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THE NEW GEO-DEMOGRAPHICS OF AMERICAN JEWRY

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On the Verge of an Organizational Upheaval

American Jewry is on the verge of an organizational upheaval of an extent that it has not seen for nearly a hundred years since the present structure of the American Jewish community took form between 1890 and 1940. Only a few years ago, many American Jews were congratulating themselves on the very successful effort at self-organization. Whatever American Jews lacked in their private lives as Jews, the public organizations of American Jewry — its synagogues, community federations, community centers, family services, assistance for senior citizens, its network of institutions of Jewish education, its "national" organizations for defense against anti-Semitism, for Jewish studies and for community coordination — were the envy of the contemporary Jewish diaspora. One thing American Jewry seemed to have done well was to build itself a structure that could serve its purposes and insure not only its survival, but a certain quality of Jewish life.

Now, after some of these collective public choices led to the consolidation of the edifice, private individual and family choices have made much of it obsolete and dysfunctional. Once again, American Jewry is in for a period of reorganization. Unlike the first time, this is more a matter of adjusting existing structures rather than simply inventing new ones from scratch. This is more difficult to do because the present institutional network, quite naturally, has its vested interests which will seek to avoid displacement, in some cases showing a willingness to adapt and having the ideas for adaptation, while in other cases resisting change.

The Impact of Population Dispersion

What has happened to generate this necessity for radical reorganization? Simply put, it is the massive geographic shifts that have taken place among the Jewish population of the United States, coupled with the great rise in assimilation. As the

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1990 National Jewish Population Study reconfirmed (there were already substantial signs of it in the 1970 study), American Jews have been engaged in a double movement away from the Northeast (and apparently from the Midwest as well) to the South and West, and away from the big cities to the suburbs and more importantly to the exurbs beyond the suburbs. Both moves have served to dissolve established Jewish communities and increase the living distance between Jews by drastically lowering the density of Jewish population "concentrations," thereby rendering the ability of established local Jewish institutions to serve their communities much more difficult.

In the early 1960s, over 75 percent of Jewish children had some Jewish education during their lifetimes. Since then, not only has the Jewish birthrate fallen, but the percentage of those acquiring any Jewish education has declined as well, in part because it was a lot easier when Jews lived within walking distance or perhaps within a few miles, a short bus or car pool ride, from Jewish schools. Once beyond convenient driving range, parents lose much of their incentive to give their children a Jewish education at the cost of an extra two hours riding time every time the child is supposed to be in attendance. Even if parents are willing to make the effort, they are willing to do so far fewer times a week than thirty or fifty years ago.

The same is true with regard to Jewish community centers. There have been studies made of how much time Jews are willing to invest in travelling to a community center. The top seems to be about twenty to twenty-five minutes. The Jewish community cannot support enough centers to keep that distance a realistic one any more, now that so many Jews do not live in reasonable proximity one to another. The centers continue to exist but the percentage and number of Jews who use them is declining.

The situation is somewhat better with regard to synagogues. Congregations can be smaller and more scattered than community centers, but despite the drive for smaller congregations in some quarters since the 1960s, most Jews' participation in synagogue activities, including attendance at services, is very limited. In all too many cases, smaller congregations mean less of a committed, critical core-membership to maintain the institution with a full range of activities, especially with more women in the work force and having less time for synagogue-centered activities, as well as the complicated phenomena of single-parent families and so-called blended families which may be as dispersed as the Jewish population itself.

Other Jewish organizations are facing even greater difficulties. As a result of suburbanization after World War II, Jews left crowded, big city neighborhoods for less dense suburban areas surrounding the central cities with which they were identified. The husbands continued to work in the city in most cases, and the wives did not live far away, so those Jewish organizations that required central meeting places could still draw upon interested Jews to participate in them. Today, the cities have ceased to be central. Employment is dispersed throughout large areas of settlement and it is very difficult to find a central meeting place, equitably (there is no speaking of equally) accessible to all the community within a relatively short drive, that will enable those who wish to participate in communal affairs to do so. If the Jewish community federations have moved out of downtown, they have invariably chosen one set of suburbs from which to draw the people who were already involved with them, which means a further elitization of the community, with institutions placed near concentrations of wealthier Jews who play leadership roles in them. As a result, it is physically quite difficult to attract people outside of those wealthy concentrations to even come to meetings, assuming they would feel at home when they got there.

There have been some efforts to combat this through regionalization of community federations serving populations spread over large areas. These efforts also have run into difficulty because it is still easier for those near the federation offices to come in to meetings. At the same time, those wealthier Jews, if they come from northern communities, frequently have second homes in the sun-belt and spend substantial amounts of time there, perhaps half the year or more, so they are no longer available for continuous involvement in their local communities. Nor do they feel particularly attached to their new sun-belt communities to want to play a role in them.

Adapting to the New "Edge Cities"

What has happened is that the first generation of suburbanization, which began following World War II, broke up the Jewish street in the older central cities and the Jewish neighborhoods just beyond. While it led to substantial concentration of Jews in the suburban belt around those cities, that came to an end in the 1960s. By the late 1970s, the second wave of Jewish dispersal had begun. Central cities ceased for all intents and purposes to be central. Now more people worked outside of the central business district or even the city limits than within them. The settlement which had

followed radial axes from the central city began to take on the form of a matrix spread over large areas with no clear center. In the 1980s, alternate centers began to develop, what author Joel Garreau has referred to as "edge cities." These are areas, not necessarily incorporated, with concentrations of shopping malls, office buildings and hotels to serve some segment of the matrix, with no single one having any special function as the central place. Since these large regional matrices cross county lines, as well as municipal boundaries, even the county courthouses ceased to play a centralizing role, most serving as sub-centers for particular localities. Whatever metropolitan planning bodies existed kept extending themselves, but even so they were no more than planning bodies that provided no particular unity to the areas served beyond their limited planning function.

For Jews this new pattern offered new opportunities for settling outside of Jewish neighborhoods or in very dispersed ones. Even if they wished to maintain connections with Jewish institutions, at most they would establish new congregations in their new sites. The federations tried to respond by establishing regional community centers and then ran into the problem of travel time, exacerbated by the competition from private health clubs that provided exercise and recreational services, often with more hours and less cost, which had formerly been among the major draws of the community centers. Slowly, in place of the approximately 200 community nodes gathered in a like number of Jewish community federations, of which approximately 20 percent were easily visible and embraced over 95 percent of the Jews in the country, Jews spread over the landscape, across federation jurisdictions, just as they did across governmental jurisdictions.

The Example of New York City

The Greater New York area may be the classic example of this. At one time, before World War II, each city in the metropolitan region was quite discreet. New York City, Newark, Bridgeport, and perhaps three or four other smaller cities, each had its own federation, its own sense of place, and its own Jewish organizational life. After the war, the movement out of New York City inundated much of the northern half of New Jersey, Nassau and then Suffolk Counties on Long Island, Westchester County north of the Bronx, and even southeastern Connecticut. The New York Federation expanded to include those counties in New York State adjacent to the city. The Newark Federation became the Jewish Federation of Essex County and then

MetroWest, and other federations grew up in northern New Jersey to embrace their new Jewish populations. For example, as Jews settled in Bergen County, they came together first as a community council and then as a full-blown federation, overwhelming the previously existing Jewish Federation of Englewood. It was in southeastern Connecticut that the new pattern first became apparent as federations were formed and named after two, three or four different towns that had come together to provide the necessary Jewish services.

By the end of the 1960s, federations had been organized to provide at least minimum connections between Jewish communities in different counties of New Jersey, in some cases embracing more than one county. Every one of them was essentially a federation of suburbanites living in a county or region with no particular center. These federations had minimal functions, mostly fund-raising, with most Jewish activity being confined to the synagogues. In the late 1970s even that began to change. At the same time, like other Americans, they began to develop wide regional patterns, not only of commuting but of service utilization. Jews who lived in Morristown, New Jersey, once the headquarters of a separate federation that later merged with MetroWest, could send their children to camps in the Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania, on one hand, and buy their corned beef on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, on the other. Institutional interdependence came later, and in the Greater New York-New Jersey area it is still relatively limited.

Florida: The Second Largest Jewish "Community"?

This is far less true for those many Jews from the northeast who moved to Florida. The concentration in Miami Beach gave way to Jewish settlements spread throughout much of Dade County. As the Miami Federation reorganized to take that into consideration, Jews were already settling further up Florida's east coast in Broward and Palm Beach Counties. Today the Jewish "community" of Southeast Florida claims to be the second largest Jewish "community" in the United States. 515,000 Jews live in those three counties, serviced by four different federations, the whole area within easy commuting distance for those who wish specialized services and, at the same time, with longer travel times for those who seek the ordinary services of Jewish life.

California: First Attempts at Regionalization

Los Angeles, generally considered the second largest Jewish community in the United States in the

wake of the post-World War II migrations, had the good fortune (or misfortune, from another point of view) of being located in a county of 4,000 square miles, slightly under the size of the whole state of Connecticut, with plenty of room for Jews to scatter every which way and still be under the same basic local political jurisdiction. Thus, the Los Angeles figure of 501,000 Jews is based on the figures in that one county alone. Those Jewish communities form part of a continuous band with those in San Bernardino County to the east, the Mojave Desert to the north, Ventura County (and Santa Barbara County) to the northwest, and the now well over 100,000 Jews of Orange County to the southeast. If southern California were to count Jews the way southeastern Florida does, its Jewish population, located in four or five mostly relatively new federations, would approach three-quarters of a million in a belt from the Mexican border just below San Diego to Santa Barbara, and from the Pacific Ocean to Palm Springs.

The Los Angeles Federation, the first to try regionalization (just in Los Angeles County, of course), ran into trouble as the regions continued to feel themselves alienated from the Federation as a whole because of distance and growing travel time to 6505 Wilshire Boulevard in Beverly Hills (not in downtown LA) where the general Federation headquarters is located. The eastern end of the county, from Pasadena in the San Gabriel Valley to the county line at Ontario, claims to have seceded. Population-wise the smallest of the five regions of the Los Angeles Federation, its Jewish population today would probably qualify for admission to the Big Nineteen of North American Jewish communities. The San Fernando Valley, with the largest Jewish population of the regions, would be one of the top five Jewish communities in the United States, by present reckoning.

In San Francisco, the San Francisco Federation not only expanded southward down the Peninsula and northward into Marin County as the Jews moved out in both directions, but took the lead in trying to develop some formal connections with its neighboring federations in San Jose and the East Bay going up to Sacramento. With Jews now settling in the Napa Valley and northward, even that regional delineation is out of date. The population of the area under consideration is approaching 300,000 Jews.

What is happening in these communities is also happening elsewhere in the country. Washington and Baltimore, two once clearly separate communities, are slowly growing together. The majority of the Jews of

"Washington, D.C." are located in Montgomery and Prince Georges Counties, Maryland, while the majority of Jews in "Baltimore" are located in Baltimore County, well outside of the city limits. The Boston area was always relatively decentralized Jewishly because of the pattern of towns in New England, but today has reached a whole new plateau for some purposes, reaching into southern Maine and New Hampshire, central Massachusetts, and Rhode Island.

Table I shows the pattern of the eight largest Jewish regional concentrations in the United States. None has less than 200,000 Jews and together they contain over 90 percent of the Jewish population of the country. Each is a region consisting of two or more federations spread over an area of several thousand square miles, with Jews living everywhere from gentrified big-city downtown areas to small towns trying desperately to avoid becoming like suburbs, much less cities.

The Beginnings of Adaptation to Change

While the choice of living styles available for Jews has expanded enormously, it is wreaking havoc with the Jewish community. The only organizations that can adapt relatively easily to this changed environment are synagogues, but even that at a large financial cost. For a while, the federations seemed to be adapting by expanding their boundaries, but that is no longer possible. They must reconceptualize themselves to get away from the kind of centralization upon which they were based, introducing greater regionalization internally and developing confederal linkages with adjacent federations as Jews overlap the traditional federation boundaries.

Some are beginning to do so on a state-wide basis or for a specific function. Federations in California and in New Jersey have come together to jointly support Hillel Foundations outside the Jewish population centers. The federations of Illinois have come together under Chicago's lead to organize a statewide lobbying effort in the state capital at Springfield and in Washington on issues of concern to them. In a way that is more akin to the requisite of the new pattern, the federations of southeast Florida have just recently joined together to develop a common economic development office to aid Israel in economic growth and to help the Hillel Foundation at the University of South Florida in Tampa (instead of their region). Yet other Jewish institutions are suffering badly. Jewish community centers will have to reconceptualize themselves entirely away from the large plants of the post-World War II period, supported by their health clubs, to develop a

Table 1

MAJOR LOCAL REGIONS OF JEWISH SETTLEMENT

Region	Jewish Population	No. of Counties	Total Area (in sq. miles) (by county)
New York - Northern New Jersey	2 million	24	5,156
Southern California	600,000	3	6,728
Southeastern Florida	515,000	3	5,159
Southeastern Pennsylvania - Southern New Jersey	281,000	10	4,155
Northeastern Illinois	252,000	7	3,528
Boston area	228,000	5	4,773
San Francisco Bay Area	210,000	6.5	5,156
Washington	165,000	5	1,470
Washington with Baltimore	265,000	7	2,339

Source: *The World Almanac and Book of Facts 1993* (New York: Oharos Books, 1992) and *American Jewish Yearbook* (1992).

new kind of programming that will attract today's Jews to sites close enough to where they live so that travel time remains within the acceptable. Location of senior citizens' housing has already moved many communities to the establishment of "campuses" of facilities, ranging from full-service dwellings for young seniors capable and desirous of living on their own in a luxury environment with appropriate meal and medical facilities nearby, to intensive-care old-age homes and hospices. Jewish community centers and synagogues are located close by. Since many of these facilities are private, they may have done the best to adapt to new market situations.

Jewish educators have already been talking for a number of years about the necessity to organize weekends and all-season camp programs of various lengths to reach out to those young people who cannot or will not attend after-school classes on a daily basis. The day school, the answer of the 1960s to the problem of

more intensive Jewish education that could be accommodated within the schedules of contemporary Jewish youth, has become so costly that it may not be able to serve as a solution in the 1990s, except for those more traditional Jews who seek larger concentrations of their fellows to sustain their Jewish life.

The so-called national Jewish organizations will continue to decline as they are unable to reach out efficiently to their potential constituencies to overcome the problems of distance in attracting them to meetings or other kinds of programs. They may be replaced by more focused special-interest organizations that will attract Jews to activities with special appeal to different segments of the Jewish population, just as in the general community.

Out of all this, the synagogues and the federations have the best chance to survive, but even they will have to undertake major reorganization. To undertake this in a period of massive Jewish assimilation may make

the task even more difficult, although it may add to the incentive to find better ways to move to the new era.

The first American Jewish institutions were organized by the immigrant generations, either by the Jews of Eastern Europe or by the Jews from Germany and Central Europe who came before them or the Sephardic Jews who came before that. All of them were principally city dwellers. They built their institutions in cities and for city dwellers. Their children and grandchildren successfully adapted those institutions to metropolitan areas when those metropolitan areas were for them simply an expansion of city settlements outside the city limits.

The new kinds of settlement to which Jews are drawn no longer rely on cities or expect cities to be critical factors in the lives of the American people. American Jews for a long time resisted the anti-city tendencies in American life. Even today they are disproportionately represented among the minority that looks to the cities for civilization, culture, and employment. Now many American Jews are becoming like

other Americans, able to do so not only because of their Americanization which leads them to want more open space and more trees, but because of technological changes which make it possible to have those things without giving up many aspects of city life that they need to make a living. The result has already transformed the American Jewish community, even if it has not been recognized sufficiently organizationally. Whether American Jews will be able to do the latter as well as they have done the former remains to be seen.

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