

BEYOND THE CORE: A RESPONSE TO ELAZAR

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Beyond the vitally connected core of the America's Jewish population, increasing numbers of Jews live low density Jewish lives, both geographically and in terms of ethnicity and religion. Directions for change in the cultures and structures of the organized Jewish community are noted which are more likely to reach such Jews than are ideological appeals.

It is an honor and a pleasure to be able to take part officially in the recognition of Daniel Elazar's significant contributions to our field. My own association with him goes back to the early 50's, at Camp Ramah in Wisconsin, and it is a friendship that has been personally rewarding as well as professionally illuminating.

As we turn to Elazar's paper, I am taken by his too brief remarks about the breakdown of the Progressive solution. I would like to ask him to expand on these remarks: what do you see as taking the place of the Progressive ideology? I also thank him for reminding us that some of the most significant areas of change in American Jewish life involve connections with other Jewries, both in the diaspora and in Israel. The future of American Jewry will not be decided only by what our own community does or does not do.

However, in the brief space I have for a response, I would like to pick up some of his other themes. First, there is the "good news" item about the current state of American Jewry. Elazar has noted that, given the fluidity of American life in general, American Jewry is now defined not by its boundaries, but by its core. In all the concern about intermarriage and assimilation, I have heard very little reference to the state of that core. I think it deserves mention.

As I read it, all the evidence suggests that we have a very vital core these days. It comprises some 20 to 25% of Jews who are deeply involved in some variety of Jewish life, usually religiously, but in other ways as well. These are our Integral Jews and Participants, to use Elazar's own terms (1976: 71-73). Most of them—of us—are not fundamentalists, but may be the functional equivalent for the purposes Elazar alludes to. The core needs continued support, both structural and

ideological, to be sure. In this core, Jewish life is thriving, and has a magnetic effect. However, I am not prepared to give up on the other 75 to 80%.

These others are the focus of almost all of the deep concern about American Jewry's future. Here, the news is not "good." Elazar refers to the situation as "the end of sociological separation." For most of the twentieth century, as America's Jews concentrated on becoming Americans, they did not worry about also staying Jewish, since American life would keep them that way, whether by ethnic exclusiveness or religious separation. But now, when we have succeeded so terrifically in becoming Americanized, the externally imposed walls of separation have come down, to all intents and purposes completely so. We all know the consequences—the shorthand is, "52%," the most recently reported rate of intermarriage.

But what the discussions of these changes in American Jewish life often leave out is the wider context. The walls have come down not just for Jews, but for white Americans in general.

From Mary Waters (1990), for example, we learn that for today's white, European ancestry Americans, ethnicity, once a given, has become an option. People now pick and choose their ethnic identities—taking on, giving up, combining. The operative principle is personal preference, not inheritance.

Waters' data comes from extensive interviews following up the 1980 United States census question on ethnic identity. Here is an example:

Q. What about your husband's ancestry?

A. He would have answered Russian Jew and English and Scottish on the census form. He really likes his Russian Jew part. We have a mezzuzah on the front door. He converted to Catholicism when he married me. He grew up with his mother, and she was Baptist, so he was kind of raised in that tradition. But he likes his Russian Jew part more, he feels closer to being Catholic, and that part goes together more. They are kind of similar (Waters 1990: 91-92).

I will not go into the details here, but as this excerpt suggests, religion has also participated in this transformation, and for both ethnicity and religion, individual choice is now very much the norm for American whites.

Waters' respondents did not disavow their ethnicity. They wanted to have an ethnic identity. But it is identity without obligations. It

functions in what I would call a decorative way. It gives a sense of belonging to something besides the great mass American culture, but in a way that does not violate the principle of individual choice. The cultural practices associated with this new kind of ethnicity are selective, intermittent and largely symbolic. They make little claim on the person's basic American lifestyle. I hope you hear in these words the echo of Marshall Sklare's Lakeville Jews, whose Judaism even then, in the 50's, was selective, intermittent, and symbolic (Sklare and Greenblum 1967). Our Jews are now, as then, reflecting the trends of American culture. Any response we make, to try to shape tomorrow's scenario, must reckon with this.

The trend to symbolic ethnicity (Gans 1979) already visible in Jewish life in the 50s is even clearer now. In response to the National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) question about how they define being Jewish, a lower percentage of Jews now say that the meaning of being Jewish in America is "religious" than agree to "ethnic" or "cultural." Chaim Waxman's new analyses of the NJPS data by age cohorts show that the "cultural" label is even stronger for the younger groups. Waxman notes that "culture" provides a much more open, less binding parameter for defining a group than does religion, or even ethnicity. The bond it offers is not mutually exclusive. Again, our Jews are like Waters' respondents. Theirs is a new kind of ethnicity—not the kind that emphasizes separation between Jews and non-Jews—but one having to do with cultural variety.

Now add Elazar's observations on the breakup of Jewish population concentrations. Jews are both mobile, moving away from their families, kin, and early friends, and scattering, moving away from centers of Jewish density and from other Jews (as an aside, I believe the question of the determinants of Jewish residential choice ought to be way up there on our research agenda in the matter of Jewish continuity, but I know of no one who is working on it).

What we now have are Jews who are all over the place, certainly geographically, but also religiously and culturally and ethnically. Most Jews beyond the core now lead low density Jewish lives.

Here is another piece of the Jewish identity-Jewish future equation: our institutional framework and cultures presume high-density Jewish lives. Most of the institutional structure of contemporary American Jewish life was designed to serve a Jewish population that was concentrated in the urban and near-suburban areas of the great American cities. Jewish Centers were at the center of some large

number of Jews, who would come to socialize or do recreational or cultural activities there. The social service institutions were accessible to people who needed their help. The American synagogue redefined itself as a large institution, with a staff of functionaries and large memberships who lived nearby and would come to its activities; and seminary training, if responsive at all to the needs of the pulpit, began to reflect a corresponding vision of the rabbi's role.

Jews now live scattered all over the suburban and "rurban" landscape (another word that Elazar has recently coined, which I hate as a word but love as a concept). They are concentrated neither near central cores nor near each other, so the traditional kind of institutional structure does not work any more. Our institutions have not yet acknowledged these facts, but their doing so is crucial to a viable Jewish future.

To put these ideas together: The power of the magnetic core does not exert itself magically. Jews who are choosing some Jewish options for decorative reasons may be brought to find deeper meaning and connection—but there have to be institutional frameworks to help this happen and to support and nourish it, along with support for Jews who still do live higher density Jewish lives.

The upshot is that I do not wholly agree with Elazar in his call for a return to covenantal faith and the language of obligation as the solution for an American Jewish future. Not that what he says about Judaism is wrong, but that it will fall on mostly deaf ears.

I have observed that strategies like the one he suggests tend to be formulated by deeply-embedded Jews. By this token, I think they are likely to be limited in their impact to those already within the inner circles of Jewish participation.

I also believe that few Jews outside of those who are denominationally committed or in the verbal classes drive their lives by ideology. Rather, for most people, ideology comes later, if at all. It articulates and justifies life choices already made. For Jews whose ethnicity is only symbolic and who live outside the orbits of Jewish neighborhoods and Jewish institutions, the lived experience of their identity is not compelling, so the ideology does not (yet) make sense.

I suggest instead a strategy of multiplicity. Institutions and individuals located in different sectors of Jewish life need to approach the Jews they know and can connect with in different ways. I do not believe the evidence is there to support any approach exclusively; and Jews certainly are not in any one place, psychologically or sociological-

ly, to be so approached. New patterns of communal participation must be nurtured, and we do not yet know what all of them are, so I am betting on variety.

The American Jewish community needs to develop new institutional structures. Given the new geographic scatter, I think they need to be localized and/or decentralized. I think the synagogue will play a key role—but a synagogue different from the old large-suburban culture-mall variety. And all our institutions will have to support each other in all this variety, and stop seeing difference as threat.

We certainly should continue to encourage our core Jews, who have an over-arching commitment to Jewish continuity, and Elazar's call for covenant is right on target for them. However, for the rest of American Jewry, a better strategy, in my view, is to suggest that the new American opposite of "totally committed" is not "normal," but "normal enough." That American life, these new American conceptions of ethnicity, allows them to be different in important ways from other Americans, yet still be in the mainstream. They are going to stay in that mainstream. The organized Jewish community needs to meet them where they are, in authentic ways. If Elazar's optimism about all our creativity and daring is right, we might have a chance.

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