

REASONS FOR GUARDED OPTIMISM: RESPONSE TO ELAZAR

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Elazar is correct in his call for a "reconvenanting" in American Jewish life that can restore a sense of commitment and obligation among American Jews. However, even more than a return to belief, such a reconvenanting might be propelled by the transformation of our institutions into more engaging and compelling Jewish communities wherein Jewish values are simultaneously learned and lived.

It is both a pleasure and an honor for me to be asked to serve as a respondent to Professor Elazar's paper. I first met Dr. Elazar when I was a graduate student in religious studies at Temple University and at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College twenty-five years ago. At that time, I was still struggling somewhat with the decision to set aside my first academic love, political science, for a focus on religion and Jewish studies. Then, I took a course in the Jewish Political Tradition taught by Professor Elazar and Gerald Blidstein and discovered, to my delight, that my two academic interests could in fact be brought together in ways that were exciting and challenging.

As my own academic focus shifted toward contemporary Jewry, Professor Elazar's work became even more central. When I was teaching at Brandeis University, we called *Community and Polity* (Elazar 1976) "Bible II" because of its seminal role for anyone seriously interested in understanding American Jewish communal life. Daniel Elazar has truly been my intellectual mentor, as well as a personal friend, and I add, therefore, not only my words of tribute, but of gratitude, on this occasion.

Characteristically, Professor Elazar has made my task as a commentator on his paper both gratifying and challenging, because I agree with virtually all he has written. I share both his guarded optimism about the future of American Jewry, and his caution that fundamental changes will be required in the way we approach our Jewishness, both individually and collectively, if we are to fulfill this potential. He calls upon us to recognize that "Progressive Era" models for Jewish communal organization and education are no longer

working, and for a renewal of Jewish belief and sense of obligation, rooted in a recovenanting as a people and a community.

I believe he is substantially correct both in his analysis and in his prescription. We live today in a period that change experts describe as one of "dynamic complexity." Certainly, this description applies to Jewish life. The changes that Elazar describes have produced a Jewish community that is unprecedented in its diversity and in its entanglement with a host of forces, emanating both from within the Jewish world and beyond, that render problematic all of our traditional assumptions about how Jews will behave and how we can generate and pursue shared objectives.

One option is simply to accept the radical individualization of Jewish identity that characterizes American Jewry today; to set ourselves up as a Jewish shopping mall seeking to offer as many products with Jewish labels as we can to our sophisticated (though often Jewishly *unsophisticated*) customers. In fact, this approach is already permeating many spheres of Jewish activity, from fundraising to education. There is no denying that skill in marketing and an ability to provide multiple entry points into Jewish life will be requisites if the community is to attract and retain the interest of substantial numbers of Jews today.

Yet, as Elazar argues, a collective Jewish enterprise based solely on the continually up-for-grabs free choice of individual Jews who recognize no *a priori* claim on their commitment, who feel no sense of obligation to be part of this enterprise, is ultimately untenable. Obligation is the fundamental principle behind the covenantal approach to human existence, which Elazar has rightly placed at the heart of Jewish political, as well as religious, teaching. I accept that in our day, as thinkers like Eugene Borowitz and Irving Greenberg have asserted, recovenanting among American Jews must occur on a voluntary basis. We are, in a sense, back at Sinai, where our consent needs to be secured, not assumed. The problem, of course, is that few of us apparently hear a commanding voice powerful enough to secure that consent on more than a provisional basis with clear time and space limits.

This recognition leads directly, I believe, to Elazar's call for a renewal of belief as the basis for recapturing a sense of obligation. Here, however, I am less than sanguine about the prospects for such a call bearing fruit, at least in a straightforward way. I believe there is a pathway toward a revitalization of Jewish commitment. It runs through the rebuilding of Jewish community—not "community" as a

sociological abstraction or a fancy term for an organizational catchment area—but real community in the Buberian sense. I would argue that for most Jews today, a sense of obligation, and, equally significantly, the motivation and support for pursuing a path of personal Jewish growth—the second key element in my view in any viable strategy for Jewish continuity—are likely to arise only from experiences of Jewish community. Communities (and they will need to be multiple) which can connect Jewish tradition, history, text, ritual, and values with the evolving and ongoing life-issues of individuals seeking meaning, support, fellowship, purpose, and a satisfying rhythm to their lives can generate a sense of commitment both to the perpetuation of the community itself and to the way of life it embodies.

In moving the primary potential energizer for a renewal of Jewish obligation from the realm of belief to that of community, I do not mean to deny the power or importance of the former, nor the relationship between the two. However, I believe that as a practical strategy, the task of reconstructing Jewish communities may provide both a more encompassing and more unifying focus for the work that needs to be done. Essentially, what is needed today is a determined effort to transform the institutions of Jewish life—synagogues, centers, schools, social service agencies, membership organizations, federations—so that they can become the vital units of what will indeed be a federal "community of communities." Our institutions do continue to touch substantial numbers of Jews. If, through the quality of Jewish learning and living they encounter in these institutions, we can draw these Jews into a more intimate relationship with one another and with the values they have heard proclaimed, but have perhaps too rarely seen enacted, then, I believe, we have a reasonable chance of transforming them from "consumers" of Jewish services to "participants" in an ongoing shared endeavor.

I do not in any way wish to minimize the enormous difficulty of the challenge. Indeed, the lessons of efforts at institutional renewal in business and in education (in some ways less ambitious than what we must attempt) assure us that the change process will be slow, messy, unpredictable, tension-ridden, and ongoing (Fullan 1993). Progressive era models of rational planning and professionally managed change will indeed not serve us well. However, the good news is that we will have to draw precisely upon the characteristic American Jewish talents for imagination, innovation, and experimentation that Elazar cites, combined with a characteristically Jewish commitment to perpetual learning, personal responsibility, and shared struggle for improvement.

If the covenantal way to the perfection of the world is, as Irving Greenberg argues, resolute step-by-step action in the here and now guided by a continually refined and reformed vision of the ideal we seek, then what I am urging is very much in the covenantal tradition.

What I suggest here as our master strategy for Jewish continuity is in fact beginning to be tested in a number of Jewish institutional settings and systems. We have a huge distance to traverse, but it is the journey itself which will call Jewish communities into existence and into action as we grapple in our institutions with the vexing, but exhilarating, challenges of infusing these institutions with a shared commitment to Jewish learning and growth.

I believe there is a critical mass of Jews today who wish to transform our institutions in this fashion and who, in the process, are breaking down many of the old assumptions and ways of doing business that have outlived their usefulness. I see this transformation both in the convergence of thinking among a broad array of Jewish intellectuals and activists and in the gradual deepening of the Jewish continuity agenda as it is being played out in local communities and in our major national institutional systems. It is the root of my guarded optimism.

REFERENCES

- Elazar, Daniel J. 1976. *Community and Polity: The Organizational Dynamics of American Jewry*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America.
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