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## THE GEO-POLITICS OF THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMUNITY

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**Jewish Citizenship / A Generation Gap? / Affiliation / Centrifugal and Centripetal Forces in Contest / Federation Response to Soviet Emigration / The Impact of Private Foundations / Federation-Synagogue Relations / Shifting Group Relationships**

[Editor's Note: In 1989, the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs completed the first world-wide Study of Jewish Community Organization with the publication of *People and Polity: The Organizational Dynamics of World Jewry*. That twenty-year effort has now led to a second round of studies, currently underway in some ten countries. At a scholarly consultation devoted to evaluating the first round of Jewish community studies and to planning the second round, Jonathan Woocher outlined some of the current political dynamics in American Jewish communal life.]

### **Jewish Citizenship**

The American Jewish community is now in the midst of a series of redefinitions of who is part of the Jewish community and in what ways. This can be seen in the ways that synagogues are grappling with membership and

involvement of intermarried families, especially the non-Jewish spouse. It affects Jewish education, federations, and Jewish community centers as well. By the year 2000 we will probably have seen the coalescence of certain positions which may or may not fall along existing boundaries. While the synagogues will play a major role in setting the rules, they will in turn have to interact with the federation world which has other considerations.

For example, federations in America provide significant financial support for day schools, and increasingly will be providing financial support for congregational schools. In many communities there is only one day school. It may nominally be affiliated with the traditional Orthodox educational framework known as Torah u'Mesorah, the National Society for Hebrew Day Schools, or it may not be. It may be what is called a community day

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school, of which there are some 50 or 60 in America. In many communities the affiliation maintained by the professional leadership of the school may be quite traditional, whereas the board may be composed of a majority of people who are not traditional, *halakhic*, or Orthodox.

This leads to problems, particularly when children who may not be Jewish by *halakhic* standards choose to enter the day school. If these children happen to come from families with influence and weight within the federation and the federation is supporting the school, they may not accept any reason that keeps their children from attending. At least one federation has explicitly made its allocation to a day school conditional on the fact that it accept all students recognized as Jewish by any congregation in the community.

### A Generation Gap?

Another issue involving the dynamics of participation is the putative generation gap. In the last few years a number of different measures of the pulse of Jewish life — surveys of attitudes toward Israel, giving patterns to federations and other Jewish philanthropies, statistics on ritual participation — have seemed to indicate that there is a fairly dramatic difference between Jews over the ages of 35 and 40 and those below that age in a number of critical areas. It is still too early to be sure whether these are differences which will narrow with movement through the life cycle or whether in fact we are seeing a real generational change.

This issue of what is happening with younger Jews and where they will eventually fall becomes a very critical one with regard to fundraising because we are seeing a generational transfer of wealth. As that takes place, if this wealth is not allocated in ways similar to such allocations in the past in terms of how much flows into Jewish philanthropic enterprises, it could have enormous implications for the entire voluntary Jewish community of America.

### Affiliation

The larger issue here is whether the organized Jewish community is losing its membership and affiliational base. The American Jewish Committee is now engaged in a study on affiliation patterns, under the direction of David Singer of their Research Department. It is looking beyond the demographics into more detailed and qualitative measures of attitudes, institutions, and knowledge and perceptions of Jewish organizational life, and should give us more information about what is happening with regard to participation and affiliation in America.

The number of professionals involved in Jewish communal service is considerable. They have their own patterns of Jewish identification and affiliation which may be quite different from the rank and file whom they are in a sense both serving and leading. To use just one indicator, the proportion of *kippot* that may be observed among Jewish communal professionals seems to be rising fairly significantly. The proportion of *kippah*-wearing Jews in active American Jewish life may be rising in general because Conservative Jews have begun to feel much less self-conscious about wearing one in public and Orthodox Jews are certainly more visible in these arenas. I only cite *kippot* as a visible symbol of a traditional Jewish orientation. There are also more women in Jewish communal service, but their traditionalism (where present) is usually not as evident. The visibility of more traditionally-oriented Jews in professional leadership positions has some very important potential implications for how people view the community that they are affiliating with or participating in, and what the culture of participation is likely to be.

If one then factors in the traditional questions about the relationships between the volunteer elite and the general Jewish populace, American Jewish life still essentially remains the trusteeship that Daniel Elazar has portrayed it as being. One can see a three-way dynamic that has not been really looked at. We know that there are tensions be-

tween voluntary and professional leaders at various levels, but we do not know how much of that is cultural, how much may be due simply to interpersonal factors, or how much is likely to be significant in terms of the outputs of the system.

We must also ask now about cultural differences between the leadership segments, voluntary and professional, and the "masses." The former are likely to be far more "Jewish" and may have quite a different agenda and value system than those they are trying to attract to organizational life.

### Centrifugal and Centripetal Forces in Contest

One perennial characteristic of American Jewish life has been the fragmentation of decision-making that comes with voluntary associationalism. Despite the rhetoric of unity, in some key areas the American Jewish community has become more decentralized and more fragmented over the past few years. This is especially true in the political realm.

It is likely, for example, that over the next few years we will see a growing number of spokespersons in American Jewish life articulating a broad range of views regarding issues having to do with Israel. Political and religious differences over peace-making, who is a Jew, electoral reform, rights of Reform and Conservative Judaism, and other issues, have become more evident and more salient. There may be periods, especially moments of crisis, in which the ostensible mechanisms for collective decision-making like the Conference of Presidents will appear to dominate the scene. But, given the real divisions that exist in American Jewish thinking, nothing can guarantee that individual organizations will not feel free to articulate their own "foreign policies" when they wish to do so.

Another example of the centrifugal forces that have reemerged in the last few years involves the area of fighting anti-Semitism. We have seen the emergence of a whole new industry in America, of organizations monitoring and purporting to fight anti-Semitism everywhere in the world. Much of

this activity is going on outside the parameters of the organized community's normal community relations apparatus. The success of the Simon Weisenthal Center has been particularly striking. It has become a major direct mail fundraising enterprise by outflanking even the ADL in the hunt for anti-Semitic threats to Jewish security. It is (sadly) not uncommon today to see organizations jockeying for position in a contest to determine who among them is "toughest" in fighting anti-Semitism that is waged in the Jewish press and barrages of direct mail appeals.

Fragmentation is not, however, the only order of the day. One interesting case study of the capacity of the organized Jewish community to handle, and perhaps even "tame," fragmentation can be found in Jewish education. Dr. Susan Shavitz, a professor at Brandeis, has described North American Jewish education as an "organized anarchy." Trying to achieve some coherent community process in Jewish education is like holding a soccer game on a round field with many different goals and new teams coming into the game all the time. The players, the coaches, and the referees are all trying to understand who is playing which game by what rules, what the object is, and finding that from day to day the dimensions of the field are changing.

However, there are efforts being made today on both the local and continental levels to put more organization into the incipient anarchy. Community-wide commissions, reorganized bureaus of Jewish education, and continental planning coalitions are all parts of these efforts. The key to all the various structural and planning initiatives underway or being proposed is bringing together all the players into some common framework, especially the federations, on the one hand, and the synagogues, on the other (see the discussion below). It is too soon to know whether the persistent centrifugal forces can be countered successfully, but it is important to recognize that fragmentation is not going unchallenged and that there are some significant trends in the opposite direction.

### **Federation Response to Soviet Emigration**

Another interesting example of this counter-trend is the potentially historic decision of the federation movement to adopt what is called equitable collective responsibility in grappling with the influx of Jews from the USSR to the United States. This is an attempt to act as a single system in allocating funds for refugee resettlement rather than as 200 individual units, as has been customary. Each federation has been assigned its proportionate share of Jews from the Soviet Union to be resettled in the United States, based on a formula involving campaign receipts and population. The community is responsible for raising whatever funds are needed to cover this "share." If they settle fewer than this number, they have to send money into a common pool to be allocated to those communities that settle more than their number. This may be the first time, other than exceptional situations like the Wilkes-Barre flood, where communities have actually agreed to put money into a common pool and to have it redistributed from community to community. Following up this first step, the Council of Jewish Federations and its member federations undertook to organize a \$900 million loan for the absorption of Soviet Jewish olim to Israel, working together as a single entity, with each federation undertaking to guarantee its "fair share" of the overall loan.

### **The Impact of Private Foundations**

Related to the dynamics of decision-making is the larger question of defining the boundaries of the action system of the Jewish polity. Some people are beginning to talk about the possibility that we are entering the "post-federation era" in American Jewish life, and that the nature of the action system itself is both expanding and changing. We have operated for a number of years with the model, articulated by Elazar, of the federation as the framing institution of the Jewish polity, with the responsibility for organizing and coordinating the flow of resources in order to achieve certain tasks and to meet certain needs.

But federations may no longer have the decisive influence in shaping communal priorities. The last ten years have witnessed the emergence of some 15-20 fairly substantial private family foundations with the explicit mission, in whole or in part, of funding various activities in Jewish life, in Israel, America and occasionally elsewhere in the world, that have been thought of as elements in the public agenda of American Jewry. These range from education to Israel-diaspora relationships to personnel development. These foundations will soon be able to mobilize tens or even hundreds of millions of dollars a year towards these purposes. There is a fascinating study to be done as to how these foundations work out their relationships to the "organized Jewish community," because they have chosen different models. In several instances there have been some false starts and redefinitions.

A number of the foundations have established reasonably sound methods for linking their activity with the organized Jewish community, but these are entirely at the discretion of the foundation. They have not given away a piece of the action, but they have developed appropriate consultative boards and groups.

It will be interesting to watch the role that Jewish communal professionals play directly with the foundations, bypassing other voluntary structures. Some foundation processes are being strongly guided by groups of current and former professionals who serve not only as staff, but as advisory or decision-making boards. The professionals come from Jewish academia, the rabbinate, and communal service, but they are all professionals, not volunteers. Some of these professionals may find that they can have more influence on Jewish communal affairs by going entirely outside the framework of the voluntary leadership to whom they are responsible for their direct professional employment and exercising leadership via the route of the independent foundations. They may come to see this as the arena in which they can be innovative, whereas in their "regular" jobs they are struggling to make ends meet and keep the organization going.

### Federation-Synagogue Relations

One question that is central to the issue of how the boundaries of the effective action system may be changing is the role of those institutions, particularly the synagogues, which stand with at least one foot (and in some cases one foot and most of the other) outside the federation-framed system. Federations are facing the fact that in order to achieve what they now identify as their goals — goals which have shifted gradually over time from the work of social welfare toward the promotion of Jewish continuity and toward objectives, such as the integration and acculturation of new immigrants into Jewish life, that in a practical sense simply are not achievable within the framework of the federation-agency action system. They will have to negotiate new ways of working with those institutions, particularly the synagogues that have been largely outside that action system. Today we are seeing the expansion of the action system to include synagogues in much more direct ways, and we are also seeing federations recognize that their role in relationship to the action system is changing. No longer can they simply be organizations that take from here (campaign) and give to there (allocations). Now they have to be organizations that use their limited leverage capital and try through a combination of influence, cajolery, and interlocking leaderships to mobilize resources that are outside their direct control.

In the 1990s, the challenge in the Jewish community organization field will be to move from being classical planners — in a rational planning model sense of identifying needs, setting goals, mobilizing resources, implementing policies, and receiving feedback — to operating in a much more difficult, subtle and elusive political way, because the relevant action system will be both wider and more diverse.

### Shifting Group Relationships

The past twenty years have also witnessed a number of major shifts in *kehillah* (community), *medinah* (state), and *edah* (people) relationships. The issue of the Jewish presence in the Soviet

Union is a wonderful case study of the complexities of trying to operate on an *edah*-wide basis, when in fact we have no body that can set policy for the *edah*. Instead, we have all sorts of different actors, including various religious groups and even local American communities going into the Soviet Union. The Jewish Agency and the WZO are there, as well as the Joint Distribution Committee, the Memorial Foundation, Chabad, and a host of others. These groups bring different goals and different methods of operation. The potential for confusion is compounded by the uncertainties of who speaks for the Jews of the Soviet Union. This is fragmentation compounded by a lack of clarity concerning the appropriate levels at which to form relationships.

We have seen the same phenomenon in the context of Project Renewal, with the direct entrance of *kehillot* in America into the life of the State of Israel. This is now reaching the point where not only *kehillot*, but individual schools are establishing relationships, not just with schools but with municipal education departments in various towns in Israel. The principle of *kehillah-kehillah* relationships, sometimes seeking to bypass *medinah*- and *edah*-level structures, has entered the realm of absorption of *olim* as well.

Looming over all these developments and dynamics is a key question: will there be enough involved and affiliated Jews to keep the whole system going? Recent studies raise some serious questions about the commitment of the Jewish public at large to Jewish organizational life. Conversely, it is not clear how well our organizations really understand the Jews they seek to serve and represent. What are their concerns? What are their needs? We have indications that the directions that the organized community is going in may not in fact be the direction of "the masses."

One factor that may bring the circle back together again is a new interest in and emphasis on marketing. We see it in Jewish education, at JCC conferences, at federation conferences; CJF now has someone whose portfolio is marketing. It is interesting that the organizational system is

turning to a business, not a political, model. It is an open question whether, if by marketing we mean simply the application of business models to the building of relationships with constituencies, this will be enough to develop and sustain the levels of support and participation necessary for a healthy, voluntary political system. Then again, given the trends in American politics over the last twenty years, marketing certainly seems to win presidential elections.

Much of what needs to be done in dealing with these dynamics and the issues they raise involves bringing to bear the tools of analysis that have been developed in the first phase of the work of the Jerusalem Center so that we can begin to understand better the long-term implications of what is happening. This needs to take place at

both the academic and communal levels. Indeed, it should involve a dialogue among analysts and voluntary and professional practitioners.

We are just at the beginning of seeing the community leadership turn to these kinds of issues in an organized fashion. Phase Two of the Study of Jewish Community Organization will augment and provide the academic framework for this work as it proceeds during the 1990s.

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