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It's BOSTON in '76

NCJCS MEETING

May 30 — June 2

Jewish Communal Organization: Democracy and Leadership; A Panel Discussion

RABBI IRWIN GRONER, MILTON HIMMELFARB AND DAVID SIDORSKY

Editor's Note: On Sunday, April 27, 1975 a colloquy was held at Congregation Shaarey Zedek in Detroit. Participants were RABBI IRWIN GRONER, moderator, and DR. DAVID SIDORSKY, Professor of Philosophy at Columbia University, and MILTON HIMMELFARB, author and editor. In the course of the symposium there was an exchange of views on the issue of representativeness and governance of Jewish communal organizations. It is presented here for the interest of our readers.

RABBI IRWIN GRONER

IN THE course of the discussion about day schools, the role of the Jewish Welfare Federation was mentioned. Mr. Avrunin recently wrote about the nature of Federation. Until the late 1930's, the Federations were limited instruments for maintaining charitable enterprises mainly in health and welfare. As a result of the darkness that spread over the European Jewish community, the Holocaust, the creation of Israel, and a host of other challenges that confronted American Jewry, the Jewish Welfare Federation emerged as a very important instrument, not only for overseas aid, but as an instrumentality by which Jews made collective decisions about their own collective lives. And I quote from his article:

It became a platform for Jews to take issue with each other and sometimes to stand together. It became "a place to reason together". Some called it "a Jewish address". Some wanted it to speak with "a Jewish voice". For others, it was Detroit's and Cleveland's and Chicago's and, yes, America's vehicle of kinship with Jews everywhere in Europe, North Africa, and especially in Israel. To all these we must apply our modest sense of limitations. But one thing is certain, the instrument of efficiency had taken on a personality and an identity of its own, a life of major importance to Jewish continuity.¹

¹William Avrunin, "The Developing Federation Idea", this *Journal*, Vol. LI, No. 3 (1975), p. 233.

And in the course of the article, Mr. Avrunin indicates that from time to time, the Federation is even referred to as the organized Jewish community, recognizing that this is an exaggeration but it's a forgivable exaggeration because indeed, crucial decisions about the priorities and values of the Jewish institutions in Jewish life are being shaped in the Federation process.

This carries great implications for the Jewish community of America. This instrumentality that has emerged as a result of historic necessity is increasingly being asked to advance, support, nurture not only health and welfare, but also education, Jewish values, Jewish group life. What are the implications of the development of the Federation as this instrument, platform, Jewish address? What are the implications for Jewish life? Should more attention be paid to Federations and is the decision-making process, the constituency process, the representative process as it is presently constituted, do these processes reflect what our symposiasts think they should reflect in American Jewish life?

MILTON HIMMELFARB

There is a recent article in *Tradition*, the journal of the Modern Orthodox rabbinate, by Dan Elazar, who is professor of political science at both Temple and Bar Ilan. One of the questions he addresses is the democracy of the

American Jewish community: Is the American Jewish community democratic? Is it as democratic as it should be and can be? He has no particular axe to grind. He is a professor, not a communal civil servant.

He says, first of all, that the American Jewish community is a lot more democratic than the Old Country Jewish community was. We tend to be nostalgic about the Old Country. The Old Country Jewish communities were routinely oligarchical—elitist is the contemporary word for it—with the rich and the learned lording it over the poor and the unlearned. You will recall the heart-rending stories about the years when Czar Nicholas I used to send the kidnappers around to the villages to grab Jewish children for 25 years of military service. Guess which Jewish children were grabbed? Not, typically, the children of the rich or the learned. If we cherish a notion of some historical, real model of a Jewish community superior in democracy to the contemporary American Jewish community, that notion is mistaken.

Elazar uses the graphic figure of concentric circles to suggest our differences in degree of Jewish commitment. Those at the very center, the core, are Jews 24 hours a day, even when they are sleeping (they sleep in a *kippah*). They never read any literature except from right to left. These are the full-time Jews. They are too full-time for my taste. I believe you should also read some literature from left to right. If we use the imagery of a clock, rather than concentric circles, at the polar opposite of the 24-hour-a-day Jew is the occasional Jew. The people for whom being a Jew is a sometime thing are also part of the Jewish community.

What do we mean by a democratic Jewish community? I suppose we would agree that democratic government is one in which people vote for

their officials. In New York City there are elections to local school boards. They are important elections. The school boards dispose of substantial budgets, they have jobs to give out. Nevertheless, the turnout for those elections is only about 10 per cent. Churches, unions, racial and ethnic radicals vie for control. If we had elections for the Jewish community organization, what would the turnout be? Should the full-time Jews, those who would turn out for such elections, be entitled to speak for all the others, who are less than full-time?

A good case could be made for the proposition that in some rough and ready way, the institutions of the American Jewish community, starting with Federations and the Council of Federations, represent more or less what most Jews want. We really do not want terribly much more. I would not like to live under a kind of Polish *kehillah* electoral system where my party, whether the Bund or the Agudah, jockeyed for power against your party. That is not how I want to express my Yiddishkeit in the United States.

If I have a complaint against Federation or communal leadership it is not about the method by which they were chosen, it is about program and outlook. But even here changes are taking place. Jewish institutions are far more Jewish than they used to be. A generation ago, who could have predicted that when you came to a General Assembly of the Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds, you would sing *zemirot* and take part in *Havdalah*? It is almost as unexpected as the kosher kitchens at Yale and Princeton.

Just as the Supreme Court was said to follow the election returns, so the institutions of the Jewish community have followed the mood of most Jews. That advertisement that David Sidor-sky read, warning that the chances are

your grandchildren won't be Jewish, was published by the New York Federation of Jewish Philanthropies! If you're a New Yorker you know how surprising that is. Federation was always proud that Mount Sinai was the best hospital in New York, it was proud that the Jewish Family Service used the most advanced psychiatric techniques. Worrying about Judaism was not typical of Federation. Now it is Federation. Why? The Supreme Court follows the election returns! In this rough and ready sort of way, therefore, our institutions reflect our needs and desires.

In the 17th century there used to be engraved on the bronze cannon of the armies three Latin words: *Ultima ratio regum*, "the last argument of kings." A king has cannon. If you refuse to pay your tax to the IRS, they have a jail to throw you into. Ultimately, power is police power. The Jewish community has no police power, and we would not want it to have.

I support an internal Jewish pluralism corresponding to the pluralism out there. Our Jewish communal arrangement may be worth only two cheers, but on the whole for us it makes sense. Tinker here and there, yes; there is always room for tinkering. What I am skeptical of is relying upon machinery to transform us.

DAVID SIDORSKY

Well, I think it was more fun when Milton and I could disagree, and I also agree with Bill Avrunin. There is a distinction between the public and the private aspects of the Jewish community. The Jewish "public agenda" is the agenda which the Federations will support and the Jewish private agenda depends upon support primarily from its own particular constituents. It is important that some such line be drawn. We would not prefer a commun-

ity in which everything is part of the general agenda.

This line does and should shift in response to the felt needs of the times. In the period of Jewish mass immigration to America, the public agenda was a more obvious one. Aid to immigrants and economic and political support for religionists left behind in Russia, Roumania or elsewhere were a major part of that agenda. Jewish defense, that is, fighting overt anti-Semitism in a period when "nativist" anti-Semitism was considered the major threat was another. These have remained on the "public" agenda but the emphasis has shifted. A major item, which was then not on the public agenda was, support of Palestine. That support was considered part of the Zionist cause and the community was deeply split on Zionism.

Jewish education was the concern of its particular constituency. In Detroit, the communal school system received Jewish public support. In most places it was sometimes public, sometimes private. The Reform community supported the Reform school. The Conservative community supported the Conservative school. The Orthodox community supported the Orthodox school. The Federations also supported such institutions and services as the hospital and the Jewish family service which everybody needed and on which there was consensus.

The Jewish public agenda has been severely influenced by the developments of governmental support in health, education and welfare. This includes government influence or control in policy areas, for example, Mount Sinai Medical School in New York needing to expend "Jewish funds" for an affirmative action program to benefit minorities as students or trainees, but in such a program, Jews are not considered a "minority." More impor-

tant, for example, Jewish sponsored hospitals must take their patients from their catchment districts that is to say, from the immediate zoning area which may not contain a high proportion of Jews.

The question this raises for an important part of the public agenda of Jewish community is the degree of Jewish control over the important policies.

We all know that Israel became an important part, in some ways a dominant part of the public agenda in the 1950's. A communal consensus emerged in the 50's about Israel, not as a Zionist activity, but as the Jewish community's most vital priority. Here too, changes take place in the level of governmental support. Assume that the United States has committed its power position in the Mediterranean and that means it has to arm the Israelis on some effective ratio against potential Soviet threat, then the scale of aid immediately rises to the \$2 to \$3 billion range. The result is that the proportion of UJA money designated for Israel becomes much smaller than in the past two decades and the American Jewish funds should become supportive of particular private institutions in Israel. I do not pretend to predict the lines of development. My point is that the Jewish public agenda shifts. The remarkable new thing that Himmelfarb said about the Jewish community from the mid-60's through the 1970's is that Jewish education, and more generally what's called the quality of Jewish life, became part of the Jewish public agenda. This meant Federations would support it.

It was traditionally charged that Federation leadership was on the periphery of Jewish life. This may be true in the sense that leaders of a Federation may pay for ads for Jewish educa-

tion, and not send their children to Jewish schools. But the leadership is no longer on the periphery of Jewish participation. There has been a change and there is a consensus about the importance of the quality of Jewish life.

Despite the obvious economic advantages, I believe it would probably be harmful if all Jewish initiatives came under the public agenda, whether it is an Israeli program, whether it is a hospital, or whether it is Jewish education. This is so because the Jewish community, as Avrunin has pointed out, always works through consensus. It is difficult for it to be daring, to try that which breeds dissent. Yet before support of Israel became part of the consensus of the Jewish community, it was a focus of dissent within the Jewish community. It was then not funded by the Federation, but by Zionists. This suggests how important it is that there be enough local initiative that some constituencies always assert their initiatives and be willing to follow their programs and to bypass communal funding.

Of course, a compromise is always available by the route of funding on a per capita basis if Federation chooses to fund without policy commitment, particularly in areas where consensus is difficult to reach as in religious aspects of Jewish education.

These changes are much greater than we have realized. The shift from the familiar public agenda of old age homes (even though these are a continuing need intensified by demography), hospitals, family service, help for immigrants (a need sharpened by Russian immigration) to the inclusion of Jewish education in all its dimensions involves many subsidiary changes. This has been obscured by the way in which Israel's support has dominated the

fund-raising in the recent past. That inhibits significant change and creates its own tension.

I think that the present priorities reflect by and large what most Jews would wish. I do not mean that they have voted for them. In the 60's and 70's it was widely believed that universities for example should be democratic organizations—that is a one man-one vote basis. On the contrary, it is the essence of democracy that it recognizes that the principle of democratic control applies to the major *political* institutions and does not apply, therefore, to the voluntary non-political institutions of this society; religious bodies do not vote on doctrine, universities do not have a democratic vote on curricula or faculty, and Federations

do not poll their constituency on decisions.

There are institutions where other principles apply. In the universities some principle about hierarchy of excellence in educational purposes is required so that professors should not be voted upon, but should be selected by a jury of their peers.

In the Jewish community, there is a very difficult mechanism but which is related to recognized purposes; its principle is control by those who are judged by their peers to be good trustees of the common interests and who are willing to be active or dedicated. There is a sensitivity to the constituencies of the Jewish community that is required; the problem of leadership is not public responsiveness but recruitment of the appropriate activists.