

Chapter 1

THE FEDERATION MOVEMENT IN THREE CONTEXTS: AMERICAN JEWRY, THE JEWISH POLITICAL TRADITION, AND MODERNITY

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I

The American Jewish community, the first fully emancipated Jewish community, is entirely a product of the modern epoch. As such it is in most respects a model of what Jewish life has become or is becoming for all but a handful of Jews in the world: based on the voluntary commitment, through a variety of paths, of those individuals who care to be Jewish, few of whom feel obligated or compelled. Once that initial commitment is made, the Jewish community comes into being, animated by the voluntary commitment of an even smaller number of Jews to serve as its movers and shakers, and shaped by the institutions they develop to embrace those who wish to be Jewish or who accept the fact that they are. Outside of Israel, it is a community held together by the strength and magnetism of its core, rather than by clear boundaries at its peripheries, and even in Israel being

Jewish beyond the demands of Israeli citizenship and law is becoming more and more a matter of personal choice.

The magnetism of the core makes its real impact felt through the institutions of the community — the organized patterns of life and the bodies that maintain them — to make the whole more than the sum of its parts; hence to know American Jewry as a force and a factor in Jewish life or Jewish history is only in a limited way a matter of intermarriage statistics or demographic trends. More concretely, it is a matter of how those Jews who choose to be Jews act collectively to achieve Jewish goals, how the American Jewish community has overcome the problems of a beneficent postemancipation existence to define Jewish goals for itself and build the institutions needed to achieve those goals.

The character of the core's magnetism has undergone changes over the past two generations. After 1933 and the rise of Hitler, it rested on a strong need for self-preservation, part of which is the preservation of all Jews. For most Jews, support for Israel after World War II was an outgrowth of that drive for self-preservation. Only for a handful of Zionists did Israel come to mean the search for Jewish national and cultural revival. At least from the 1970s onward their magnetism has increasingly come to rest upon the religious and spiritual dimensions of Judaism, a process that continues to accelerate today.

Organizationally, the American Jewish community is best understood as a mosaic, a multidimensional matrix of institutions and organizations that interact with each other in their attempts to cover the range of communal concerns while preserving their respective integrities. These institutions and organizations often seem to be in noisy competition but in a larger sense are bound by shared patterns of culture and persuasion, have somewhat overlapping memberships, and are governed by more or less the same leadership cadres.

The institutions and organizations of the American Jewish community serve local, countrywide, overseas (including Israel), and occasionally regional constituencies. They group themselves, *de facto*, around five major functions or spheres of public activity: (1) religious-congregational, (2) educational-cultural, (3) community relations, (4) communal-welfare, and (5) Israel-overseas. The activities of the American Jewish community are

organized along the lines inherent in this matrix. Rather than functioning through neat structures of authority and responsibility, as would be the case in a more hierarchical system, the mosaic of institutions and organizations depends upon a network of formal and quasi-formal federative arrangements enlivened by an informal communications network among their leaders. Standing out among them are the Jewish community federations and their continent-wide Council of Jewish Federations, collectively known as the federation movement, this year celebrating the centennial of the founding of the first community federation — in Boston in 1895.

The casual observer of the American Jewish scene cannot help but be impressed by the extraordinary variety of forms of Jewish association. Any organized interconnections within the maze of institutions and organizations of American Jewry have had to be established in the face of many obstacles, including the lack of any inherent legitimacy attaching to any coordinating institutions, the penchant for individualism inherent in the American Jewish community (derived from both American and Jewish cultures), and the difficulty of enforcing any kind of coordinating effort within the context of an American society that treats all Jewish activities as private and voluntary.

Thus the pattern of relationships within American Jewish life must be a dynamic one. There is rarely a fixed division of authority and influence within American Jewry, but rather one that varies from time to time and usually from issue to issue, with different elements taking on different “loads” at different times and in relation to different issues. Moreover, since the community is a voluntary one, persuasion rather than compulsion, influence rather than power, are the tools available for making decisions and implementing policies. All this works to strengthen the character, quality, and relevance of what is communicated, and how it is communicated frequently determines the extent of the authority and influence of the parties to the communication. Within and across each of the five major public-purpose spheres there is considerable overlap among the aforementioned elements.

At least five factors shape the American Jewish polity. First, there are factors stemming from the environment (internal and external) in which the community functions — the general

American context, the context of American Jewish life, the environment of the Jewish world as a whole, including the persistent patterns of Jewish political culture, and the impact of modernism and technological change. Second, there is the pre-eminence of local institutions in American Jewish life and the emphasis on local control that they both represent and reinforce. Third, there are the above-mentioned functional groupings that have emerged in the community. Fourth, there are the basic divisions that both separate and link institutions, people, and leaders within the community — principally the division between “religious” and “secular” activities and the division between “cosmopolitans” and “locals.” Fifth, there are the character and interests of persons who are active in the community and become the actual or potential leaders within it.

II

While the American Jewish polity is in so many ways *sui generis*, it is also the heir to a long and well-developed Jewish political tradition, an expression of patterns and processes of governance whose origins lie at the very founding of the Jewish people some 3,500 years ago and must be understood and evaluated in relation to that tradition.¹ While the Jewish political experience has been extremely varied over the years, ranging from independent statehood in the Land of Israel to communal autonomy in the very difficult circumstances of exile; has included monarchic, oligarchic, and democratic forms of government under different conditions; and has had to find ways of expression in almost every time and clime throughout the world, there are some constant and recurring elements in the Jewish political tradition that continue to be echoed in the American Jewish polity.

The federal element has already been noted. It is part and parcel of the very foundation of the Jewish political experience and tradition, both in the sense of the covenantal founding of the Jewish people (federal is from the Latin *foedus* meaning covenant) and more explicitly in the predominant form of political organization throughout the history of the Jewish polity beginning with the federation of the twelve tribes. Covenant in Jewish

tradition has a strong political as well as a theological dimension. Covenants have been the basis for all legitimate Jewish political organization from Abraham and Sinai to the present.

Brit (covenant) is quintessentially federal in that it conveys the sense of both separation and linkage, cutting and binding. A covenant creates a perpetual bond between parties having independent but not necessarily equal status, called upon to share in a common task. That bond is based upon mutual obligations and a commitment to undertake joint action to achieve certain defined ends, which may be limited or comprehensive, under conditions of mutual respect in such a way as to protect the fundamental integrity of all the parties involved. A covenant is much more than a contract — though our modern system of contracts is related to the covenant idea — because it involves a pledge of loyalty beyond that demanded for mutual advantage, often involving the development of a certain kind of community among the partners to the covenant, and ultimately based upon their moral commitment. As a political instrument, covenant resembles the political compacts of the seventeenth and eighteenth century philosophers except that it is not secular in character.

Jewish political institutions and behavior reflect this covenantal base in the way they give expression to the political relationship as a partnership based upon a morally grounded pact and, like all partnerships, oriented toward decision- and policy-making through negotiation and bargaining. Beyond that, wherever the possibility has existed, Jews have organized their political institutions on a federal basis, whether in the form of the ancient tribal confederacy, the Hellenistic *politeuma*, the medieval confederations of local communities, the Council of the Four Lands in late medieval Poland, the communal federations of the contemporary diaspora based on territorial or country-of-origin communities, the party and settlement federations of modern Israel, or the federations of functional agencies of the American Jewish community that served as the community's framing institutions.

By nature, a covenanted community is republican in the original sense of *res publica*, a public thing, rather than the private preserve of any person or institution. In the Bible, the Jewish republic is referred to as the *edah*, from the term for

assembly, in other words, a body politic based on the general assembly of its citizens for decision-making purposes. The term and its later equivalent, *knesset*, derived from the Aramaic at the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, have continued to be used to describe the Jewish body-politic ever since (*adat bnei yisrael*, *knesset yisrael*). The original *edah* was literally an assembly of the entire people on constitutional matters and the men who had reached military age for others. As such, it parallels and historically precedes similar phenomena such as the Swiss *landesgemeinde*, the Icelandic *althing*, and the New England town meeting.

The basic characteristics of the *edah* can be summarized as follows: 1) Political equality exists for all those capable of taking responsibility for the defense of the *edah*. 2) Decision-making is in the hands of an assembly that determines its own leaders. 3) The *edah* can be portable and need not be confined to one place. 4) Nevertheless, for it to function completely, the *edah* needs Eretz Israel. 5) The Torah is the constitution of the *edah* which, as a commonwealth, is built on a normative foundation and it is organized to maintain these norms.

The congregational form itself — the *kahal* or *kehilla* — is a subsidiary product of the linkage of the covenant and the *edah*. Traditionally, any ten male Jews may come together to form a *kahal* by covenanting among themselves to establish a local framework within the larger framework of the Torah for the conduct of their religious, social and political life. The constitutional terminology of the *kahal* reflects its covenant orientation. Among Sephardic communities, for example, the articles of agreement establishing communities are known as *askamot*, from *haskama* or consent.

On the other hand, the fundamental egalitarianism of the *edah* should not obscure the fact that the Jewish political tradition has a strong aristocratic dimension, in the sense that those who hold the powers of government are trustees for both the people and the Torah, traditionally selected on the basis of some qualifications to be trustees — Divine sanctification, scholarship, lineage, or wealth. In the last analysis, however, the Jewish political tradition is based upon what S.D. Goitein has termed “religious democracy,” using the term religious in its original sense of “binding” (as in Ezekiel’s *masoret habrit* — Ezekiel 20:35-

37), uniting God, the citizenry and the human governors empowered under the particular regime in operation at the time through covenant.²

In this spirit, governance within the *edah* and its arenas was based upon the delegation and separation of powers. The diffusion of power characteristic of the organizational structure of the *edah* is to a large extent mirrored and amplified by the traditional insistence on its distribution within the various arenas of government. Hierarchical concentration of political authority is rejected, as it would be in any covenantal system true to its fundamental principles. Thus government normally is handled through various *reshuyot* (authorities).

These *reshuyot* are grouped into three domains, dating back to Sinai and known in Hebrew since the time of the Second Commonwealth as *ketarim* (literally, crowns). According to biblical sources, each *keter* has a grant of authority directly from God, hence all are fundamentally equal as instruments of governance on earth. The three are the *keter torah*, whose task is to give programmatic expression to the Torah, Israel's Divinely-originated constitution; the *keter kehunah*, whose task is to bring God and the *edah* into close proximity through shared rituals and symbolic expressions; and the *keter malkhut*, whose task is to be the vehicle for civil authority to exercise power within the *edah*.

The first normally flows from God to the people through mediating institutions such as prophets, Torah sages, and *poskim* (*halakhic* decisors). It is embodied in such classic works as the Torah and the Talmud. In today's community it resides in the hands of Torah greats, Yeshivot and rabbinical seminaries, and certain Jewish studies scholars. The second, which is formally entrusted to the priestly descendents of Aaron, supplemented since the destruction of the Temple by religious and synagogue functionaries, normally involves human initiatives directed heavenward. Today it is effectively in the hands of synagogues and congregational rabbis. The third, originally entrusted to elders and judges, then to kings, particularly of the House of David, and then to patriarchs (*nesiim*), exilarchs, and *parnasim* (community leaders), emphasizes human political relationships with other humans. In the U.S. today it is exemplified by the federation movement and the other organizations within that movement's orbit.

This unique tripartite division of authority allows the Jewish polity to encompass far more than the narrow functions of contemporary political systems. In effect it embraces religious and social as well as political expressions, thus constitutionalizing power-sharing in such a way as to reflect the multi-faceted character of the Jewish people. Each *keter* has a share in the governance of the *edah* through the institutions and officers empowered by it. Each, however, does so from a different base.

What distinguishes this division of authority from a conventional separation of powers system is that the *ketarim* address themselves first to the source, character, and purpose of authority, only then to issues of function (e.g., executive, legislative, judicial). The latter are usually shared by two or more of the *ketarim* by design. The distinction lies less in the need that each serves than in the perspective each brings to bear on political activities, thereby enabling each to exercise a constitutional check on the others. Each possesses its own institutional structure. The three are interdependent. No Jewish polity is constitutionally complete unless it contains representatives of all three *ketarim* in one form or another.

While the *ketarim* may be equal in theory, in practice there have been shifts in the balance among them throughout Jewish history along with a degree of inter-*keter* conflict. For example, when David became king, he secured his throne and dynasty by securing the dominance of the *keter malkhut*. He did so by bringing the other two *ketarim* into his court, preserving them but at the same time subordinating them to the throne. During the Second Commonwealth there was a continuing conflict among the three *ketarim* which were rather equally balanced, but after the destruction of the Second Temple, the sages representing the *keter torah* made theirs the dominant one, aided by the unique ability of the *halakhah* to serve a community in exile with no political sovereignty. The *keter torah* not only remained dominant for the next 1800 years, it became the grounding for the *edah* in every respect. In our times, however, the reestablishment of the State of Israel, coupled with the increased secularization of Jewish life in both Israel and the diaspora, has led to a resurgence of the *keter malkhut* which has gained the upper hand although once again being challenged by the representatives of the *keter torah*.

What is important to note is that these conflicts are based on the premise that all three *ketarim* must continue to function for the polity to be legitimate. All are agreed on this, even if they contest for power within the framework. Periodically in Jewish history there have been efforts to combine or eliminate one or another of the *ketarim*, whether at the time of the prophet Samuel who took all three to himself as at the time of Hasmonean rule during the Second Commonwealth when the ruling family combined the *keter kehunah* and *keter malkhut*, or in the early stages of the Zionist movement when the Labor Zionist settlers of Israel thought that only the *keter malkhut* was important. All have failed, in the first two cases disastrously.

All this points to the great force of constitutionalism in the Jewish political tradition. The Jewish polity is a constitutional polity above all, whose fundamental constitution has remained *Torat Moshe* (the Torah of Moses), however interpreted throughout the ages. Despite its long and unbroken constitutional foundation, historical circumstances have caused the *edah* to undergo periodic reconstitutions in order to respond to changing conditions. For the *edah* as a whole, these reconstitutions have taken place approximately every ten generations or 300 years, thereby establishing a constitutional basis for the periodization of Jewish history. In each of those reconstitutions a new constitutional referent has been introduced as the principal vehicle for interpreting the original Torah, whether in the form of the prophetic literature, the Mishnah, the Gemarah, or the various medieval codes culminating in the *Shulchan Aruch*.

The *edah* has passed through thirteen such historical epochs and is now in the early stages of the fourteenth. The American Jewish community is a product of the thirteenth epoch, whose characteristic regime was that of the voluntary association and which coincides with the modern epoch in world history from 1648 to 1948. It has acquired its present form in the fourteenth epoch whose major manifestation is the restoration of the Jewish state and the role it has played in reconstituting the *edah* so that the Jewish people as a whole again has a structure. As we shall see, it may be on the threshold of another major reorganization reflecting the new patterns of Jewish geography and demography of the last generation of the twentieth century.

Significantly, the two great constructive phenomena of twentieth-century Jewry, the reestablishment of a Jewish state in the Land of Israel and the establishment of the great Jewish community in North America, represent interesting and highly significant adaptations of the *brit* and *ketarim* within the *edah*. If one looks at the foundation of the early institutions and settlements of the new *yishuv* (Jewish settlement) in Eretz Israel, one finds that their basis in almost every case was covenantal. Borrowing from the established patterns of congregational *askamot*, they established partnerships and created associations on the basis of formal compacts and constitutional documents. This continued to be the standard form of organization in the Jewish *yishuv* even after the British became the occupying power in the country. The *yishuv* was governed internally through a network of covenants and compacts until the emergence of a centralized state in 1948. Moreover, the Zionist movement implicitly recognized the existence of at least the *keter malkhut* and the *keter torah* even though it sought to capture the former and radically reduce the role of the latter.

In the United States, the organization of congregations follows the traditional form even though the congregations themselves may be untraditional in their religious practices. They continue to embrace the *keter torah* and the *keter kehunah*, if at times in uneasy combination. Similarly, the organization of social agencies and educational institutions and their coming together in local Jewish federations or countrywide confederations as expressions of the *keter malkhut* is simply another extension of what has been the standard pattern of Jewish organization for several millennia. One would be hard put to prove that in either the Israeli or the American case there was an explicit or conscious desire to maintain a particular political tradition. Rather, it was a consequence of the shared political culture of the Jews involved that led to the continuation of the traditional patterns in new adaptations.

Contemporary Israeli and Jewish politics reflect the Jewish political tradition, in its virtues and its vices, good and bad. It is more than a little ironic that in the United States, where the government does not care how Jews organize themselves, so long as they do not try to go beyond certain fundamental constitutional restrictions, this pattern has been able to express

itself most fully under contemporary conditions, whereas in Israel, where there was a necessity, as it were, to create an authoritative state on the model of the reified nation-state of modern Europe, this process has run into something of a dead-end at the state level, stifled by the strong inclination toward centralized control of every aspect of public life brought by the state's molders and shapers from their European experience.

IV

While the particular demands place upon Jewish life by the American environment have caused American Jews to adopt the protective coloring of religion as their point of departure as a community, it is in fact as a body politic that American Jewry has functioned best. It is no accident that "philanthropy" — the accepted American pseudonym used for this kind of political existence — is a greater point of Jewish identification than worship, despite the various religious "revivals" in American Jewish history. Rightly or wrongly, secretly or openly, Jews function as Jews in response to their needs as a collectivity first and foremost — in other words, as a polity, truncated as it may be under any given circumstances.

This review focuses on the American Jewish community and its polity in the perspective of the federation movement at its centennary. Only a comprehensive study of federations and their role in American Jewish life and American life in general can do justice to this subject. Here we can only explore a few issues and raise a few questions.

What follows is a discussion — incomplete, to be sure — of how the federation movement has responded to the problems of transforming the passive bonds of kinship into active associational ties based on the bonds of consent.

The emphasis on successful polity-building should not obscure the crisis of Jewish survival presently besetting the American Jewish community. On one plane the gap between the organizational life of the community and the majority of the Jews within it has grown to threatening proportions, so that even as the community's institutional capability increases, the danger of losing millions of Jews through assimilation grows

apace. On another, American Jewry may well have passed the peak of its influence in the general community and may find its interests increasingly at odds with those of the non-Jewish majority, a prospect that promises to test American Jews as never before. Even when the whole is greater than the sum of the parts, organization alone cannot solve those problems.

Notes

1. This section is based on the theory and analysis more fully described in Daniel J. Elazar and Stuart A. Cohen, *The Jewish Polity* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984).
2. See Shlomo Dov Goitin, "Political Conflict and the Use of Power," in Daniel J. Elazar, ed., *Kinship and Consent: The Jewish Political Tradition and Its Contemporary Uses* (Ramat Gan and Philadelphia: Turtledove Publishing, 1981), pp. 169-181.