

FORUM II

Building Bridges to "New" Ethnic Minorities: Adapting the Community Relations Agenda to New Demographic Trends

DAVID GAD-HARF
and
MIRIAM SCHEY IMERMAN

The field of Jewish community relations' continued existence and relevance will depend upon its ability to adapt to changing conditions in society. One of the strongest influences on intergroup relations at present and one that is likely to affect the future of outreach efforts is changing demographic patterns.

At the time when many of the major American Jewish community relations organizations—at both the national and local levels—were founded, the Jewish community was, for the most part, concentrated in urban centers. Contacts with other ethnic minorities were often limited to members of the relatively few, predominantly European, minorities that had settled in the cities. Later, the movement of the African-American community from the South to urban centers in the North created opportunities for outreach between blacks and Jews. This relationship gained momentum with the civil rights movement, but has weakened somewhat in recent years.

A number of demographic shifts have occurred in the last quarter-century. American society has been changed by the arrival of large numbers of immigrants from the Middle East, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean, in addition to those from Europe and Africa. As the population has diversified, formerly homogeneous ethnic enclaves in many cities have broken up and dispersed. The resulting multi-ethnic neighborhoods often experience tensions as the newly contiguous neighbors learn to coexist with one another. The Jewish community has by no means been unaffected by these shifts. Cities have lost their small,

concentrated, predominantly Jewish neighborhoods as residents of these neighborhoods moved to increasingly sprawling and diffuse suburban areas.

An example of the dramatic shift in the Jewish population of Detroit is provided by Temple Beth El, a prominent Reform congregation in that city. In the 1950s, approximately 90% of the temple's religious school students at the elementary school level attended, at most, ten different public schools. By the 1980s, Temple Beth El's religious school students attended at least 75 different elementary schools (Dr. Richard C. Hertz, Rabbi Emeritus of Temple Beth El, personal communication, 1991).

Further evidence of the spreading out of Detroit's Jewish population is found in a 1990 population study commissioned by the Jewish Welfare Federation. The "core communities," those few suburbs with the largest Jewish population, served as the basis for the study's main conclusions. The "periphery," consisting of a huge area covering at least 25 separate suburban communities, accounted for 21% of the Jewish population. With fully one-fifth of the Jewish metropolitan community living outside traditionally Jewish neighborhoods, changing demographics has become a critical element of community relations planning.

As the Detroit Jewish community has left the comfort of its relatively solid enclaves in the city and joined other ethnic minorities from many parts of the world in previously solid white working-class or rural suburbs and exurbs, the public schools have, in many cases, been the focal point

of intergroup tensions. Although such tensions are not a new phenomenon, the change in the Jewish community to a more established and influential group may offer new opportunities to initiate outreach efforts.

A MODEL FOR MULTICULTURAL OUTREACH

Many suburban public school systems in the Detroit area have developed excellent multicultural curricula in response to the increased diversity of their student populations. Unfortunately, the message of tolerance for all cultures, although taught skillfully, was often not reinforced at home. To address this problem, the Jewish Community Council decided to bring together a culturally, racially, and religiously diverse coalition that would jointly sponsor a publication, *The American Mosaic: Cultural Diversity and the Schools*, to be addressed to parents. The original draft of the publication was written by a specially constituted task force of the Jewish Community Council and was subsequently revised in consultation with a local school district consultant and key religious leaders. Cooperating ethnic organizations also contributed their suggestions. The brochure, which was endorsed by the three major metropolitan area school districts, carried the message of the importance of sensitivity to and acceptance of cultural diversity. The intended audience was the parents of elementary and secondary school students, who would receive it from the schools, further emphasizing their endorsement.

Nearly every organization asked to co-sponsor this publication did so with great enthusiasm. Organizations representing nine different ethnic groups—the Arab-American, Asian, Asian Indian, Chaldean, African-American, American Indian, Italian, Latino, and Polish communities—joined in the project. All but the African-American and Chaldean communities were new coalition partners.

This positive response to a specific project with specific and limited goals reflected a desire to cooperate on broader issues. Many of these organizations made it clear that their agreement to cosponsor this brochure was dependent on our assurance that the partnership would not end there, but would continue to deal with issues of substance. Clearly, we had struck an untapped reservoir of need—we were happy to promise that the relationship would continue, and so it has.

The very process of gathering collaborators for the brochure was instructive in several ways. First, as stated previously, we presented a clear, specific opportunity for collaboration, rather than an open-ended "dialogue." Second, we reached out to groups that had in some cases never before been contacted for any similar project. Finally, we identified a problem—prejudice and resulting tension among groups, centering in the schools—that all partners considered serious and worthy of action.

The immediate and widespread support for this metropolitan, multi-ethnic coalition led us to conclude that a need exists to exploit any and all reasonable opportunities for joint action on areas of mutual interest. The commitment of the Council to expanded interethnic outreach is expressed in its hiring of a part-time staff person whose very busy schedule is exclusively focused on intergroup relations in the suburbs, with a special emphasis on the schools. The suburban community relations associate, with a limited schedule of only two days per week, is charged with serving as the Council's point of contact with school administrators, teachers, and Jewish and non-Jewish parents to assist in developing programs and instructional plans that show sensitivity not only to the Jewish student population but also to other communities. This position, which is still being defined, also involves outreach to other elements of the suburban population. Many suburban districts are forming multicultural task forces, and the Council is

participating in as many such groups as possible. In one case, described more fully later, the Council is initiating such a group.

One of the first projects undertaken by the new staff person was to secure funding for the distribution of the *American Mosaic* brochure and to develop a plan for its dissemination. A companion project to the brochure—a videotape featuring high school students from a variety of ethnic and religious backgrounds offering their perspectives on the impact of stereotyping and discrimination on their lives—is also being developed. A grant proposal seeking funding both for distribution of the brochure and production of the videotape has been submitted to a local charitable foundation that provides funds for educational community projects.

The very act of collaborating with the Council's ethnic organizational partners on developing a distribution plan for the brochures has already led to further joint ventures for the newly formed multicultural coalition. For example, several partner organizations have expressed an interest in sending representatives into the schools to reinforce the message of cultural sensitivity contained in the publication. The ethnic partners have also made modest contributions of funds toward the printing and distribution of the brochure.

In addition to support from the organizations for production of the brochure, a few area school districts have learned of the project and have offered to assist with printing the piece for their own use. In one case, outbreaks of interethnic tension in a local school district resulted in a meeting with our suburban community relations staffer and an offer by that district to distribute *American Mosaic* to the school experiencing difficulty.

In other school districts in metropolitan Detroit where cultural diversity has led to intergroup tensions, the Council has worked with administrators, teachers, or parents to reduce these tensions. An important part of the responsibilities of our suburban

Community Relations Associate has been to suggest ways that curricula and special programming can be adapted to show sensitivity to the Jewish community in areas where Jews have not lived previously.

TRADITIONAL PARTNERSHIPS IN NEW SETTINGS

Although the opportunity to collaborate with new ethnic minorities has been an exciting development, traditional coalitional partnerships have by no means been abandoned. Relationships with the African-American community in Detroit continue to have an important place on the community relations agenda, but in different arenas. Jews have not lived in the city in large numbers for many years. New black-Jewish links are currently being forged with success in the suburbs, as formerly all-white communities begin to experience ethnic diversity for the first time.

The suburb of Southfield, home to a large percentage of metropolitan Detroit's Jewish community for over two decades, is now also the home of a growing population of African-Americans. These changes in the community's demographic make-up have provided excellent opportunities for joint action. The ability to maintain and strengthen outreach efforts to the black community depends on the creativity and flexibility brought to the process.

In Southfield, the Council is working to establish a multi-ethnic task force that will work with the city government and schools to promote positive aspects of this culturally diverse city and reduce the incidence of intergroup tension. To launch this effort, the Council has joined forces with The Neighborhood Project, a program created by the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Detroit to stabilize Jewish residential patterns in Oak Park and Southfield, two long-standing areas of Jewish residence. In forming the Southfield multicultural task force, its planners hope to establish a new and potent interethnic partnership that

will contribute to the betterment of a racially and culturally integrated community in a metropolitan area known to be one of the most polarized in the nation. Not surprisingly, the connections formed through the *American Mosaic* project have been of assistance in assembling the Southfield Task Force.

THE ROLE OF CIRCUMSTANCE

Although some partnerships are born out of perceived opportunities (these are usually stimulated by one party to the relationship), and others resemble earlier interethnic links but transplanted to a new locale, a third "culture medium" for the growth of a coalition is that of circumstance. A somewhat unique set of circumstances combined in Detroit to enable outreach efforts to the Arab-American and Chaldean communities. The Detroit metropolitan area is home to the largest Arab population outside the Middle East. This fact makes coverage of news from that part of the world a "local" event; developments of any magnitude in Israel-Arab relations are given front-page or lead-story prominence in the local news media.

Until recently, however, the only regular, organized dialogue between the Jewish and Arab communities took place under the auspices of a group called Arab-Jewish Friends. Although the members of this group included several active lay leaders of the Jewish Community Council, it essentially has met as an ad hoc body for approximately 10 years.

In late 1990 and early 1991, new opportunities for Arab-Jewish interaction arose. The *American Mosaic* brochure project, which was immediately endorsed by the local American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (AAADC) and a Chaldean organization, provided a basis for Arab-Jewish cooperation at a time when no pressing community relations crisis loomed. Then, when war broke out in the Persian Gulf and reports surfaced of vandalism of Arab-American-owned businesses, the

Jewish Community Council issued a statement to the press condemning such acts and sent copies of our statement to the local Arab organizations. The press gave prominent coverage to the "Jewish reaction" to anti-Arab vandalism, and the Arab community was given further proof of the Jewish community's interest in solidifying its relationship with local Arab-Americans. The AAADC reacted quite favorably to our stance and soon initiated contact with the Jewish Community Council on issues for which they sought support.

Another parallel development has been the growth of relations between the Jewish and Chaldean communities. The Chaldeans are Catholics from Iraq, many of whom trace their ancestry to the village of Tel-Kaif and a few other small villages near Baghdad. Detroit is the home of the largest Chaldean population in the United States. The growth of Jewish-Chaldean dialogue has been made easier by the fact that the Chaldean population, unlike the majority of the Arab population, has begun to settle in the same suburban areas as the Jewish community—primarily Oak Park, Southfield, Farmington Hills, and West Bloomfield. Although some Chaldean parents send their children to parochial schools, many do not. Contact between Jewish and Chaldean students in the public schools has presented both problems and opportunities. The organizations that have been formed in the Chaldean community are strikingly similar in structure to Jewish community relations groups, and the Chaldean leadership has been extremely receptive to outreach efforts by Jewish leadership, both by rabbis and influential lay leaders.

It remains to be seen what the ultimate outcomes of Arab-Jewish and Chaldean-Jewish coalition building will be, although successful bridge building to the Arab and Chaldean communities has already occurred. When the Southfield Task Force was being planned, the AAADC and the Chaldean Federation were asked to provide representatives for the coalition. Both groups readily agreed to join the Task Force and

to provide delegates with ties to the South-field community. More recently, the Council joined forces not only with the Arab and Chaldean communities but also with 15 other leaders of Jewish, Asian, African-American, interreligious, and labor organizations in a joint letter to the editor of the *Detroit News*. The letter sounded a warning about the David Duke campaign for governor of Louisiana and the threat posed by Duke to intergroup cooperation. As the Duke campaign moves from a statewide to a national one, the connections formed by this initial letter will undoubtedly be utilized again.

SETTING THE GROUND RULES FOR OUTREACH

Although the coalition partners for the Jewish community may in some cases be new ones and in other cases be old partners in new settings, the ground rules for building successful coalitions have not changed significantly. Goals and objectives should be clear, parties must find common ground where possible, and they must agree to disagree where no common ground exists. Struggling to write a new rule book for outreach will only delay the process unnecessarily. What the Jewish community is seeking to do now in its multi-ethnic outreach efforts is what it has done successfully for decades, and we should draw on our

experience, provided we remain alert to current situational realities and do not attempt to recreate a past that no longer exists.

CONCLUSION

The changing face of American society is a challenge to the Jewish community relations agenda's adaptability. The ability to cope with shifting circumstances, which has always been a source of our strength as a people, should enable the community relations field to examine itself anew. Detroit's utilization of new intergroup relations opportunities and the strategies it has developed may prove useful to other communities seeking to cope with similar situations. The commitment of the Jewish community relations field to improved intergroup relations, coupled with the awareness of the Jewish community of its own history as an immigrant group, has enabled the field to apply new strategies for outreach to traditional partners and to develop means to link with groups with whom it has had little or no previous communication. The result will be stronger ties not only to the general community but also within the increasingly diverse Jewish community, which will ultimately benefit both the community relations field and the population it serves.