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JEWISH TELEVISION FOR THE NEXT CENTURY

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A Tool for Jewish Survival

As television is about to be transformed by high tech revolutions, the organized Jewish community — locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally — has fallen asleep at the switch. The next century will soon be upon us, with a huge new communications potential for organized Jewry to use in the struggle for survival, yet this vast potential is largely being ignored by the Jewish communal leadership.

This is especially ironic since in the United States and almost every other Western country Jews are well represented in the fields of radio, television, communications, journalism and entertainment. Yet this tremendous Jewish resource has not yet been directed to meeting serious communal needs.

One can easily imagine every English-speaking Jewish family in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, South Africa, and even Israel having access to a full service, high quality, all-day Jewish TV channel, part of an international

Jewish television network. (For convenience we will refer to this channel/network as JTV.)

A typical channel could feature programming that would be a blend of local, national, and international content. Some programs, such as news reports, fast breaking bulletins, and other special events, might be broadcast live or on tape delay because of time differences, to an international Jewish audience, a true "klal Yisrael." Such a channel could feature all kinds of programming, a blend of the high brow, middle brow, and low brow with something for everyone. No Judaic ideology or perspective could dominate; some form of pluralistic accommodation would be the rule. Let us consider some of the forms this programming might take.

News and Public Affairs

Imagine a daily Jewish news show, of perhaps a half hour to an hour, divided into local, national and international news portions. The local news could be produced locally, while the international

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stories could be taken, where feasible, from another mainstream network, from Israeli television (dubbed or subtitled), or even from foreign correspondents of the JTV.

There might also be a "Sixty Minutes" type show, with investigative Jewish journalism? One could create Jewish interview shows like "Face the Nation" (a model actually exists) or argumentative panel shows like "The McLaughlin Group" or "Inside Washington" or "Cross-fire." One could imagine a weekly panel with people like Norman Podhoretz, Ruth Wisse, Alan Dershowitz, Leonard Fein, or Arthur Waskow (pick your own advocates) debating Jewish affairs of the day. In addition, some public affairs programs could be taken from similar Israeli shows, either dubbed or subtitled.

Jewish Cultural Special Events

The possibilities are limitless. In any week there are many stimulating lectures or symposia sponsored by synagogues and other Jewish cultural associations, and featuring outstanding Jewish minds. Judaic scholars, authors, artists, politicians, and other public personalities could be highlighted. Periodic lectures by some of the outstanding Jewish thinkers and speakers of our time would deserve a place. These events should not be limited only to those fortunate enough to attend the events in whatever city they were held. They can all be taped and re-broadcast.

Jewish cultural productions of various kinds could also be taped and broadcast, such as an outstanding klezmer concert, a performance by a Yiddish theatre, or a telecast of Israel's Hassidic song festival. Concerts of cantorial music and Jewish choirs could also be broadcast, notably to coincide with various Jewish holidays. And why not the best of Israeli rock music?

Even Jewish sports fans need not be excluded. They could enjoy Israeli soccer and basketball matches against international opponents. One can even imagine a special sports telecast of the highlights of the Maccabiah games.

Many local events in various communities could also be filmed and broadcast, including Israel Independence Day celebrations, March to Jerusalem highlights, and the like.

The Best of Jewish Entertainment

There already exists a backlog of taped programs featuring Jewish performers — comedians, singers, and others, whether on variety shows (from Ed Sullivan to the Tonight show) or more recent sit-coms such as "Rhoda" and "Seinfeld." Jewish humour has been

prominent from the work of Borscht Belt legends to current stand-up comics. Select shows from these sit-coms which feature a Jewish theme in given episodes could also be re-broadcast.

Jewish Documentaries

There exist a host of programs on Jewish themes available via PBS, independent producers, Israel television, as well as mainstream networks in the U.S., Canada, and the UK. Many first-rate productions exist, from Abba Eban's celebrated series: "Heritage: Civilization and the Jews" to the pioneering NBC mini-series "Holocaust." More important, JTV would provide an avenue for the production of new documentaries.

Jewish and Israeli Film Festivals

JTV could feature the best of recent films on Jewish themes, including the best of Israeli cinema. There are hundreds of films which have been made which deal in one way or another with Jewish themes, many of high quality. Fare could range from older Yiddish films to Hester Street, Goodbye Columbus, Fiddler on the Roof, and Schindler's List.

Educational Programming

JTV could devote a good deal of its daytime schedule to Jewish educational programming, useful for Jewish schools of various types. These programs could include the Israeli Rehov Sumsum (Sesame St.) and various programs which have been done, and could be done, to explicate the various Jewish holidays and rituals.

Special Programs

The schedule could include a weekly program on Jewish cooking, featuring not only the usual Jewish recipes but also discussions about *kashrut*. Another program could deal with Jewish travel, featuring not only travel to Israel, but perhaps a Jewish angle for tourists to various other destinations (e.g., Spain) where fascinating aspects of Jewish life past or present could be discovered. A self-help program could deal with a Jewish perspective on various personal or family crises and relationships. And why not a Jewish "Dating Game" or Matchmaking Game?

Hebrew Language Programs

JTV might also play a role in the teaching of Hebrew. This could be done directly through Hebrew language educational programs aimed at children or other learners. It could also come about indirectly

through the use of some Israeli news reports or other programs, with subtitles.

Crises or Celebrations

Finally, JTV might enable Jewish homes throughout the planet to be connected in times of crisis or decision, be these wars in the Middle East, terrorist bombings in Argentina, or Israeli peace treaties with enemies. One can imagine JTV providing live, in-depth coverage of major events to an extent not available on commercial or mainstream networks. The Lubavitch Hassidim have paved the way in building community through live coverage of the late Rebbe's "fabrengen," telecast to cable stations throughout the world. JTV could extend the concept, helping create a strong sense of Jewish community worldwide.

Who would Watch?

It is hard to estimate the market for JTV. While most of the viewers of such a channel would be Jewish, experience with the existing Jewish programs available on cable suggests that some non-Jews, for whatever reason, watch these shows as well. A good portion of that viewing may be simply channel surfing. But the main audience would depend on the total Jewish population, and then on the proportion which would be sufficiently identified, or curious, to watch.

As long as JTV would have to be accessed as part of a cable package, then Jews in areas of scant Jewish population would have a more difficult time. Jews who live in major urban centers, however, would likely be able to convince cable companies to carry JTV as part of their package. Once other signal carriers apart from cable become more common, from satellite to phone lines — and the day is fast approaching — that limitation will vanish. Viewers in any location would have easier access to the 500 channel universe, and Jews in small or isolated communities could also be reached. With more American Jews moving to exurbs, or to newer cities outside the Northeast which may lack the range of established Jewish institutions, JTV could have an acute role to play at a local or regional level.

In the United States alone, there are an estimated 1.8 million "entirely Jewish" households. If we add the Jewish population of Canada, the UK, Australia, South Africa, and English-speaking Israel, one can speak of a minimum of well over 2.1 million households. How can we estimate the potential audience that might actually watch, whether regularly or the odd time? We might have to infer this size from other indicators.

In the United States, about 33 percent of Jews read a Jewish newspaper, and 50 percent belong to a congregation. In Canada, the comparable percentages are 60 percent and 67 percent. The proportions in the UK, Australia, and South Africa would be closer to those of Canada. These then give us a ballpark estimate of at least one million Jewish households of likely viewers.

Another way to approach the issue of audience is to look at various subgroups. Jewish children, either at home or school, would be one logical constituency for Jewish educational programs. The growing number of the Jewish elderly and retired population would be another constituency. The large numbers of Israelis currently living in English-speaking countries are a potential audience for programs with Israeli or Hebrew content. Yet the general core of mainstream identified Jews would comprise the main segment.

While the major benefits of JTV would flow to Jewish families and the Jewish audience, that is not the full story. JTV would prove to be a boon to Jewish creative artists (and not only those working in television) and journalists focusing on Jewish themes. It could become an important outlet for their work, especially in those cases where it might seem too specialized for a mainstream audience.

Jewish TV Today

"Jewish" diaspora television already exists, but its scope is far below what it could and should be. In the United States, in keeping with the localistic and individualistic ethos of the country, efforts are sporadic and uncoordinated. There does not seem to be any all-day Jewish television station functioning in the U.S. An early proposal for a Jewish television network by Moshe Waldoks, published in *Conservative Judaism* (Winter 1986-87), did not lead to national action.

At best there are local Jewish shows, often non-profit efforts of local federations, often of poor quality and subject to budgetary swings. An exception is the private sector effort of Talkline Communications Network, based in New York and directed by Zev Brenner. According to information provided by Talkline, the Talkline program, featuring debate with controversial guests on Jewish topics with host Zev Brenner, is broadcast several times a week and reaches five million homes (many or most of which are not Jewish) on a variety of channels such as International Channel, the Telemedia Network, and the New Inspirational Network. In the greater New York area alone, about nine cable systems apparently carry the program. Indeed, this one hour cable television show is broadcast

by an estimated 100 cable stations nationwide.

An even more ambitious effort is underway in southern California. The Jewish Television Network or JTN, headed by Jay Sanderson, now provides ten hours per week of Jewish broadcasting with a wide variety of shows. A non-profit operation, JTN hopes to launch America's first national Jewish cable network, in collaboration with UJA and local federations. JTN has plans to expand to several more cities on the east coast. They report a market survey in 1990 of 400 Jewish homes in Los Angeles, which found 55 percent claiming to watch JTN on a regular basis. Perhaps JTN could form part of a nucleus of a major North American project. In 1994, the annual operating budget of JTN was \$1 million, a figure expected to rise to \$2 million in 1995.

JTN, like many other local Jewish cable shows, broadcasts the Israeli show "Jerusalem on Line." This is a relatively well done show with good production values, funded/sponsored by the Jewish Agency, but it does not exhaust the possibilities of Israeli-based programming. Moreover, it steers clear of controversy.

There are, of course, many other locally produced Jewish cable shows in various communities, but the pattern is checkered. For example, one area in Florida used to boast three hours a night, seven days a week, of Jewish TV broadcasting on JFTV, a non-profit operation of the community. Yet because of budget cuts the schedule has been cut back to one hour per week. In Canada, the situation is not much better. In Montreal there are several locally produced Jewish shows available on the multicultural network and rebroadcast several times each. Despite inadequate funding, the shows are still of good quality and draw an audience. Toronto's situation is comparable, if not worse.

There have been attempts in the past to raise the issue of Jewish television in Jewish communal circles, but without lasting success. Maybe the timing was premature, or the technology not yet in place. Perhaps the potential audience is over-estimated. The subscription problems facing Jewish periodicals, the latest being *Jerusalem Report*, are an example. Some people may claim that Jewish viewers would only take something seriously if it appears on "non-Jewish" TV. Or perhaps there is sufficient Jewish content on mainstream stations that there is no unmet demand. Such objections should indeed be studied, perhaps through a serious feasibility study.

Perhaps it is just too difficult, too costly to try to move beyond these uncoordinated, underfunded, local

TV ventures. Perhaps Jewish communities have no option but to content themselves with scrambling to find their half-hour Jewish community show on their local multicultural or community cable network channel, if and when they remember to do so.

I believe this is nonsense, however. Jewish television has barely scratched the surface of the possible. We know this simply because of what else is available out there.

What Other Groups Do

In the United States, according to the Federal Communications Commission, there are 41 Spanish language TV stations licensed to operate. (There are only seven with more than 50 percent ownership by American Hispanics or other minorities.) There are an uncertain number of "black" television stations serving the black community. The Black Entertainment Network coordinates programming for a variety of such stations. There are all manner of other "ethnic" stations either licensed or with applications pending. Many of these are educational, and thus non-profit, but some are clearly profit-oriented. These ventures range from a Korean station in Tacoma to an application for an "Assyrian" station (educational) in California. There are also many different — mainly Christian — religious stations and networks.

In Canada, because of the greater intervention in the regulatory process of the Canadian Radio and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC), notably with regard to content, information is easier to obtain. In 1984, two specialty service networks were licensed, Chinavision (now Fairchild Television) and Tele Latino. Both are private sector operations seeking to become profitable. Fairchild provides 13 hours a day, every day, of Chinese language television to viewers in Toronto, Edmonton, Calgary, and Vancouver. A Fairchild representative claims 60,000 households view regularly, and some of these not serviced by a cable package subscribe directly at a cost of \$28 per month.

Tele Latino operates in Toronto and Montreal with 13-14 hours per day, 55 percent in Italian and 45 percent Spanish, seven days a week. These include daily newscasts and live soccer matches from Italy. A representative claimed that 80 percent of Toronto Italians (possibly inflated) were regular viewers. In both cases, 20 percent of air time must be devoted to local (i.e., Canadian) TV production.

Each of these two stations/networks has a full production studio to handle their Canadian programming. But how do they manage to fill all their air

time? Much of it is through satellite transmission from Italian, Spanish, Hong Kong, and Taiwanese television. Indeed, this is also true for many of the American Hispanic stations which rely upon either direct Mexican transmission, or satellite feeds from Venezuela (for Puerto Rican TV) or Spain.

Could a Jewish television station/network be financially viable? Of course. At the local level the cost of production for the major Montreal Jewish television show (which uses rented production facilities) averages between \$500 to \$1,000 per hour. For some elaborate programming, such as video coverage of a major communal event, the cost could reach \$1,500-1,800 per hour. Of course a JTV could capitalize on economies of scale. Assuming \$70,000 per week for 60-70 hours of programming, this would yield a yearly cost of \$3.5 million. (This is a low budget estimate compared to the alternative developed here. It reflects prevailing localistic low-cost cable options. A full-fledged JTV would be far more costly.)

The CRTC provides data on the annual economic performance, costs, and revenues of the two full service ethnic television networks described above, as these are all in the public domain. In 1993, the total reported expenses of Fairchild were \$3.6 million, with a profit of \$90,000. In the three previous years losses of between \$200,000 and \$400,000 had been reported. Tele Latino reported total production costs for 1993 of \$2.8 million, with a profit of \$110,000, though also with a pattern of losses in the three previous years.

The point here is simply to present the order of magnitude of costs involved in presenting a full service TV station to various ethno-cultural communities. These amounts are not beyond the reach of North American Jews, whether as entrepreneurs or as non-profit ventures from various Jewish foundations (operating individually or in a consortium) or communal federations.

In terms of the multiple benefits of such a high quality Jewish television network, one could argue that the costs could be borne as straight philanthropy. But that argument need not be made, since Jewish families would clearly be prepared to pay something for a television service such as the one described above. The question is how much.

The cost of living Jewishly is already a burden for many committed families. But compared to the costs of synagogue fees, Jewish education and camps, bar and bat mitzvahs, kosher food, or trips to Israel, the incremental cost of JTV would be small.

In most cases these ethnic programs are brought to cable subscribers as part of a package. A JTV could

easily compete with a generic (Fairchild) Chinavision or Tele Latino for a spot on a cable package in Canada or the United States. (In any case, the days of such cable packages with limited choices are numbered.) If forced to choose, how much might a typical mainstream Jewish family be willing to pay for a high quality JTV? Would an amount of \$50 or \$100 per year, whether as a fee or perhaps a donation, be impossible? Such payments alone could generate tens of millions of dollars annually, depending on the audience.

A pricing structure combining fee for service with perhaps an element of subsidization might be worked out as an alternative option to a strict profit-making approach. Moreover, one ought not neglect advertising income, which comprised close to 50 percent of the revenues of Chinavision and Tele Latino.

Philanthropic dollars are scarce these days. But clearly there exists in the English-speaking world a pool of Jewish investors, philanthropists, or foundations that could manage the original outlays. Moreover, these outlays, in whole or in part, might be recouped. What is needed is a plan of action to help the Jewish world maximize the benefits which might be reaped from the telecommunications revolutions of the next century. A grouping of foundations and/or investors, multinational in scope and including Israeli input, could recruit the expertise needed to organize the project and get it going.

This presentation is the outline of an idea, with some suggested parameters and comments about feasibility, and not a detailed, finished proposal. Its objective is to place the idea of an English-language Jewish national and international TV channel on the Jewish communal agenda for further exploration. Yet the bottom line is clear. The tasks involved in setting up a high quality JTV are well within the financial, technological and creative capacities of the Jewish community.

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Israel at the Polls, 1992

Edited by Daniel J. Elazar and Shmuel Sandler

Israel at the Polls, 1992 is the fifth book in the "Israel at the Polls" series begun in 1977 with the "upset" in the Israeli elections that brought down the Labor government which had ruled in Israel since the founding of the state. In the 1992 elections Labor returned as the ruling party and this book looks at the question of whether those elections mark the beginning of a new era in Israeli politics. Thirteen essays evaluate the downfall of Likud and the "national" camp, the major and minor parties, and the Israeli Arab and ex-Soviet Jewish vote, as well as the impact of the elections on foreign policy, the Israeli army, the economy, the style of the media campaign, and the role of interest groups. Special chapters focus on Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's personality and style of leadership and review the first year and a half of the Rabin government.

Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield and JCPA, 1995, 359 pp.

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**Covenant and Polity in Biblical Israel:
Biblical Foundations and Jewish Expressions**

Volume 1 of The Covenant Tradition in Politics

Daniel J. Elazar

The covenants of the Bible are the founding covenants of Western civilization. They have their beginnings in the need to establish clear and binding relationships between God and humans and among humans. These relationships are primarily political in character in that they were designed to establish lines of authority, distributions of power, and systems of law. This first volume of a trilogy addresses political uses of the idea of covenant, the tradition that has adhered to that idea, and the political arrangements that flow from it. The volume represents an in-depth exploration of biblical sources of the covenant tradition, its development in Scripture, and subsequently in Jewish history and thought. It traces the interconnections between ideas, culture, and behavior as well as between peoples and generations. Among the topics covered are covenant as a political concept, the Bible as a political commentary, the post-biblical tradition, medieval covenant theory, and Jewish political culture.

New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Press, 1994, 536pp.; \$49.95

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**Federal Systems of the World:
A Handbook of Federal, Confederal and Autonomy Arrangements**

Second Edition, Revised and Expanded

Written and Edited by Daniel J. Elazar and the JCPA Staff

Of the over 180 politically sovereign states now in existence, 50 are either federations or include within them forms of self-determination and self-government which represent extensions of the federal principle or applications of the idea of political autonomy. The previous edition of this handbook (1991) represented the first major effort to inventory and describe all known examples of federal and autonomous arrangements, compare their basic features, and classify them by form. This fully updated edition documents the extensive changes in the state system in recent years, including the dramatic events in the former USSR, Germany, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, and the European Community/Union.

Longman Current Affairs (UK), 1994, 380 pages.