latter days of the twentieth century that the world as a whole is undergoing a profound revolution in communications. The mantras of this revolution include the phrases "new world order," "global village," and "virtual reality." The steady progress of electronic media, and particularly the spectacular intrusion of the Internet and all of its possibilities on the consciousness of the public, in general, has begun to markedly affect all aspects of education and public discourse, not least in the political sphere. The process of change in this sphere is only beginning. If the age-old rule of thumb, that whatever is going on in the world at large impacts on the Jews, has any validity, then the advent of the global village and virtual reality on world Jewry will have important effects on the ways Jews communicate with one another, as well as the ways in which the Jewish community's public business is conducted. In fact, observers are beginning to openly question the relevance of traditional Jewish organizations and ways of getting things done in light of the changing

times. A particularly interesting concrete example of this process and its effects can be seen in the Canadian Jewish community with respect to one of its foremost institutions — the Canadian Jewish Congress — and that institution's foremost gathering — the National Plenary Assembly.

### Canadian Jewish Congress (CJC)

In theory, CJC exists as the unified representative body of Canadian Jewry. From its founding in 1919 it has adumbrated the voice of Canadian Jewry and, indeed, it could even be said to have established the concept of a united, Canada-wide Jewish community in a period in which Canada itself was in the process of finding its independent voice in the world. Though CJC lapsed organizationally shortly after its founding, the challenges of the 1930s caused its reestablishment in 1934. Since that time, CJC has enjoyed institutional continuity and considerable renown both within Canada and on the world Jewish scene. It is widely regarded, both inside and outside the organization, as the "Parliament of Canadian

DANIEL J. ELAZAR, EDITOR AND PUBLISHER; ZVI R. MAROM, ASSOCIATE EDITOR; MARK AMI-EL, MANAGING EDITOR. 13 TEL-HAI ST., JERUSALEM, ISRAEL; TEL. 972-2-5619281, FAX. 972-2-5619112, INTERNET: ELAZAR@VMS.HUJI.AC.IL. IN U.S.A.: 1616 WALNUT ST., SUITE 507, PHILADELPHIA, PA 19103; TEL. (215) 204-1459, FAX. (215) 204-7784. © COPYRIGHT. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. ISSN: 0792-7304.

THE OPINIONS EXPRESSED BY THE AUTHORS OF VIEWPOINTS DO NOT NECESSARILY REFLECT THOSE OF THE JERUSALEM CENTER FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS.

Jewry" and as that community's public face in general Canadian society and politics and beyond. Thus, in an interview marking the end of her mandate, CJC past president Goldie Hershon emphasized the extent to which CJC commanded respect as a non-governmental organization (NGO) even at the international level.

In consonance with that perceived mandate, the organization has taken upon itself the responsibility to set public policy for the Canadian Jewish community and to represent that communal policy to the Canadian government and to other individuals and institutions in Canada and abroad. That mandate and responsibility mean that the setting of CJC policy is a process with serious political implications.

How is this public policy determined? The CJC's constitution specifies that ultimate authority for the determination of CJC policy is vested in a National Plenary Assembly held every three years. Thus, at least in theory, the Plenary possesses enormous power to shape the public agenda of the Canadian Jewish community. This normative understanding of the nature of the CJC Plenary is reflected in a recent press report that "The Congress holds a plenary assembly every three years to elect new directors and establish policy through resolutions." The theory thus mandates the adoption of community policy through open and public debate. In any attempt to take the pulse of the "public square" of the Canadian Jewish community, then, the state of the CJC Plenary must be examined. This *Jerusalem Letter/Viewpoints* is my attempt, as a participant-observer who attended the last two CJC Plenary Assemblies as an accredited delegate, to understand the dynamic of the latest CJC Plenary held in Winnipeg, Manitoba, on May 24-25, 1998.

### Declining Importance of the CJC

While in theory CJC speaks for all Canadian Jews, in truth, it has never been the sole organization which has sought to speak for the Canadian Jewish community on public issues. From its inception, it had an overt rival in the Canadian Zionist Federation and, later, in the Canada-Israel Committee with respect to Canada's relations with Israel. It also faced, and still faces, a determined attempt by B'nai B'rith Canada and its subsidiary League for Human Rights to speak for the community, particularly with respect to issues of racism and anti-Semitism.

More importantly, CJC has also recently experienced a significant behind-the-scenes challenge from Federation/UIA Canada. An amalgamation of CJF Canada and UIA Canada, this organization represents

the collectivity of Jewish community federations across Canada with their powerful fund-raising apparatus. Through its National Budgeting Committee, Federation/UIA Canada has become the prime source of funding for CJC. As always, the power to fund constitutes real power which Federation/UIA Canada has chosen to use. Through its budgetary process, it has succeeded in reducing CJC's budget significantly. Thus, in the past six years, CJC's budget has been cut from approximately \$CDN 3.7 million to less than \$CDN 3.0 million, with a resulting curtailment of a number of the organization's activities. Indeed, CJC is now practically unable to take any significant action without prior consideration of the position of the federations on the relevant issues. Thus, the CJC's latest Treasurer's report clearly states that, "The financial predicament in which we found ourselves over the past three years has continued to put tremendous pressure on our staff and has been the cause of certain programs to be eliminated or severely curtailed." This, in brief, was the situation of CJC coming into its 1998 Plenary. It faced many important issues, not least among them the virtual abandonment of its headquarters building in Montréal and a general sense among the Canadian Jewish public at large that its stature had become significantly diminished.

### Staging a Plenary

On May 24-25, 1998, CJC held its twenty-fifth Plenary Assembly in Winnipeg, Manitoba. This marked the first time that CJC had held a Plenary outside the two major Canadian Jewish communities of Montréal and Toronto. The previous Plenary, held in Montréal in 1995, had been marked by considerable controversy and a hotly contested race for the organization's presidency. Whether on purpose or not, the 1998 Plenary would see a decided deemphasis on anything remotely resembling internal controversy. First of all, there were no contested elections for officers. Perhaps partly for that reason, the length of the Plenary was cut from an originally-planned three days to two.

The annual business meeting, which constitutes another potential source of public organizational conflict, was allotted no more than one hour of time and was held in a small conference room that barely held the approximately 100 delegates attending the meeting. No written agenda was prepared for the meeting, which was promptly cut off at the one hour mark so that a video could be shown in the same room. Thus, there was little time or scope allowed for public discussion of the important organizational and existential questions

facing CJC. The session dealing with resolutions would be the sole remaining "unscripted" time in which delegates would have the opportunity to express themselves on the public issues facing CJC and the Canadian Jewish community as a whole.

The session on resolutions was similarly allocated a set time, two hours, which was not ultimately extensible. During that time, some thirty-six resolutions were to be discussed which had previously been submitted to the Resolutions Committee, on topics ranging from social justice to community relations to CJC infrastructure. In a vain effort to streamline the proceedings, the Resolutions Committee had attempted, prior to the Plenary, to limit the number and length of resolutions brought forward. At the resolutions session, the chair announced that she would recognize only one pro and one con speaker per resolution, even though the rules for debate, as established in the official Resolutions' booklet, envisioned as many as three speakers each pro and con.

Despite, and possibly partially because of, this attempt at limiting debate, there was much procedural confusion and in the end the "Parliament of Canadian Jewry" got to discuss only 11 of 16 pages of resolutions, with the remainder, including those resolutions dealing with CJC's status and structure, referred for ultimate disposal to CJC's regional councils. At that, the session seemed to have gone marginally better than the resolutions session at the 1995 Plenary in Montreal, which also did not have the time to discuss all the resolutions presented and which disposed of the undebated resolutions in a similar manner. However, such is the power of the normative version of public adoption of policy in CJC that Canada's preeminent newspaper, the *Globe and Mail*, reported that "about 500 delegates to the CJC meeting formally endorsed the Calgary declaration on national unity." Had there been 500 delegates at the Plenary, they would have doubtlessly voted for that resolution. In the event, however, less than one hundred delegates were present at the resolutions session to formally ratify anything.

In sum, those elements of the Plenary program designed to discuss CJC policy in a public way were most decidedly deemphasized. That part of the Canadian Jewish public square had most assuredly shrunk in size and significance.

### The Plenary as Talk Show

If, then, deliberation on CJC policy, which was the ostensible purpose of the gathering, was deemphasized, what was the main thrust of the Plenary? In terms of

emphasis, both in time and effort, it must be said that the Plenary essentially became an excuse to stage a talk show. The first real indication of the nature of this emphasis came at the first luncheon, where customary speeches and award ceremonies were cut short so that the body of delegates could proceed in a timely manner to a spacious auditorium. In that place, which could easily hold the hundreds attending, the delegates were to play studio audience for a series of talk shows lasting fully six hours over the two days of the conference.

Staging for the shows was influenced by the format of contemporary television talk shows for a very good reason. The shows were videotaped by Videon, a Winnipeg cable channel, for actual broadcast in Winnipeg and for eventual distribution across Canada. The host was Jim Carr, a Manitoba politician, who was in control of the various elements that made for a successful talk show. On the stage for each of the six hour-long telecasts were two "anchors" and two or three "panelists." Each of the "anchors" was expected to discuss each of the topics and provide general expertise as well as a certain continuity. The panelists added expertise specific to the subject at hand. Each person on stage was given a chance to make a presentation lasting three to five minutes and to react to the other panel presentations. Then Carr went into the audience where the people attending the Plenary, warming to their role, engaged the host, the panel, and each other on the set topics. For the purposes of the talk show, there was no differentiation made between voting delegates and others; that was a detail that mattered only with respect to the deemphasized "traditional" aspects of the Plenary.

Toward the beginning of the first televised session, Carr stated that "the imperative of TV is beyond our control." This statement indicated, in effect, that the media requirement that information be conveyed in relatively short "soundbites" carried the day. So, in contrast with the non-televised sessions, panelist speeches were short and audience participation became an essential element in the program rather than an appendage.

There were also two non-televised sessions on the program. Though these sessions, on Canadian National Unity and Dialogue between Jews and Evangelical Christians, were of considerable intrinsic importance and topicality and both were reported in the press, the *Canadian Jewish News* reporter covering the Plenary gave them diminished status. They constituted an addendum to what was for him the main story on the Plenary proceedings: the televised sessions.

There were other important aspects to the talk show presentation. It is, perhaps, significant that in five of the six sessions, one of the five or six people on stage was a woman. This meant that care was taken to include at least one female at each session, but only in the session on "The Clash of Tradition and Technology" was there more than one.

In any Canadian gathering, the issue of language can never be ignored. For the most part, one of Canada's two official languages, French, was conspicuous by its relative absence from the Plenary. Though CJC and its printed program are officially bilingual, the only exceptions to an all-English Plenary were some remarks by the representative of the Canadian government, Dr. Hedy Fry, Secretary of State for Multiculturalism, and by Max Bernard of Montréal, speaking on National Unity. Perhaps significantly, neither expression of French was in one of the televised sessions where a second language of expression would likely have been an unwanted distraction.

Topics for the six televised hours included many issues of key interest to those concerned with contemporary Jewry: Jewish Continuity, Prosecution of War Criminals and the Issue of Financial Restitution, Issues Dividing Israel and the Diaspora, What is the Future of CJC and Other Jewish Institutions?, the Clash of Tradition and Technology, and What is Jewish? As might have been expected, a studio audience selected for its interest in Jewish affairs reacted with great enthusiasm to this opportunity to speak to the various subjects, expressing a wide range of opinions, with applause indicating audience approval of a given opinion.

Several times during the course of the six sessions, Jim Carr stated that Winnipeg was the capital of the Jewish world. This statement may have been made somewhat tongue in cheek, but nonetheless reflected a serious truth. Any person viewing the show on television would not necessarily care whether the program emanated from Winnipeg or New York or Jerusalem. Furthermore, the dynamic emerging from the talk show format meant that leadership in the Jewish polity, as in the general community, was vested in those who controlled the media of communication in the most effective way. One of the anchors, Elan Steinberg, Executive Director of the World Jewish Congress, could only agree. Though he remarked that he had never seen such a program before, he clearly was impressed by its potential. The power of television, he stated, is such that Winnipeg *could* become the center of Jewish communal life, at least in virtual reality.

### If the Medium is the Message, Then What is the Message?

It was Canadian scholar Marshall McLuhan who bequeathed to the world the epigram "the medium is the message." I believe that any analysis of the 1998 CJC Plenary has to proceed from that starting point. The Plenary was, as its chair, Israel Ludwig, stated, "a top quality product." His hope that the product would "encourage an atmosphere of participation and dialogue" seems to have been largely borne out by the result, with which the CJC leadership was clearly pleased. But the "product" of the Winnipeg Plenary was decidedly different from normative, traditional expectations of a CJC Plenary. The elements of the program that, in a formal sense, had made CJC the parliament of Canadian Jewry became palpably vestigial at the 1998 Plenary. That does not mean, however, that CJC has been eliminated as a major element in the Canadian Jewish public square. Rather, the Plenary illustrates the changing nature of the public square of post-modernity and its impact on the Canadian Jewish community.

The theme of the 1998 Winnipeg Plenary was "Jewish Roots Meet 21st Century Realities." The reality of the Canadian Jewish community on the cusp of the twenty-first century is that it is united, if at all, as a "virtual" community. The impact of the media, which is evolving new ways and means of communication and public discourse, is having a major effect on the institutions which attempt to represent the community.

The *Canadian Jewish News*, Canada's national Jewish newspaper, printed an editorial on the occasion of the Plenary which incisively stated that the CJC "is as close to a 'parliament' of Canada's Jewish communities as today's communal organizational realities allow." In light of the present analysis, one can only agree. Organizational realities are changing before our eyes. There is a consensus among observers of public institutions that televising proceedings changes the way things are done. Certainly, for example, people watching the Canadian political scene are agreed that the Canadian House of Commons became a palpably different place, once the sessions were televised. Just so, as the definition of the public square changes, Jewish communal organizations and their public discourse will find themselves in an evolutionary process and will be presenting themselves differently to a public with different and evolving expectations. The 1998 CJC Plenary was a milestone in this process of transmogrification of the Jewish public square.

As Elan Steinberg observed, the change in medium

has extended the range of public Jewish discourse. Does this mean that setting public policy by formal resolution is becoming vestigial? What does seem beyond dispute is that the media for public discourse within the Jewish community are in a process of change. Ultimately, if the new face of Jewish public discourse is to be the talk show, with all its potential and all its limitations, then the question of who controls the public discourse in the Jewish polity and, hence, sets policy for the Jewish community has to be asked in significantly new ways.

\* \* \*

Ira Robinson is Professor of Judaic Studies in the Department of Religion at Concordia University in Montreal, President of the Association for Canadian Jewish Studies, and an Associate of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs. He has written extensively on the Canadian Jewish experience and his latest book, *Renewing Our Days: Montreal Jews in the Twentieth Century*, co-edited with Merkin Butovsky, won a Toronto Jewish Book Prize. This *Jerusalem Letter/Viewpoints* is based on the author's recent presentation at JCPA's 17th Annual Summer Workshop on the University Teaching of Jewish Political Studies, focusing on the topic of "Religion in the Public Square."

---

★ ★ ★ NEW ON THE JCPA WEBSITE ★ ★ ★

<http://www.jcpa.org>

Read our best *Jerusalem Letters* — online in full text — featuring behind-the-scenes reports on Israel and the Jewish world. See [www.jcpa.org/jlhits.htm](http://www.jcpa.org/jlhits.htm).

The *Jewish Political Studies Review*, JCPA's scholarly journal now in its 10th year, discusses Jewish political institutions and behavior, thought, and public affairs. See a complete set of abstracts of 118 articles online at [www.jcpa.org/jpcont.htm](http://www.jcpa.org/jpcont.htm).

The JCPA's newest books are featured at [www.jcpa.org/jcbk2.htm](http://www.jcpa.org/jcbk2.htm), while a full catalog of the "Literature of Jewish Public Affairs" may be found at [www.jcpa.org/jccat2.htm](http://www.jcpa.org/jccat2.htm).

★ ★ ★ NEW BOOKS FROM THE JERUSALEM CENTER ★ ★ ★

JUST PUBLISHED!

**Covenant and Civil Society:  
The Constitutional Matrix of Modern Democracy**

The Covenant Tradition in Politics, Volume IV

**Daniel J. Elazar**

As the modern epoch unfolded, certain key institutions of the covenantal tradition scored major successes to become the norm for modern democratic republicanism. These included the idea that political society is a human artifact that humans established for themselves through political compact; the translation of essentially unenforceable medieval theories of constitutionalism into enforceable constitutional systems; the idea of popular sovereignty; and the development of consociational and cooperative forms of political and social organization. This volume is devoted to the exploration of these ideas and institutions, and the struggles to develop them in the Old World, especially in modern and early postmodern Europe.

*Published by Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, NJ, 1998 – \$54.95.*

---

Other volumes in Daniel J. Elazar's landmark *Covenant Tradition in Politics* series:

Volume I: (Now in paperback)

*Covenant and Polity in Biblical Israel: Biblical Foundations and Jewish Expressions*      Cloth – \$54.95; Paper – \$29.95

Volume II:

*Covenant and Commonwealth: From Christian Separation Through the Protestant Reformation*      Cloth – \$54.95

Volume III:

*Covenant and Constitutionalism: The Great Frontier and the Matrix of Federal Democracy*      Cloth – \$44.95

---