The Jewish Community on the Move— From Immigration to Reaffirmation*

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During all of these stages (of 100 years of history), there has always been a division of power in the American Jewish community: between secular and religious interests, between local and national bodies and between differing ideological groups. Our new agenda and focus have moved us in the direction of greater Jewish unity, and this in turn has created pressure for a greater concentration of power.

In 1855 Alexander II ascended the Russian throne and instituted, for Tsarist Russia, a moderately liberal regime. In the next quarter of a century, the situation of the Russian Jews improved steadily. Severe disabilities were gradually lightened or lifted; opportunities for education, business, and professionalization increased. In the 1860s and 70s, Jews in Russia enjoyed opportunities for advancement they never had before. Then came the assassination of Alexander II on March 13, 1881. That single event changed the lives of millions of European Jews and marked the beginning of the largest mass migration of Jews in our history.

Alexander II's successor, his second son Alexander III, set Russia on a brutal reactionary course with the Jews as his chief victims. Just six weeks after the assassination, the pogroms began, lasting well into 1882. New legislation severly restricted Jewish mobility and educational and occupational rights. From 1881 until the Russian revolution, Jews faced periodic pogroms and continuous persecution.

What began as a trickle of Jewish immigration to the United States quickly became an avalanche as Russian Jews sought to escape the discriminations and restrictions of their native land. From 1881 to World War I, some two million Jews braved the long and hazardous journey to the New World. Indeed the movement of Jews during the past century has been staggering. It is estimated that 70 percent of the Diaspora and 80 percent of world Jewry as a whole now live in countries where under three percent lived in 1881, while large sections of the traditional Diaspora are today virtually without Jews.

This great odyssey has been much romanticized and no doubt there was an element of adventure in journeying to a new land of hope and promise. But there was also much fear, and a deep sense of loss. The famous Yiddish lexicographer, Alexander Harkavy, in his book, *Chapters From My Life,* describing the day in 1882 when he, together with some 20 other young men left their homes and families for the United States, writes: "The day set for departure from Vilna arrived, and we were ready to go. At ten in the morning every member of our group was supposed to gather by the railway. When the moment came to separate from Vilna, love for my native land welled up within me, and I lamented to myself my decision to set out for America. But everything was set; there was no turning back. Broken hearted I parted from my relatives . . . and I made my way to the railway where members of the group had gathered . . ."

Harkavy's group, and thousands upon thousands of others with the same fears and trepidations, the same hopes and

* Presented to the Annual Meeting of the Conference of the Jewish Communal Service, Minneapolis, June 11, 1982.

aspirations, crowded and huddled on the steerage decks to make their rendezvous with the lady with the lamp in New York harbor. At first it was the younger, the dissenters, the displaced, the poor and the unlearned, who came. Later the older, more educated, better equipped made the same journey. They were of all kinds, these greenhorns: the *shvitzers,* the hustlers, the entrepreneurs. There were *melamdim* and the observant Jews, concerned primarily with ritual, *chedder* and *shul,* and radical free thinkers, Bundists, and secular revolutionaries, all bound together by a common past and a drive to find a better life for themselves and their children in the *Goldena Medina.*

This past 100 years of Jews on the move can be divided into roughly four stages. The first, which lasted well into the 1920s, can be characterized as the period of resettlement and of Americanization. It was during these years that the "uptown Jews" organized to help the "downtown Jews," and relief agencies and Jewish settlement houses like the Educational Alliance developed. It marked the first time private Jewish social agencises worked with public institutions, such as schools and libraries, in a cooperative effort to Americanize the Yiddish-speaking greenhorns. The children of the new immigrants were sent out by their parents to the public schools and to the larger community almost as scouts, bringing back into their traditional Jewish homes American culture, language, and thought.

The second period, from the middle 1920s to the beginning of World War II, saw the transition of the European Jew from the working class to white collar status, from peddler to merchant, from pants-presser and button-hole maker to clothing manufacturer, from student to teacher, from nickelodeon operator to movie mogul. At the same time, it was a period marked by overt anti-Semitism on the part of Americans as eminently respectable as a Henry Ford and a Father Coughlin; by discrimination against Jews in employment, housing, and college admissions; by sharp and painful conflicts between foreign-born parents and their native-born children; and by frequent manifestations of self-hate. During these years, a great depression helped shape the character and function of Jewish agencies and, because opportunities in other fields were scarce, motivated so many of my vintage to become social workers and Jewish civil servants. And during these years, the Third Reich cast its long shadow over the entire world.

The third stage, from approximately 1945 to 1965, has often been called the "golden age" of Jewish life in America. The postwar economy welcomed Jewish entrepreneurial activity and the intellectual community was hospitable to our developing cultural forms. Anti-Jewish discrimination and prejudice seemed relegated to the ashcan of history, and Jews began to be seen—and even, at times to see themselves—as part and parcel of a wide majority. The first free and accepted generation of Jews outside of Israel had no need for self-hate as a psychological defense. For if being Jewish no longer seemed to play a relevant role in their general pattern of life, neither did it constitute a disability. On the contrary, there was a certain special *elan* to being a Jew in the early 1960s.

Then in the late 60s came another stage born out of new events: the six-day war, the teachers' strike in New York, the Yom Kippur war, the increasing isolation of Israel. New and serious conflicts of group interests became evident, and with them the disintegration of the old and broad liberal coalition, a new definition of equality and calls for a quota-determined society.

It was in this period that we saw the rise and fall of a youth culture that used drugs and rock music to insulate itself from an older generation it disdained, and whose

idols were the Beatles and Mario Savio. It was a period marked by a brief emergence of the New Left; by the "Zionism-is-Racism" resolution; and by manifestations of anti-Semitism that we had never experienced before.

It was also a period of Jewish introspection, of a turning inward, of a radically heightened sense of Jewish identity. It was a period marked by the Jewish women's movement, the growth of the Havurot and new approaches to the Jewish family. In short, in this century, we have seen transitions from Jewish affirmation to Jewish self-hate to Jewish self-acceptance to Jewish re-affirmation.

As individuals and as a community, American Jews today are in a far better position than any realist would have dared to predict 100 years ago. Little is left of the old discriminations. Judaism is recognized today as one of the three major faiths in America. There are hundreds of chairs of Jewish studies in American universities and Jews are presidents of some of these universities. There are Jewish senators from states with insignificant Jewish populations. The public opinion polls record a lower factor of anti-Semitic prejudice than at any time since the surveys began to measure such factors in the 1930s. Internally, too, we're in much better shape. The term "self-hate" is a translation of the German word *selbsthass,* coined in the 1920s and almost always accompanied by the adjective "Jewish"—*Judische Selbsthass.* Early in the 19th century, Rahel Varnahagen's diary notes how deeply ashamed she was of being a Jew. Early in this century, Otto Weininger, a man Freud called "a genius," so loathed himself for belonging to that "contemptibly feminine" people, the Jews, that he committed suicide.

In the United States, in the 1940s and 1950s, the scientific literature about self-hate dealt almost exclusively with Jewish self-hate. It is not written about today because there is so much less of it—not none at all, but far less than there used to be. American Jews in their 20s, 30s and even in their 40s are psychologically healthier than their acculturated parents and grandparents were at the same age. Indeed, some of this improved self-regard has even rubbed off on their elders.

We speak out forcefully on matters of Jewish concern, such as Israel, and the Jewish religion—which many predicted would be moribund by the end of the 20th century—is alive and flourishing.

Jewish institutional life also remains vigorous. If we no longer have with us the giants of yesterday, that, too, has had some salutary effect: We have broadened the base of our leadership and in so doing have democratized our organizational stuctures.

So, I repeat, both externally and internally, socially, politically, economically and psychologically, our condition is better than it used to be. But, of course, the Yiddish proverb still hold true: There is no limit to how much better things can be.

To a large extent this new re-affirmation is the result of our coming to grips with modernity. As a minority people, we Jews have always had to deal with the tensions between having to live in and with the larger society and, at the same time, maintaining Jewish particularity. In societies that were hospitable, Jews moved easily into some kind of cultural accommodation: Alexandrian Jews were fluent in Greek, Moroccan Jews in French and Spanish. On the other hand, most never dreamed of assimilating into the dominant religious pattern, because this meant conversion.

With the emergence of liberal enlightenment, it became much easier and more tempting for Jews to abandon their traditional religion and culture. When science replaced religion as the dominant authority, Jews, even more precipitously than their gentile neighbors, began to reinterpret their doctrines and reappraise their institutions.

Political emancipation also helped release Jews from alien status and accorded them new rights and freedoms. But this liberation, too, brought Jews to an unfamiliar intersection, where their particular needs might collide with the universal needs of modern mankind.

However, as Charles Silberman pointed out in his keynote address to last year's meeting of this Conference "modernity looks a lot *less* attractive and Judaism a lot *more* attractive than they did a generation ago. Instead of seeing modernity as the norm (or ideal) to which Judaism has to be adjusted, young Jews today are trying to find accommodations between Judaism and modernity on terms approximating equality."[1]

The truth is that this accommodation with which we have been struggling for the past 100 years has been a unique characteristic of the American Jewish experience, a result of the congruity of the American dream with Judaism. Never before has any country offered conditions under which Jews could live so fully and so freely as Jews. America was not just a land of milk and honey, paved with streets of gold. It represented pluralism, openness, religious tolerance, hospitality to change and a common humanity. Here it is possible to be authentically Jewish *and* authentically American and to experience that relationship not as a hyphenated, but as a thoroughly integrated one. Jefferson, Whitman and Emerson speak to us as deeply as do the Psalms of David and the poetry of Bialik. The pragmatism of Dewey and James and the spiritual message of Buber and Heschel are both part of our intellectual armament.

And that is why we are equally concerned with the quality of Jewish life and the equality of American society. That is why we can face the intersection of the universal and the particular confident and secure in our dual roots as Jews and Americans.

But confident and secure as we are, we still wonder and worry about the future. The French writer, Joseph Joubert, once said, "The charm we are most sensible to is the charm of the future and not the charm of the past." But Joubert wrote at the end of the 18th Century and into the early 19th. Most of us would be more apt to share the sentiments of his compatriot, poet-Philospher, Paul Valery, who, writing in the 20th century, declared, "The trouble with our times is that the future is not what it used to be."

Making predictions about the future is always a hazardous enterprise. Instead, I shall comment briefly about a few of the challenges I see facing us. Specifically, I want to discuss the challenge of the middle, the demographic challenge, the challenge in Israeli-American Jewish relationships, and the challenges facing Jewish agencies and the profession of Jewish communal service.

The challenge of the middle—that large group of unaffiliated, Jews who stand between the assimilated and the committed—has received a good deal of attention in recent years. We are all familiar with the statistics and we know that while enrollment in day schools has increased markedly, the total number of Jewish children receiving *any* Jewish education has significantly declined. We know that the majority of Jews are not active in organized Jewish institutional life. It is not that they are opting out. It is that they are opting not to opt. And so our task is to make the option of affiliation and commitment much more attractive than it apparently is.

To do this we need to develop innovative programs, such as those offered by the Conference on Alternatives for Jewish Education, the Havurot, and new synagogal approaches. We need to encourage the growing emphasis on the Jewish family using it as a focus and matrix for Jewish community services. We need to expand the decision-making structure of our agen-

cies and organizations and the authenticity of volunteer involvement in that process. Above all, we need to make reaching-out to the unassociated middle an organizational priority and not just a pious wish.

The essential facts of our demographic profile are also well known to us. We are not reproducing ourselves. We are intermarrying more. Our population is dispersing from the northeast to the sunbelt, and from urban to suburban and even rural areas. Our aged population bulge is growing, and we are still receiving Jewish immigration to the U.S.

Demographically, we are a population at risk, endangered by our very achievements. We are far and away among the most educated of Americans, and educated people, especially educated women, have fewer children. When we do have children, we have high educational aspirations for them, another characteristic that goes with small families. Nor is our low birth rate peculiar to American Jews; it characterizes modern, not conspicuously devout Jews everywhere, including Israel. Throughout the world, Jews such as ourselves are not reproducing themselves.

We are also, as I mentioned earlier, acculturated and accepted. Acculturated and accepted Americans of different backgrounds frequently intermarry. The specialists argue about just how high our intermarriage rate is, but everyone agrees it is high. Intermarriage today is likely to be less designing, less escapist, more "normal" than earlier Jewish intermarriage in Europe and the United States, which often represented a deliberate effort to throw off the external and internal burdens of Jewishness. Children born of intermarriage today are more likely to be brought up as Jews than were children of escapist intermarriages.

Mordechai Kaplan, whose 100th birthday we celebrated last year, often explained that an army is an ordered relation of people to one another in the pursuit of a common objective. Jews used to be soldiers in an army, Kaplan said, but now they're only veterans.

Kaplan's exaggeration was pedagogical but the point he wanted to make remains valid. To be a Jew is not something private, individual, cut loose from the community and communion of other Jews. If there are no Jews there is no Judaism.

The implications of all of this are quite clear. We need to initiate Jewish communal social policies that encourage marriage and childbearing, that result in more Jewish daycare centers, and other support systems for parenting and for the Jewish family. We need to reach out to the intermarried and the new immigrants to bring them into our institutions and our activities.

Regardless of affiliation, regardless of demographic trends, more American Jews feel closely tied to Israel, with bonds of common concern and a profound belief in a common destiny. Indeed, for many Jews, Israel is today a primary source of their Jewish identity; and their commitment to her security and survival is irrevocable.

Within Israel, despite continued disappointment at the failure of large numbers of American Jews to make aliyah, there is a growing acceptance of the permanence of the American Jewish community. Most Israelis recognize the importance of American Jewish economic, political and moral support as well as the potential for joint action on issues of common concern.

But even as great credence is given to the *fact* of this interdependence and the realization that what happens in Israel and/or in the American Jewish community, can and will affect the status and future of Jewish communities the world over, differing and distorted perspectives frequently impede communication and limit possibilities for constructive cooperation on both sides.

Most American Jews are firmly rooted in America and Jewish life here. They are anxious to ensure the future credibility and

vitality of the American Jewish community.

Israeli Jews, by and large, increasingly define their identity in terms of Israeli nationalism rather than their Judaic heritage or history. With the reduction of Jewish immigration into Israel and the increased emigration from the country, the proportion of Jews to Arabs in the population is diminishing, and this, together with the far higher birthrate of the Oriental Jews as compared to the Ashkenazi Jews, is rapidly changing the character of Israeli society from a Western into a middle-Eastern one. This has made for a readier acceptance of religious symbolism in Israeli society, a strengthening of fundamentalism and a diminution of an already precarious religious pluralism.

Some American Jews view these developments with alarm, reducing or threatening to reduce their support of Israel, declaring, in effect, that they want nothing to do with this kind of an Israeli State. Others are disturbed and confused.

The virtual isolation of Israel in the international community, and its almost total dependence upon the United States for its security and economic viability, places a heavy responsibility on American Jews. Increasing strains such as we are now witnessing between the American government and Israel will most certainly add to the pressures on American Jewry and may well result in tensions and conflicts within the American Jewish community.

It is therefore essential at this time to make a thoughtful and systematic study to find ways and means to improve communication between American Jews and Israel and to develop avenues of interaction between the American Jewish community and Israel, not only in times of crisis, but day-by-day. As professional Jewish communal workers we have a special role to play in achieving these two goals. One of the problems of the present relationship is its asymmetry—a relationship between the American Jewish community, a voluntary grouping, and a sovereign Israeli government. This presents a whole host of problems. But Jewish communal workers have counterparts in Israel with whom we relate through an international conference and other channels. We need to expand the range of our dialogue with these counterparts to encompass a broad gamut of issues and problems, rather than only those peculiar to Jewish communal service. And this brings me to the final two challenges, the challenges for Jewish organizational life and for our profession.

Jewish communal organizations like the Jews they serve have gone through several phases in the course of the last 100 years. First came the stage of adaption, integration and Americanization. Then we moved out against discrimination, fought for civil rights and zeroed in on social work practice, concentrating on dysfunction and clinical practice. The third stage, which corresponded with the Jewish community's inward turning emphasized the need for re-affirmation stressing the communal rather than individual base of our operations. We grappled with a new political and welfare agenda: Israel's security, Soviet Jewry, affirmative action and quota, new energy resources and the growing Arab influence in the U.S. and elsewhere, among others.

During all of these stages there has always been a division of power in the American Jewish community: between secular and religious interests, between local and national bodies and between differing ideological groups. Our new agenda and focus have moved us in the direction of greater Jewish unity, and this in turn has created pressure for a greater concentration of power.

But a unified Jewry does not call for a single voice or a single power center, or a greater degree of centralization. Changing Jewish needs and aspirations have led to changing functions of Jewish organizations. The Federation movement, for

example, which was created to meet local health and welfare needs, moved to a concern for Israel's economic, social and welfare needs. At the same time, it became apparent that meeting Jewish needs also meant enhancing the quality of Jewish life, which requires intensified Jewish education and Jewish cultural programs, new support systems for the Jewish family and, most important, involvement in the political support for Israel.

An organization like my own, The American Jewish Committee, on the other hand, started at the other end of the spectrum, focusing on external Jewish security and coming to the realization that external security won't matter if there is an erosion of internal Jewish life. Jewish needs are interrelated, and the so-called "purity" or "scrupulousness" of organizational purpose is no longer—if it ever was—viable. There is no one "right" person or group in the Jewish community to meet with the President of the United States, no one "right" organization to concern itself with the quality of Jewish life, and no one "right" group that has *the* answer. The challenge for Jewish communal organizations is to maintain a commonness of purpose while avoiding centralism and encouraging pluralism in Jewish life.

The challenge that confronts us as professional Jewish communal workers stems from two major ambiguities, the ambiguity of role and the ambiguity of practice.

Take, for example, the changing nature of lay leadership. Our top volunteers today are highly sophisticated, managerially proficient, result-oriented. It is management by objective and the bottom line that counts, and they are highly demanding, as evidenced by the recent spate of executive firings. At the same time these leaders give a great deal of their time and substance to the causes they serve, and some are even making mid-life career changes to enter the field as professionals.

The anomaly is that our response has been to seek MBAs ourselves, figuratively, if not literally. We have focused on management techniques, administrative processes and cost efficiency ratios and that is fine to a point. As one who has administered Jewish social agencies for more years than I care to mention, I am certainly in favor of efficiency. But I have yet to discover any empirical evidence which demonstrates, to my satisfaction, that the attainment of efficiency should be our major desideratum. It may be so for the profit making business organization but it is not necessarily so for the voluntary, nonprofit human and communal service agency. For us, the fuel that powers the engine of our enterprise is commitment, commitment on the the part of the layman and the professional to the organization and its mission of service to the Jewish people. For us as Jewish communal workers this means, as Jerry Bubis has put it, "that we need to profess"—to feel, to proclaim, and to act out that for which we stand.

In my days as a practitioner the primary emphasis was on commitment to a set of professional goals, standards, values and practices. Lately, I have seen a new breed of Jewish communal workers, in my own agency as well as others, who are equally, if not more, committed to the Jewish people and their survival. That is also fine. But commitment for us has to sit on a three-legged stool. One leg is the profession, another is Klal Yisroel and the third leg is the organization through which we practice our profession and serve the Jewish people. We need also to be committed to our agencies, to their institutional needs and organizational health. All three legs need to stand equally firm and sturdy.

And then there is the ambiguity of practice. There are three strains of thought about the professional base of Jewish communal service. There are those who hold that social work is the core discipline for professional service in the Jewish community. Others argue that a number of

different professions are required, not just in the field generally but in specific agencies. Still others opt for a separate profession of Jewish communal service, which will use elements of knowledge and skills required by other professions, but stand with its own integrity as a core discipline. I must confess that though I was once a strong advocate of the social work base, and though I accept the need for different settings to use different professions, I have come to believe that the future of our field lies in the emergence of a profession of Jewish communal service.

Over the years, social work theory and practice have made an important contribution to our field, but with the changed focus of Jewish communal service it is no longer the most useful tool for us today. And while the settings approach is still viable and necessary, for the long haul, I believe we need to put much more emphasis on defining a core curriculum—values, knowledge and skills—that will determine the base of the profession of Jewish communal service. And we need to strengthen those schools that are experimenting in this direction.