
How to Save American Jews

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OVER THE past ten years, the American Jewish community has undergone a radical inner shift in mood, from buoyant optimism to deep anxiety about its future. Indeed, it is now startling to recall that the most commented-upon Jewish book of 1985 was Charles Silberman's *A Certain People*, an upbeat account of "American Jews and their lives today" which found widespread evidence of "Jewish renewal" and security. If Silberman saw a danger looming on the American Jewish horizon, it came from "a new parochialism" that, he warned, was leading "many communal leaders to turn inward and focus exclusively on Jewish concerns."

Today, a mere decade later, the leadership of American Jewry is much more preoccupied with internal matters than it was in 1985, as it struggles to develop a strategy to hold the allegiance of those American Jews who remain within the fold and to win back the ever-increasing numbers on the margins.

The present anxiety can be dated to the findings gathered by the National Jewish Population Study (NJPS) of 1990. That study reported that among

individuals born Jewish who married between 1985 and 1990, more than 50 percent were marrying Gentiles. The study also found that rates of affiliation with Jewish institutions other than synagogues and community centers were lower among younger Jews than among their elders, as were measures of identification with the state of Israel.

These findings jolted Jewish leaders sufficiently to prompt a far-reaching reexamination of the community's internal condition. Initially, most discussions focused on the apparently devastating data concerning intermarriage. "Will our grandchildren be Jewish?" was the troubling question posed at innumerable communal gatherings. Then, in a mood of somber stocktaking, leaders of Jewish federations convened a number of task forces to analyze and devise responses to what had become defined as a crisis of "Jewish continuity." The reports issued by these panels over the last few years reflect an emerging consensus on how best to cope with the challenges they describe. They also offer an opportunity to revisit the question of the exact nature of the threat facing the American Jewish community today, and to ask whether the treatment being prescribed is in fact appropriate to the illness.

A CAREFUL READER of the task-force reports will notice one striking feature: although they make regular ritual references to a "core" and a "periphery," they nevertheless tend to treat Amer-

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ican Jewry as a single unit, suffering its crisis of Jewish continuity in a more or less uniform manner. This leveling perspective is perhaps most glaring in the report of one such group, the CJF (Council of Jewish Federations) Task Force on the Intermarried, which asserts that "in reality they are us—our distant and most intimate family members, our neighbors, our friends, and our colleagues." The assumption, in brief, is that intermarriage is present in every Jewish family; that it appears at random; and that all sectors of the community are equally vulnerable.

Why are American Jewish leaders disposed to see an all-pervading crisis when, as they themselves tacitly concede, the data they are drawing upon suggest a number of subpopulations behaving in different ways? One answer derives from the constraints under which all such task forces operate. Drawing their own membership from the broad spectrum of Jews, they can reach agreement only by appealing to the lowest common denominator. Distinguishing between core Jews and peripheral ones would imply that some Jews behave in a fashion that is "better" than others. Such judgmentalism goes against the neutrality-seeking culture of the task forces' sponsoring institutions.

Indeed, the task forces are frank to admit that they proceeded with their work only after banning discussion about the most divisive—i.e., the most important—issues. For example, the report of the North American Commission on Jewish Identity and Continuity* states at the outset that its signers, some 85 Jewish leaders, "tried to avoid imposing what are necessarily individual, albeit strongly held, views concerning the relative importance of what all agree are worthy principles and recommendations." Similarly, the Task Force on the Intermarried resolved from the start to remove many critical matters from the table and leave them for individual organizations to decide. Among such issues were "conversion and the impact that inclusion of the intermarried might have on Jewish institutions."

A SIMILAR DISINCLINATION to pass judgment informs the actual policy recommendations the task forces came up with. Thus, to "meet the needs of intermarried families," the Task Force on the Intermarried counsels the Jewish community first and foremost to ensure such families' "comfort." It urges

top Federation leaders to meet with intermarried couples through dialogue and focus groups in order to learn their feelings and needs and

to let them know the interest and concern of Federation. This approach would avoid making assumptions about what people need and want, but, instead, would allow learning about the needs of the intermarried directly. . . . This experience could be an important consciousness-raising step for Federation staff and lay leaders to increase their own sensitivity.

Notice that the moral burden here is not on the unaffiliated and the intermarried, who have "feelings and needs," but on the organized community and its institutions, which must show "interest and concern." Indeed, the degree to which Jewish institutions have been remiss in just this respect is a *leitmotif* of reports like that of the Commission on Jewish Identity and Continuity:

Many observers have noted that in subtle and not-so-subtle ways Jewish institutions often send the message that they are a "private club" for those who meet certain criteria of commitment, life circumstances (e.g., being a family with two Jewish spouses and children), or ability to pay. If the community wishes to be taken seriously by those who may not meet these "entry requirements," it must actively seek to indicate to those not currently visibly connected to Jewish life that they are valued as Jews and that their needs and concerns are of importance to these institutions.

From premises like these it is but a small step to the conclusion that the real problem in the Jewish community is not the legions of the disaffiliated but the organizations which have driven them away. Here, for instance, is the editor of a major Jewish newspaper commenting on the way the community ostensibly treats its "fringe Jews":

It only takes one punch to knock out countless Jews from Jewish life. They are the people who, in recent years, have scorned things Jewish. Then, one day, they have an urge to connect. They make the call, show up at an event or sign up for a program. Some even start getting involved. Then, boom! A rude receptionist, an insensitive letter, an unreturned telephone call, or just a lousy experience. They feel betrayed, or worse, become indifferent.

The same thinking is displayed by the Task Force on the Intermarried: "It may take only one negative experience, or what is perceived as a negative reaction, to discourage a couple showing interest and embitter their extended family."

If the organized community must refrain from

* This report has recently been released under the title, *To Renew and Sanctify*.

criticizing intermarriage, and, for fear of offending, is forbidden even to convey the perception of a negative attitude, what must it do instead? In the words of the Commission on Jewish Identity and Continuity, it must "try to learn what [disaffiliated] individuals are seeking in and from their Jewishness, and to assist them in building their own Jewish frameworks for achieving these goals." In pursuit of this benignly therapeutic—and transcendently vague—purpose, a veritable cottage industry has sprung up, mainly staffed by enterprising academics bent on "reinventing" Jewish organizational life. Their conclusions are unsurprising: American Jewry needs *more* institutions—new organizations that are "responsive," innovative programs of "outreach," additional types of synagogues, alternative rabbinical seminaries, as well as new forms of prayer, new conceptions of God, and, in some cases, new definitions of what it means to be a Jew. This is the bait that will, presumably, lure back the marginal, the disaffiliated, the no-longer Jewish.

DOES IT make sense for the organized Jewish community to rush to implement the course prescribed by its task forces and academic advisers? Is there a better way?

Common sense alone would suggest that American Jewry is not a homogeneous unit experiencing erosion uniformly; rather, the 5.8 million Jews who are scattered throughout the country constitute a heterogeneous population responding in diverse ways to the challenges and opportunities of contemporary life. The numbers who intermarry, for example, may have increased dramatically in specific sectors of the community but not in all. The overall figures of synagogue attendance may have declined among some groups of Jews but not in others. In some segments of the community there may be an increased *commitment* to Jewish norms and values.

In an effort to arrive at a more accurate picture of reality, we devised our own categories of Jewish involvement, using the 1990 NJPS data to identify the numbers and types of individuals in each. We began with those we named the "actively engaged," by which we meant to designate those Jews participating in any one of three types of activities: regular attendance at public worship, support of Jewish institutions, or observance of religious rituals at home. To qualify under the first of these criteria, an individual had to attend synagogue services twice a month or more; under the second, to participate in four of five civic activities (holding

synagogue membership, joining a Jewish organization, contributing at least \$500 to a Jewish charity, subscribing to at least one Jewish periodical, visiting Israel on at least two occasions); and under the third, to perform at least three of four home rituals (lighting Sabbath candles, purchasing kosher meat, using separate dishes for meat and dairy foods, celebrating four Jewish holidays). The groupings were not, of course, mutually exclusive. Our intention, rather, was to cast as wide a net as possible, in order to "catch" the population group that, when all is said and done, is most likely to determine the future of American Jewry.

Using the same measures, we then proceeded to classify the rest of the community. First we identified the "moderately engaged": those whose participation is more sporadic than that of the most involved but who still invest much time and energy in Jewish activities; then the "loosely engaged"; finally, the "disengaged."^{*}

Categorizing American Jews according to levels of religious and communal participation brings into focus the true pattern of identification with and/or disaffiliation from Jewish life. Thus, we found that the actively engaged constitute 24 percent of American Jews and the moderately engaged 20 percent, while, between them, the loosely engaged and the disengaged make up 56 percent. As for intermarriage statistics, they run as follows: 4 percent among the actively engaged, 10 percent among the moderately engaged, 19 percent among the loosely engaged, and a whopping 49 percent among the disengaged—hardly a uniform or random distribution.[†]

NOW, IF the purpose is to ensure Jewish continuity for the next generation, it would seem clear that the place to begin is with the sectors of the community that are *already* engaged to a greater or lesser extent, enhancing the level of their commitment to Jewish life and increasing their overall size. After all, the two most engaged categories constitute, together, 44 percent of American Jews, and this is a percentage that *has not been declining* by

^{*} The moderately engaged attend synagogue once a month or perform two home rituals or celebrate four holidays or participate in three types of communal affiliation. Loosely engaged Jews either attend synagogue only on the High Holidays or are affiliated in only two ways or celebrate only three holidays. The disengaged are at still lower levels of involvement.

[†] The NJPS, of course, registered a much higher figure overall (52 percent), but it was reporting on marriages in the narrow time frame of 1985-90; our figures measure the total number of married couples in the population in 1990.

age. These are the core of the future community; surely they should be nurtured accordingly.

At the moment, however, they are not being so nurtured. To the contrary, many of the programs targeted at the uncommitted are virtually designed to undercut the Jewish values of the committed. Take, for example, a course of study jointly sponsored by a Hillel Foundation and a Jewish Family Services agency. Entitled "Interfaith Partnerships—Exploring and Negotiating Difference," the course advertises itself as ideal for intermarried couples "wanting to improve their relationship through exploration of each other's cultural history." But how, one wonders, does such "exploration" serve the interests of a Jewish community that wishes to *discourage* intermarriage? Would not that purpose be more effectively served by a program that conveyed a positive message about endogamy, and conveyed it to those with at least some minimal predisposition to hear it?

Basic to much of the so-called "outreach" effort aimed at interfaith couples is a tendency to denude Jewishness of its particularity. To be Jewish, such programs teach, requires only minimal changes in the values, identity, and primary-group ties of prospective members of the community. In their eagerness to ensure that non-Jews feel comfortable at religious services, for example, some Reform synagogues have rewritten the liturgy to strip away references to Jewish particularism. Thus, when a Gentile parent is called to the Torah on the occasion of a family celebration, all references to the chosenness of Israel are omitted.

Again, in trying to make potential converts feel comfortable, Jewish leaders have propagated the notion that *everyone* in the Jewish community who identifies with the group does so voluntarily and as the result of a subjective process of decision-making. "We are all 'Jews by choice'" goes a popular refrain, with the implication being, why don't you get in on the choosing, too? Yet such an approach drastically subverts the tribal nature of Jewish identity, and is anyway unlikely to work. Most people internalize their religious and group loyalties at an early age; by suggesting that Jews "choose" their identity, one is suggesting that being Jewish is not natural. Offensive as this is to the sensibilities of committed Jews, it is also hardly geared to win people over to a wholehearted identification with Judaism.

In short, moves designed to help Gentiles and marginal Jews feel "comfortable" also purvey the false and potentially destructive message that, in the interests of accommodation, the most deeply

rooted Jewish beliefs can and readily will give way. Thus do well-meaning efforts to reach individuals on the margins not only wildly mislead about the nature of Judaism but drive an even greater wedge between such individuals and those in the core.

OUR OWN analysis points in a different direction. In our view, rather than heeding the call of its task forces, the organized Jewish community would do better to redirect its attention, its funding, and its programming from the periphery to the core; to turn to its most dependable members, whose participation it has taken for granted, and support *their* activities.*

For the truth is that engaged Jews cannot take care of their needs without significant institutional support. In the absence of such support, and while the attention of communal leaders has been riveted on the unaffiliated, they are struggling on their own. The key institutions requiring support are synagogues, day schools, summer camps, youth groups, campus programs, and religious and cultural institutions of higher learning—that is to say, institutions which emphasize Jewish particularism and foster strong identification with the group. These settings for natural and intense social interaction also teach the lesson that there is a distinctive Jewish world view, and that being Jewish means, to some degree, being different.

That difference is rooted, ultimately, in religion—a fact which leaders of the organized community, and especially of the secular policy-making agencies, have long sought to avoid addressing. To be sure, task-force reports are sprinkled with terms drawn from traditional religious vocabulary. They refer, for example, to *mitzvot* (commandments); but at the same time they conspicuously shy away from speaking of Judaism as a religion of laws, obligations, and *norms*. They speak about the imperative of Jewish survival; but no reason is given to explain why such survival is important, or how and by what means it can be effected. They pay lip service to the desirability of Jewish knowledge; but no attention is devoted to defining the content or purpose of such knowledge. Reading the task-force reports, one receives an impression of Judaism itself as a somewhat bitter-tasting and unpleasant medicine, a dose of which an ailing community must perhaps swallow; one receives little or no sense of the inherent value of its religious teachings.

* The Jewish Communal Affairs Department of the American Jewish Committee, under its director Steven Bayme, has in fact embraced the sorts of strategies we advocate here.

There is no doubt a reason for this, arising from the reluctance of many in the organized community to acknowledge what the current crisis, if it is to be confronted fully, may demand of them. The report of the Commission on Jewish Identity and Continuity, for example, is honest enough to name “the forces of modernization and the attractiveness of a welcoming host society” as agents that “can combine to weaken the fabric of Jewish life, to dissipate the intensity of Jewish identity, and to loosen the bonds of Jewish community.” Yet the report is simply incapable of contemplating what follows logically from its sober assessment: namely, that in order to combat these “forces,” the Jewish community may have to adopt a view of Jewish identity as being at least partly in tension with the values of liberal, universalist modernity, and that any effort to strengthen “the fabric of Jewish life” may necessarily entail challenging if not rejecting aspects of that very ethos, an ethos with which both secular Jewish leaders and many religious ones as well have been prominently allied.

SIGNIFICANTLY, AMONG those we identified as the most engaged Jews, large numbers have made up their minds on this selfsame issue. For them, religious participation, even if it marks them out as “different” from their fellow Americans, is central to Jewish involvement. Although only 7 percent of American Jews overall identify themselves as Orthodox (according to the NJPS),

among those we identified as the actively engaged, roughly 25 percent are Orthodox, with another 50 percent Conservative, and the remaining 25 percent Reform.

Such data do not prove that one “version” of Judaism is more correct and authentic than another; they do suggest that religious commitment is the strongest predictor of every other form of Jewish engagement. With some exceptions, moreover, those most actively engaged in Jewish life have consciously or unconsciously adopted a critical stance toward a number of the central values of modern culture, including its preference for individual autonomy at the expense of communal responsibility and its celebration of choice over obligation, especially obligation imposed from without.

But here is the final irony. For Jews on the margins who may be surfeited with rootlessness and looking for something authentic in their lives, the existence of an enthusiastic and fulfilled core population, a population offering a *genuine* alternative, can surely act as a more powerful lure than the bland nostrums of an establishment that offers, in effect, only another version of what already ails them. Such a core population exists—and with careful nurturing it can become even more highly engaged and much more numerous than it already is. For that to happen, however, the organized community will need to redirect its sights, and re-define what it means by Jewish continuity.