

Chapter 5

THE AMERICAN JEWISH POLITY

Daniel J. Elazar

At present, four great organizations dominate the communal-welfare and Israel-overseas spheres countrywide — the Council of Jewish Federations, the United Jewish Appeal, the United Israel Appeal, which serves as the conduit and overseer of UJA funds allocated to the Jewish Agency, and the Joint Distribution Committee, one of the most respected organizations in the Jewish community.¹

The end of the 1970s found the CJF completing a self-study in preparation for a transition to new leadership. The end result was some strengthening of its internal organization, a modest expansion of its budget and consequently its organizational capacity, and a substantial expansion of its role in Israel and overseas programs. The catalyst for that expansion was the earlier intrusion of UJA into the sphere of activity of the local federations, especially in leadership development. With its far larger budget, skimmed off the top of the funds it received from the federations, the UJA was able to freely expand its programs while the Council was constricted by the caution of the local federations when it came to expanding its role and their resultant reluctance to increase its budget. The Review Committee took almost immediate cognizance of this issue, but decided that

the way to deal with it was through quiet action rather than formal recommendations. As a result, CJF initiated a process which in effect brought UJA to heel, convincingly demonstrating to those who witnessed the act where the real power lay in the American Jewish community.

The principal vehicle used by CJF to do so was the United Israel Appeal. Once the United Palestine Appeal, the fundraising arm of the Zionist movement's Keren Hayesod in the United States, with the establishment of the UJA by joint action of UIA and JDC in 1937, the UIA had lost its direct fundraising role. While it continued to be of lessened but still real importance in maintaining UJA's Israel connection for another decade, in the 1950s its role was further reduced and it became for all intents and purposes a paper organization whose major function was to accept funds from UJA and transfer them to the Jewish Agency.

With the reconstitution of the Jewish Agency in 1970, the UIA acquired a new lease on life as the body that formally designated the American community representatives in the Agency's new governing institutions. The CJF took this revived instrumentality, brought about its reorganization to be more representative of the local federations, and revived its role in the governance of its creature, the UJA, which had become its master. Through CJF representation on the UIA, the federations were able to secure a restoration of UJA to something closer to its proper position in the constellation.

One result of this was the continued growth in importance of the UIA as a principal arm of the American Jewish community in overseeing the use of funds raised for Israel. While the three organizations continued to have substantial overlapping board memberships as well as constituencies, in the ensuing years each developed its own bedrock functions. The CJF is the coordinating body and spokesman for the federations, with a primary responsibility for community planning. The UJA is the federations' fundraising arm for Israel and overseas needs with a primary responsibility for fundraising. The UIA is the federations' arm for overseeing the use of the funds in Israel with a growing responsibility for oversight and evaluation as well as for handling issues of representation on the JAFI Board of Governors and Assembly.

This is not to suggest that competition does not continue to exist between the three. It is almost a given that there should be a certain amount of competition and tension at their points of intersection and overlap. This leads to periodic suggestions that the three should be consolidated into one organization. In fact what has developed is a kind of system of checks and balances among the three which may very well strengthen the community's governing processes.

Periodic suggestions that the CJF, UJA, and UIA be merged have led to the appointment of joint committees with representatives from each organization to consider the possibilities, but until recently there has been no movement toward merging. The matter is now under consideration by the CJF-UJA National Restructuring Committee. In fact each of the three organizations has its own "personality" and attracts different styles of leadership. CJF is most attractive to those people interested in domestic community planning and the careful organizational work that requires, including devotion to "process." UJA draws the fundraisers, those who draw upon emotional support for Israel in their work and enjoy doing so. UIA attracts those concerned with organization and governance in the world arena, and who are able to devote the time and resources, including a great deal of traveling, to those tasks.

Because of these differences, which must be taken into account in voluntary organizational life, the three together are able to mobilize and place more activists than any single comprehensive organization would be able to do alone. Beyond that, the three function to provide something of a system of checks and balances in the polity. At the highest level, despite the overlapping membership in the three bodies, the three have come closer together through two joint management agreements: one to maintain a joint Israel office instead of three separate offices, and another to work together on raising endowment funds.

The CJF established a Washington action office (WAO) primarily to assist federations in gaining federal funds for their various local programs, and the countrywide Jewish community in securing funds for Israel and overseas relief purposes under the very capable professional leadership of Mark Talisman. The WAO has been one of the CJF's most successful endeavors on

both fronts. The office also has joined with the Washington offices of other Jewish public affairs bodies in the generally well-coordinated effort to provide a solid advocacy fund for Israel, specializing in such features as the Memorandum of Understanding between the American and Israeli governments to foster joint efforts in education and social services.

In all of this, what became the dominant feature of the new generation was a new concern with the Jewish Agency and how federation-raised funds were being spent in Israel. The reconstituted Jewish Agency soon became a major item on the agenda of the federation movement. This was manifested through a strong commitment to making the new reconstituted Jewish Agency Assembly, Board of Governors, and Executive more responsive to diaspora — meaning for them American — Jewish concerns. From there it developed into programmatic concerns, particularly after Project Renewal was launched in 1977-1978 and individual federations began to be involved in specific Israeli communities. At every stage it was concerned with achieving greater efficiency and accountability.

The Spheres and the Links Between Them

The postwar generation has witnessed the increasing integration of the communal-welfare, Israel-overseas, and community relations spheres and, as the generation progressed, linkages between the communal-welfare and the educational-cultural spheres as well. The merger of the local federations and UJA in New York and Washington in the aftermath of the Yom Kippur War completed the era of strengthening and unification of federations. Both substantially increased their activities in the field of Jewish education, which inevitably brought the new communal bodies into closer contact with the synagogues. At the same time, new thrusts in the social services are also creating bridges within their own frameworks.

In the other categories federation roles are being extended. Intercongregational linkages and those between synagogues and federations are growing in response to current conditions. Declining synagogue membership and support necessitated new responses after a twenty-year boom. Now that normalization

has set in, the sense of privateness that has characterized most congregations is beginning to give way to a recognition of their dependence upon and role in the community as a whole. Federations and synagogues are finding new activities that they must conduct in common. Even the already-linked communities are deepening their linkages, often through new mechanisms of institutionalization. While no trend is unidimensional, and it should not be assumed that because there is greater interaction there is a lessening of tension, the trend does seem to be toward linkage and partnership, even if sometimes on an antagonistic basis.

The organized Jewish community is constructed out of these building blocks and exists as a result of the network of linkages that they have developed with one another. Since those linkages are, at least in their initial stages, entirely voluntary in origin, they do not follow any single pattern. Rather, they have developed in each community in accordance with certain factors that have influenced communal life locally. Moreover, even after circumstance limits the possibility for severing established linkages or of crossing over to form radically different ones from those that have developed over the years, the element of consent continues to play an important role in determining whether a particular linkage is pro forma or significant.

Overall, the complexities of contemporary life are leading to greater linkage among all the spheres. Now that the federations have staked out a real role for themselves in the educational-cultural sphere, that too is being drawn into the overall orbit. The last holdout was the religious-congregational sphere. Linkage between it and the others has become one of the primary items on the American Jewish community's agenda for the coming years. In this respect, developments in the American Jewish community parallel those in other polities throughout the world in the twentieth century: a clear movement from separated spheres toward increased integration, with all the problems of coordination that such integration brings.

Systems of Community Power and Influence²

The way in which power and influence are structured in the various local communities of American Jewry or in the American Jewish community as a whole is a matter of no little importance. Theoretically one could discover any one of the three major forms of political control: autocracy, oligarchy, and polyarchy. Needless to say, as models they are ideal types that do not necessarily exist in practice as they are described, but that reflect the overall characteristics of different realities.

Under the autocratic form, a single individual (in other times and places, an intercessor with the powers that be known as a *shtadlan*) or organization functioning as a corporate person (such as a chief rabbinate) monopolizes power by being decisively involved in every significant community decision. Since autocratic control of this nature usually requires some kind of force compelling Jews to be members of the Jewish community, it is extremely unlikely that it could ever exist in the American Jewish community as we know it; nor is there any case on record of such autocratic control in the United States outside of small synagogues and in the Hasidic enclaves, whose members submit to the authority of a rebbe of their own free will.

The second major form of political control is oligarchy, whereby a substantially closed group of individuals enjoys a virtual monopoly of power by reserving control over all significant decision-making. Oligarchy, far more prevalent in the American Jewish world than autocracy, comes in several varieties. The simplest involves rule by a single element in the community, a small group with the same fundamental interests, whose members are closely linked with one another through a network of interlocking relationships. To persons who stand outside, this form of control may seem no different from autocracy. However, inside the controlling group itself decision-making is collegial, if only because no individual is in a position to exercise control on his or her own.

This kind of oligarchy is to be found in certain small Jewish communities, whose entire organized life centers around a single congregation, which in turn is dominated by a small group of individuals. Here, too, the open character of American Jewish life limits the extent to which such an oligarchy can

exercise its power. Moreover, when the community grows large enough for competing institutions to develop, this form of oligarchy usually ceases to be a viable means of leadership.

Another kind of oligarchy is the multiple-element variety, which brings together leaders of a number of different elements in the community within the decision-making group. The group itself is self-selected and stands in a more or less autocratic relationship to the remainder of the community. Since each element in the coalition has its own sources of power, no one element can decisively influence community decision-making without the others. The more elements that are represented in the oligarchy, the more open it becomes to various points of view in the community.

Multiple-element oligarchies are — or were — reasonably common among local Jewish communities in the United States. Indeed, it is probable that before World War II they were the dominant form of organization of power and influence in the American Jewish setting. Moreover, such countrywide organization as exists in the United States has certain characteristics of that category. In recent years it has become increasingly difficult for groups to “go it alone” on issues deemed to be of universal importance to American Jewry. They must coordinate their efforts with others within the establishment circle. The determination of which groups “count” in deciding how the community as a whole will speak is devolving more and more upon the establishment circle, a coalition of the groups themselves. The Presidents’ Conference, for example, is a structural device that has been developed to coordinate a weak multiple-element oligarchy, in those areas in which the constituent groups are willing to coordinate.

A multiple-element oligarchy can be broadly based; it can be quite responsive to at least the articulate segment of the community; and it can be representative of the great majority, if not all, of its significant elements. In this instance it can be considered a representative oligarchy, which, in exercising its decisive influence over community decision-making, gives every legitimate interest a share (albeit a highly structured one) in the process. Most local Jewish communities in the United States seem to fall within this category, especially those generally deemed to be the best organized. Communities like Detroit,

Cleveland, and Minneapolis have developed oligarchies that are broadly representative. In fact, one suspects that if more participants in Jewish life sought a role in the organized community there would be no oligarchies at all.

Polyarchy — the third major form of political control — is a system in which no single individual, group, or element (or any exclusive combination of these) is able to monopolize power or become decisively involved in every significant community decision. Polyarchies are characterized by their relative openness and fluidity. Power is not only widely diffused but different issues or situations are likely to alter the relative influence of different groups, giving them greater or lesser roles in the decision-making process, depending upon their salience to the issue at hand. Moreover, leadership within these groups is likely to change with some frequency.

Organized polyarchy can be said to exist where the elements, groups, and individuals active in the community are mobilized in routine ways and exercise their influence through recognized channels. Since their participation is expected, coordination among them is possible on a regular basis.

When power is more widely diffused and the participants are less easily coordinated, a fragmented polyarchy exists. In a fragmented polyarchy it is difficult for both participants and observers to determine who has the power potential to achieve their goals. If sufficiently fragmented, a polyarchy may become chaotic, but since chaotic polyarchy would signify a community in dissolution, it is a rare and ephemeral phenomenon indeed.

While we do not have the requisite data to draw solid conclusions at this point, on the basis of what is known it seems reasonable to hypothesize that most of the large Jewish communities in the United States fall somewhere between multiple-element oligarchies and organized polyarchies, with the greater number being representative oligarchies. Most of the small communities are either multiple-element or single-element oligarchies, perhaps by default. The American Jewish community as a whole is frequently portrayed as a chaos of competing oligarchies. In fact, it may very well be that the countrywide community is moving from a fragmented polyarchy to a representative oligarchy, not nearly so well formed or structured as the multiple-element oligarchy it sometimes seems to be and not

as open as polyarchy might imply, but nevertheless following patterns of organization and fragmentation that combine increasing openness and representativeness with a measure of oligarchic control.

Oligarchy has long been a common pattern for organizing power in Jewish communities, at least since the crystallization of the idea of the Jewish polity as an aristocratic republic during the Second Commonwealth. In their best premodern form oligarchies have been aristocratic in character, and in their finest modern form, trusteeships of leaders seeking the good of the community. Degenerated, they fit the original meaning of the term: rule by the few for their own benefit.

Ideal aristocratic republics have a way of becoming oligarchies when they fall short of the ideal. At its best oligarchic control is in itself a decent approximation of the ideal republic within the limits imposed by human nature. Indeed, to the extent that the term "oligarchy" implies rule by a few for their own personal gain, another term must be found to describe Jewish self-government. Classically, the leaders of the Jewish community have been considered to be trustees responsible for the commonwealth, and the demands placed upon them have echoed this principle of trusteeship. It is not inappropriate, then, to refer to oligarchic forms of control in their best sense as trusteeships.

In more down-to-earth terms oligarchies frequently arise because there are power vacuums to be filled and only a few people interested in filling them. This is particularly true in contemporary American Jewish life. Given the concentric circles of involvement, the number of people even available for leadership is severely limited. This situation should not be underestimated. Indeed, whenever groups that feel themselves excluded do make their appearance on the Jewish scene, chances are that they will be co-opted and given a seat at the table simply because they ask for it — witness the response of the community to its young "radicals" since 1968.

The response of the overall community to the demands of youth in the late 1960s is illustrative of the processes of community politics in the American Jewish polity. The youth demands were raised belligerently in an ostensibly revolutionary manner, principally because those making the demands believed that the

Jewish establishment was so entrenched and so unconcerned with their needs that normal political means would be unavailing. To the extent that those making the demands were outside the decision-making processes they were correct. They received the hearing that they did primarily because they utilized confrontation politics. At the same time, the rapidity of the response demonstrated how open the establishment really was — at least on matters affecting youth, who are perceived to hold the future of American Jewry in their hands.

The Jewish establishment moved in the direction that it did partly because they felt that the young people were right in their demands even if wrong in their tactics. They were, in certain respects, pleased to be called to account and to be told that they should provide more support for Jewish education and to act in more traditionally Jewish ways. They also saw in these young people their own heirs and therefore were particularly concerned with wooing them. Unquestionably they sought to co-opt the young people, even as they attempted to meet some of their demands. Nor did their actions significantly transform the structure of the federation movement or its decision-making processes. Locally and countrywide, youth were given token representation on boards and committees and a few even tried to make themselves heard; for the most part, however, they were either so stunned or impressed by the decision-making process that they sat back quietly in deference to their elders, listening rather than demanding.

As the countrywide tide of youthful rebellion subsided, so too did it in the Jewish community, leaving behind a residue of new activities and a cadre of youth leaders who had virtually made careers out of their new roles. They were fast becoming as isolated and unrepresentative of the mass of Jewish youth as their elders were of the mass of Jewish adults, probably more so. Over the next few years, they either drifted on to other activities or found places for themselves in the organized community.

The special nature of the Jewish polity — its core of religious principles and behavior patterns that must be preserved if the community is to survive meaningfully, its lack of an all-embracing territorial base and the special problem that imposes, its dependence upon a particular kind of dedicated leadership willing to assume grave burdens voluntarily — makes trustee-

ship a very reasonable solution to its problem of governance. At the same time, the community's necessary reliance upon the consent of its members to survive, the voluntarism that informs that consent, and the religious tenets that make survival meaningful demand a degree of openness and democratic participation that have generally kept Jewish trusteeships reasonably representative.

Leadership and Representation

Once we understand the system of power and influence in the American Jewish community, we are in a better position to understand the nature of its leadership and the ways in which it is or is not representative. The representative character of a community's leadership can be measured in two ways. Leaders who are elected by a broad-based electorate in a competitive manner are deemed to be representative by virtue of their election. Leaders can also be considered representative, even if they are chosen in ways that do not insure representativeness, when they are culturally, ideologically, and socially in tune with the people they are leading.

By and large, the second kind of leadership prevails in the American Jewish community. Indeed, in a few instances where there have been contested elections, it appears that the leaders chosen were not particularly representative but were, rather, the choices of organized minorities that managed to win against unorganized majorities. Paradoxically, it is precisely where elections tend to be pro forma that the leaders often are most broadly representative of the varied Jewish interests in the communities they serve. In fact, judging from the record, it seems that when pro forma elections have been converted into contests, the very representativeness of the leadership in that sense of the word is what has discouraged people from seeking real elections. Modern Jewish communities that have experimented with communal elections (Australia, for example) have not found them to be any better a solution to the problem of representation, because the turnout in such elections tends to be extremely low. Indeed, the smallness of turnout appears to be

directly related to the degree of true freedom of association available to the Jews of the community in question.

Communal elections do not guarantee that statesmen will be elected to communal leadership either, since the mass-based organizations that can get their members to turn out in an election frequently are those that involve the most localistic Jews, whose leadership has the most limited perception of the needs of the larger community. Elections do have one important consequence, however: they raise to the inner circles of leadership people whose qualifications are not simply financial. In most cases they are people who have become leaders of some important organizational bloc that is able to turn out the vote. As such, they are more likely to be attuned to straightforward political considerations than are big donors, who do not have to cater to constituencies in any way.

Only when there is a feeling in some substantial community group that the existing leaders are not fundamentally representative are they challenged; then elections are transformed into contests. Since community leadership by and large consists of filling vacuums, it is often more difficult to recruit leaders and to determine whether they are representative or not. It is not as if many people were clamoring for a few places — indeed, it is just the other way around.

There is no question but that the Jewish community — a voluntary polity dependent for its functioning on the free choice of individuals who are willing to do their share to make it function — is indeed ruled by a certain kind of governing class composed of people who choose to make its tasks theirs, either as professionals or volunteers. The character of that governing class both reflects the character of the population it serves and contributes significantly to the shaping of the character of the community itself.

Because the sheer range of communal functions today requires such a variety of talents to fill its many leadership roles, the kind of simplistic exercises in describing leadership patterns in the Jewish community that were frequent in the past have been rendered obsolete. In a basically complex leadership network that is further complicated by the division between professionals and volunteers, special questions arise as to the relationship between leadership and decision-making, recruitment and

training, and the selection, mobility, and replacement of leaders of both types. These are questions that cannot be easily answered on the basis of "representativeness" or some similar catchword.

The American Jewish community, then, is governed by what may be termed a "trusteeship of givers and doers," in which decision-makers who are generally self-selected on the basis of their willingness to participate control communal life in all its facets. They perceive their function to be one of managing the community's affairs in trust for its members, the Jewish people as a whole, just as earlier generations of leaders did. We have said that this sense of trusteeship is what keeps the communal leadership from being an oligarchy in the classical meaning of the term: a small body that manages the community for its own benefit. Every significant Jewish interest has the right to claim a place in the trusteeship of givers and doers and is accorded its place once it brings its claim to the attention of the appropriate leadership.

Although it is not elected in any systemically competitive manner, the trusteeship of givers and doers is representative in another way. It seems to reflect the attitudes, values, and interests of American Jewry, probably with considerable accuracy except perhaps in one respect: the leaders are probably more positively Jewish than the community's rank and file. Nevertheless, to the extent that it is desirable to broaden the community's base, it may be necessary to provide support for potential voluntary leaders who cannot afford to work for the Jewish community under present conditions. Such an arrangement would open the doors of leadership to many people who presently cannot entertain the notion of assuming positions in American Jewish life beyond the synagogue arena. There is no doubt that this would lead some people to make their careers in the Jewish communal world, not as professional administrators but as communal politicians. This would bring into being a different set of problems and possibilities, but it might be worth the effort.

The fact that elections are not likely to accomplish the purposes for which they are instituted does not mean that better ways to involve a wider segment of the American Jewish community in its crucial decision-making bodies cannot be developed. Any efforts in that direction must be founded on the

recognition that oligarchy is likely to be the persistent form of Jewish life (in some respects it is even the classic form of Jewish political organization). The trusteeship of givers and doers seems to be the system that is fated for American Jewry, and probably for any Jewish community living in a voluntaristic environment like the United States. What is called for, then, is to make the oligarchies properly representative.

This might come about by encouraging a whole host of tendencies already present on the American scene and by adding others. It seems unquestionable that the strength of the American Jewish community lies in its local locus. This means that, where there is a tendency to oligarchy, the existence of face-to-face relations between members of the oligarchy and the larger Jewish population is critical to moderate the former's control. Even when the oligarchy is a trusteeship, there needs to be that kind of face-to-face contact to keep the "establishment" trustees in tune with the community. Were countrywide organizations more powerful, they would also be more independent of the Jewish public because they would be more separated from it and even less in tune with the Jewish public. Even the countrywide organizations are aware that their volunteer leaders are still rooted in their local settings. Thus, representatives of the American Jewish community acquire as a *sine qua non* the maintenance of a strong local dimension.

Notes

1. For a history of the JDC, see Herbert Agar, *The Saving Remnant: An Account of Jewish Survival* (New York: Viking Press, 1960); and Yehuda Bauer, *My Brother's Keeper: A History of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, 1929-1939* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1974).
2. This typology is adopted from Daniel J. Elazar, "The Reconstitution of the Jewish Community in the Postwar Period," *Jewish Journal of Sociology* (December 1969). I have also applied it to American cities in my *Cities of the Prairie* (New York: Basic Books, 1970).