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AMERICAN JEWRY IN THE 1990s: PART ONE — A GROWING FEELING OF JEWISH VICTIMIZATION

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A Distancing from Israel in the 1980s

In the 1980s, American Jewish attitudes toward Jewish issues and particularly Israel underwent a dual change. On the one hand, there was a distancing from Israel as a result of bad publicity that Israel received over relations with the Palestinians, beginning with the Lebanon war (1982). Honest differences of policy orientation emerged between a high percentage of the American Jewish leadership and the Israeli government. Surveys at the time showed that about two-thirds of those who were defined as being part of the American Jewish leadership had substantial differences with the Israeli leadership, differences which intensified as the Likud more clearly became the dominant partner in the national unity governments of the 1980s. In part, they reflected the wishes of the Ameri-

can government itself, where it was no secret that the Bush administration had hoped for a vote of no confidence and a change in government last spring. Indeed, they got their vote of no confidence and change in government, but not in the direction they expected.

Changing Patterns in Fundraising

This distancing from Israel was exacerbated by several other factors as well: the who is a Jew issue which seemed to drive a very sharp wedge between American Jews and Israel, even though it was resolved for the moment as a result of American Jewish pressure; the general turning inward that took place in the United States throughout much of the 1980s, which affected the Jews as well; and beyond that, the weakening of those institutions of the American Jewish communi-

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ty which had Israel as their central focus and the turning of Jewish attention toward other institutions with different foci. With the exception of AIPAC, the complex of framing institutions of the American Jewish community, such as the federations and the UJA, whose position of strength was heavily based on their close connection with Israel, were increasingly weakened, partly because of the distancing from Israel, partly because of the change in the character of the American Jewish community -- the turning inward, and partly because of the change in people's attitudes towards their contributions for charity or for public purposes.

More and more people sought "hands-on giving"; that is to say, they did not want to give any more on a federated basis where they contributed to a pool and then someone else made the decisions as to how that pool was allocated. Increasingly they wanted to give in such a way that they knew directly and specifically where and for what their money was going (or thought they did) and that they would be able to make the decisions themselves that they previously were willing to leave to allocations committees.

The institutions that seemed to benefit most from this shift in attitudes were those that presented themselves as alternatives to the "establishment" in Israel or those such as the Simon Wiesenthal Center and the Anti-Defamation League that went back to an earlier theme in Jewish communal life -- the Holocaust and anti-Semitism. The amount of money that was being raised for public Holocaust institutes, museums and memorials (a number sponsored by the general community as a result of Jewish pressure but funded by Jews), whether in Washington, New York, or in other parts of the country, became a major element on the Jewish fundraising scene and certainly a diversion away from support for operations and activities that have made the Jewish community the functioning body that it was and is.

The institutions that were able to shrei gevalt best seemed to do best in terms of

mass fundraising, but people who were more knowledgeable were also targetting their money. People in the Orthodox community had always chosen to target their money in the direction of institutions for which they had a personal understanding and concern. Now community leaders and even people who were marginally Jewish but were touched by some "cause" also began targetting. Federation campaigns went "flat," which meant that they declined in terms of real income.

These trends were exacerbated by two other trends that represented a real change in American society. Both big and medium-sized Jewish givers increasingly began to focus their attention on the cultural and arts institutions of the general community, swinging a fair amount of their money away from exclusively Jewish interests and leading to a situation whereby the Jewish institutions were not only competing among themselves but were competing with the local symphony orchestra and the art museums for contributors' dollars.

Another factor that characterized the American Jewish community in the 1980s, a residue left over from the 1960s and 1970s, was the tendency of those Jews who were not intensely committed to some organization or movement to seek Jewish expression through "happenings." That is to say, they were available to come out once in a while but it was hard to get them to sit down for sustained work in an organization, for example, to serve on committees. In part this was due to changing occupational styles. Certainly the women's organizations that had been very active a generation earlier were deeply affected by the fact that many of the women whose mothers would have been active organizationally were pursuing careers. But beyond that, the tendency even for those who might otherwise have had the time was that sustained activity of this kind was less interesting than "happening"-type events.

The federations certainly tried to respond to this trend. Probably the most

successful innovation in fundraising on the part of the federations in the 1980s was Super-Sunday, an annual "happening" to raise funds. One day of the year, everyone sits down in one big massive effort, marching and calling to get people to contribute. Why? Because there was no other way to get people to cover the cards of potential donors (other than the big ones) in the sustained way that had been characteristic of the fundraising campaigns of an earlier time.

Some federations even tried to adapt by downplaying Israel as their beneficiary. In the latter part of the 1980s, there were federation campaigns in which Israel was hardly mentioned. The literature that was most widely distributed talked strictly about local needs and only mentioned Israel as an aside.

Jewish "Antennae" Sense Victimization

Beginning with the attempted PLO attack on a beach south of Tel Aviv on Shavuoth (June 1990), a critical change in American Jewish attitudes seems to have begun, a shift to an increased sense of the renewed victimization of Jews, a growing sense that they share with other Jews around the world. Much of the reason behind this feeling has to do with changes in Israel's world situation. After the resumption of overt PLO terrorism in June, the resulting headlines embarrassed the American government sufficiently to force it to call off its talks with the PLO. In July there were the Iraqi threats to attack Israel.

In August there was the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, followed by wild Palestinian demonstrations in support of Saddam Hussein and more Iraqi threats to attack Israel with chemical weapons. At that point, many American Jewish "doves" began to reconsider their previous positions. Then in October, during Sukkot, there was the incident on the Temple Mount, where the immediate reaction of the world was to assume that Israel was wrong. The official U.S. reaction was somewhat less so, but the American media was strongly crit-

ical, largely ignoring in their reports the Arabs' preparations prior to the incident and the danger to the crowds of Jewish worshipers who had been attacked without provocation at the Western Wall.

At this point, it was not only a question that Israel was threatened and that there was an appropriate American Jewish response, but throughout the Jewish world that instinctive sense that Jews are once again going to be victims began to surface. Much of the Jewish response in the United States and elsewhere was the response of people who perceive themselves to be part of a victimized group that had not been victimized for a while, or so it seemed, but was once again being punished simply for existing. The full impact of this has yet to surface.

Jewish Sensitivity to Potential Threats

Obviously, the very fact that the new institutions that have been most successful in fundraising in the 1980s were those who preached that anti-Semitism was alive, well and growing was already a sign of how sensitive Jewish nerve endings are on this issue. It has always been fascinating to note the degree to which American Jewry, which likes to proclaim itself as the most secure diaspora Jewish community ever, still sees anti-Semitism lurking in every crisis in which Israel is involved, and their expectation that each crisis would bring down the wrath of the non-Jewish world upon them. Each crisis, starting with the 1973 war and the oil crisis that followed, has raised this issue, even though the evidence, gathered in extensive community relations organization surveys, is that most of the non-Jews in the United States did not particularly associate any of these developments with Jews, that the high blame-the-Jews responses came from the Jews themselves and not from the non-Jewish community. But the nerve endings are there and the least little sensation affects them.

Some may see a little paranoia in this, but even paranoids can have enemies. In fact, anti-Semitism has been on the rise.

The passage of time since the Holocaust has made it possible for anti-Semites to speak out. We do not know whether there are more anti-Semites today than there were forty years ago or whether the anti-Semites who had to keep quiet for forty years now feel free to talk and to desecrate, which only reinforces Jewish sensitivity.

How American Jewry Looks in Israeli Eyes

One of the other elements in the 1980s was a rise in the stock of American Jewry in the eyes of Israelis. American Jews seemed to be enormously successful. Israelis of all levels envied their wealth and self-confidence, admired the super-wealthy among them, and saw American Jewry as the example of the Jewish economic engine that they wished to have. This admiration could be seen even at the highest levels in the Israeli government in the way in which Israeli politicians pursued wealthy American Jews. It was not only a question of raising money for their political parties; there was a certain desire by Israelis to be in the company of these very successful and apparently secure and self-confident people. That is one of the reasons why American Jewish influence on issues of concern in Israel grew throughout the 1980s.

Today Israelis are very aware that American Jews were the first to stop coming to Israel to visit with the beginning of the Gulf crisis. They noticed the quantity of individual decisions that led to the cancellation or drastic reduction of planned UJA missions, or the prevention of their children from studying in Israel as planned. In my opinion, it is going to be a long time before the damage that this has done to the position of influence that American Jewry had acquired in Israel will be repaired. While most Israelis are still too polite to say it, what many are now thinking about American Jews is: "You want to tell us to make all kinds of concessions and to be forthcoming on many issues in which our security is threatened, but when it is a question of putting your-

selves even remotely, possibly, on the line for a week or ten days, you are not willing to do it. So just shut up and don't tell us what to do."

By November certain segments of the American Jewish leadership were beginning to feel some remorse about this. Consequently there has been a recent upsurge of visits on the part of those leaders who are seriously concerned. But it took that kind of feeling of remorse to bring out at least a certain segment of the leadership.

Israel's Prominence Returns

On the other hand, the tendency of American Jews to ignore Israel that had been growing during the 1980s has been substantially reversed, at least among the activists in Jewish life. One got some sense of this at the 1990 General Assembly of the Council of Jewish Federations. In the previous several years, the Israeli presence on the program of the GA had consistently diminished, to the point where there was almost no sign of Israel. This year, Israel was very actively featured on the program. President Chaim Herzog, Cabinet Minister Moshe Nissim, Ambassador Zalman Shoval, former Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, and Deputy Foreign Minister Benjamin Netanyahu were all on the program, plus professors such as Uriel Reichman and myself. The session on Israeli constitutional reform (which was organized in great part by the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs) attracted an overflow crowd of 1,700 concerned people. This is part of the reflection that Israel has come back into American Jewish attention. Feeling more victimized themselves, American Jews feel less necessity to distance themselves from Israel.

The Impact of Operation Exodus

Finally, it is hard to underestimate the impact of Operation Exodus on the American Jewish community. First of all, even before the events of June through October, Operation Exodus gave the American Jewish community something to rally around that Israel was no longer providing in its

old sense. This was a rescue cause, linked to Israel, and the response to Operation Exodus has exceeded the expectations of the leadership who had initially been fearful that the community would not be ready to meet the demand. Of course it has now become a major focal point for the convergence of all these factors. Through the rescue of Soviet Jews, one can display concern about feeling more victimized, worrying about anti-Semitism, and playing out one's remorse for not coming to visit Israel in a time of trouble. Operation Exodus has become a kind of catchment for all of these feelings in a very traditional American Jewish way -- raising money for Jews elsewhere to be taken in by Israel. It is a moving cause for American Jewry.

Beyond that, organizationally and politically Operation Exodus has become a critical element for federations and the federation system, which was beginning to fade due to the competing pressures described at the beginning of this piece. The federations and their network institutionally stand to benefit from the necessity for and the success of Operation Exodus. When the chips were down, it became apparent that none of the new style organizations can do what is necessary to save the Jews from the USSR.

It is now evident that the only way for American Jewry to do its share to help is by providing a share of the funds needed (though, it must be remembered, a much smaller share than Israel is providing). The only ones who can raise those funds are the federations, the UJA, the UIA -- the network. They are the only ones who can deliver the goods at home and deal with the JDC and the Jewish Agency in Israel. They are the only institutions we have in place for that purpose in the Jewish world.

A lot of people at the top who were beginning to drift away from the federation network are now beginning to recognize that the framing institutions are necessary, that they have to be kept strong, and that they are the tools and the vehicles for taking on tasks of that kind. The federation movement today has the opportunity to reverse the trend of the 1980s, at least for this coming decade, if its leaders act wisely.

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Daniel J. Elazar is President of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs. This is the first of two articles by him on the changing state of American Jewry in the 1990s.

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