

JERUSALEM LETTER / VIEWPOINTS

Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs

No. 283 30 Tishri 5754 / 15 October 1993

AMERICAN JEWISH POLITICAL ADVOCACY: DEFINING THE CHANGING AGENDA, IDENTIFYING THE EMERGING PLAYERS

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New Players, New Issues

Traditionally, Jewish community relations in the U.S. have been led by three major institutions — the Anti-Defamation League, the American Jewish Committee, and the American Jewish Congress. Yet, as other players have emerged on the scene, a transition is taking place that includes a whole array of newer and, for the most part, single-issue constituencies.

The four traditionally dominant issues comprising the field of community relations — Israel, anti-Semitism, civil and human rights, and the status of world Jewry — have stimulated a variety of other groups to enter this field. These traditional issues have also opened the door for yet other matters to be placed on the agenda as the American Jewish community moves beyond the events of the civil rights era and the period of the aftermath of post-1967

Mideast politics. The four traditional concerns, while still significant to older leadership and very much a part of the mandate of a community relations or political advocacy agenda, are clearly not necessarily the only primary interests that are on the minds of the American Jewish community today, and may not be the causes that will necessarily impact Jewish advocacy in the future.

In this arena we are beginning to witness a competition factor due to an added variety of players challenging each other for primacy and influence. For example, the Israel agenda alone has seen the emergence of numerous political action committees (PACs). Over 80 PACs now operate in the U.S., providing yet another forum for participation in Jewish life through the support of pro-Israel candidates. (See Michael Malbin, "Jewish PACs: A New

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Force in Jewish Political Action," JL90.) As a result of this trend, the National Jewish Coalition was created by Jewish Republicans, along with a similar effort by Democrats.

In the religious community, Agudat Israel has recently emerged as a political player, offering yet another voice and model for Orthodox participation in political advocacy. As a result, traditional community institutions are faced with a variety of new "challengers" focusing on single issues. Clearly, some of the more successful organizations are managed by high-profile personalities and by a top-down management style.

Today, on matters regarding the separation of church and state, there are elements in the Jewish community who align themselves with such proposals as government-funded education vouchers or menorahs in public places. The historic position of the separation of church from state no longer holds sway to the same degree it once did. This suggests the difficulty that mainstream community relations institutions face in attempting to speak for the community, when in fact the lines of consensus have been so deeply weakened by the variety of viewpoints held by American Jews.

The Issue of Leadership

The most successful institutions in American Jewish life have been those able to capture the attention of the community and the media, whether by a "cult of personality" — having a single leader who clearly and forcefully can represent their agency — or by the notion that the institution has a defined mandate, as, for example, the Anti-Defamation League, whose image is associated with the cause of anti-Semitism.

Jewish institutions including the Simon Wiesenthal Center, the ADL, and the American-Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), have benefited from strong personal leadership, namely, Marvin Hier, Abe Foxman and, until recently, Tom Dine. In addition, they have effectively framed their case with not only a focused agenda but also a management style that differs from the multi-issue institutions in Jewish life, such as the CRCs. These agencies are operated in such a manner as to centralize power or authority, mini-

mizing the input of community-based constituencies. They are far more able to process what they believe they need to accomplish than their counterparts who rely much more on leadership input, consensus, and grass-roots involvement.

Similarly, because there is no centralized Jewish voice that can speak to all the agendas of this community, it is easier, for example, for a Michael Lerner or Alan Dershowitz to become identified as a spokesperson in magazines, letters, and articles seen across the country. As a result, they and others have a kind of national voice, regardless of whether or not their views are shared by the Jewish institutional world or by its various publics.

Changing Relationships to Israel

According to the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey, which measured Jewish connectedness, identity and affiliation, many younger American Jews, who are already less involved in the organized Jewish community, are moving away from the notion of a special relationship to Israel. The collective Jewish memory that led to the creation of the State and the nurturing of a special responsibility that emerged in the post-war period, now appears to be receding to the point where issues involving Israel seem to have less of an impact on future generations. The peace process itself may generate a different kind of framework affecting the relationship of American Jewry with Israel.

As the nature of American Jewry's relationship with Israel undergoes changes, we seem to be moving from a time in which American Jews were perceived as a resource for Israel, on a number of different levels, to a point in which Israel may by necessity need to intercede in the American Jewish community in many different ways. Israel's intervention will have to be more than just philosophical or academic, but must involve more direct measures.

The Impact of America

There are definite organizational difficulties in the American Jewish community today because American Jewry is so dispersed and has become increasingly integrated into the larger culture.

Delivering Jewish messages is much more complicated, and localized structures are not in a position to provide the necessary tools to support such a network of communications. Daniel Elazar, in his newly revised edition of *Community and Polity*, demonstrates how the new geo-demographics essentially limits effective communication. (See Daniel Elazar, "The New Geo-Demographics of American Jewry," JL278.) Unfortunately, the revolution in technology in the field of political advocacy has not been effectively adopted by the Jewish community in order to market its ideas. Even though this involves a community whose constituents are active in the shaping of literary and media ideas, we have failed to develop a delivery method for articulating our messages. Jews react to information and participate actively in the political process, yet as a community we have been singularly unsuccessful in promoting sophisticated television or radio productions.

On another level, non-Jewish Americans do not fully realize the demographic and political changes that have occurred within the American Jewish community, and the myth of Jewish political unity and power still exists. The perception remains that our community is successful in accessing Washington and other political power centers. Groups want to understand how we organize for political advocacy because we are still viewed as a model for success.

The Pollard Case: Pressure from the Grassroots

The organized Jewish community did not understand the impact that the Pollard case would have on American Jewry. As a result, support for Pollard emerged from the grassroots — one of the few situations where an issue developed outside the mainstream of institutional politics. This cause has created a whole cadre of support from individuals and institutions marginal to the center of Jewish institutional politics. These elements sought some kind of confirmation and recognition that the case of Jonathan Pollard was legitimate and required a Jewish response. This process may, in fact, be yet another way by which different pressures will be brought to bear to change the mecha-

nisms of how the organized Jewish community operates in the future.

The Downsizing of Community Relations

At a time when many Jewish organizations are faced with internal budget problems and are looking for ways to promote a high profile for their activities and policies, what constitutes a profile of success for these groups? How does one identify the impact of community relations activities? Does one judge the effectiveness of the Conference of Presidents or the ADL, for example, by the number of press statements or the number of times quoted in the *New York Times*? There is competition for resources and some institutions have decided to redirect their priorities, resulting in a downsizing in the field of community relations, which was already a relatively small field in the American Jewish community with certainly a large number of venues for publicity and for action.

The Federation system, for instance, is increasingly taking a look at the community relations field and suggesting to its own allocations and planning committees that the political advocacy function has many other players. It is no longer clear what the roles will be for an umbrella community relations voice at a time when there are fewer points of community consensus and greater demands elsewhere in the Jewish communal system. Thus, we are witnessing the weakening of community relations structures, especially in the case of the local Jewish Community Relations Committees (JCRC). In the last several years, community after community has downsized their JCRC system, in some cases merging them with the American Jewish Committee or the ADL, and in other cases simply leaving the field or ceding it to one or more of the national agencies.

In certain communities, as well, there are some Federation leaders who want to restrict the subject matter that the JCRC may act on, arguing that it should not be permitted to take under advisement such matters as Supreme Court nominations, the issue of abortion, or certain social justice or inter-group relations questions. These critics believe the JCRC should be limited to the issues

of Israel and anti-Semitism, historically the two primary points of consensus within the community.

Defining the New Agenda

A new factor that will impact the political advocacy field is represented by the significant numbers of younger Jews who are looking at questions that pertain to more personalized lifestyle issues, such as the environment, gay rights, and education. The question being asked by this generation may no longer be "Is it good for the Jews?" but, rather, "Is it good for me and is it good for our society?" The community relations field, then, must now focus its efforts toward a kind of quality of life agenda. Its approach to issues will need to address the blending of Jewish law, tradition, and experience, so as to show how a certain issue reflects a Jewish connection, and how the Jewish community is touched by such matters as health care, immigration and social services. For example, when there is a concern that budget cuts will affect the delivery of social services, there must be an effective voice able to articulate Jewish interests, with reference to continue funding programs for the poor or to maintain Jewish social service networks.

On issues associated with immigration, as an example, there is competition for resources between the various ethnic groups in America. While Jews continue to immigrate to America from the former Soviet Union and elsewhere, certain parts of the United States have received large waves of Hispanic or Asian immigrants who are competing for resources. This additionally affects the issue of when and where to close the door on immigration. Clearly, there is an emerging Jewish agenda within this arena.

The value of the traditional inter-group relations notion of dialogue has been brought into question, as to whether or not these existing relationships remain valid. There has emerged a new trend toward project-oriented community-building efforts rather than the more conventional coalitional politics, the old adage that working with a particular group somehow enhances the Jewish community's agenda automatically.

All these changes in the community relations field are a result of the loss of community consensus, changes in the power structure of Jewish life, and as a result of the emergence of single-issue constituencies. Thus, the community relations field will appear very differently in the twenty-first century than it has in the last forty years of this century. It will focus increasingly on building bridges that link the evolving agendas of environment, education, and social services with the traditional organizations who will now need to adjust to these new expectations and requirements.

This may be the ideal time for a very candid and hopefully thoughtful effort on the part of the American Jewish establishment to rethink the nature of political advocacy, keeping in mind the various lessons, both internal and external, as to what is happening in American Jewish life.

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