

Responding to the Crisis of the Jewish Public in America

Daniel J. Elazar

Chairman, Center for Jewish Community Studies and
Senator N.M. Paterson Professor of Intergovernmental Relations, Bar Ilan University, Israel

The modern epoch is ended. Its cherished visions, insofar as they were particularly modern, leave us confused at best, or at least dissatisfied. The Jewish people as am and edah, in all its parts, is undergoing crisis and reconstitution of the kind that occurs once every 300 years or so.

The Shifting Sands of Jewish Public Life

American Jews were never better organized than they are today, yet never were the social and situational foundations underpinning their organization, weaker. As a result, the organized Jewish community faces the problem of constantly rebuilding itself on shifting sands. How and why is this so? What are its very real consequences?

The shifting sands are both subjective and situational. In part they have to do with such devastatingly prosaic matters as inflation, such inevitable matters as staff changes, and such tidal matters as the breakdown of the family and the shifting role of government. Those which we see as particularly Jewish have standard labels: assimilation, intermarriage, loss of Jewish sensibility or uniqueness.

The latter, in particular, are reflections of a larger problem, one not at all confined to Jews, which plagues the United States and much of the western world, namely the problem of the crisis and apparent breakdown of the public. *Public*, and not community; the two are similar yet separate. Both refer to people brought together into a shared life but unlike the second, the first refers to a shared civic life. The crisis of the public which is upon us is reflected in the overprivatization of our lives. Perhaps in our deserved emphasis on the dignity and rights of the individual, we have neglected to recognize the necessity, dignity and obligations of the public.

The Hebrew term for public is *tzibbur*. It is from a Hebrew root which means to bind

together. Our sages have given *tzibbur* a homiletic interpretation that is an elegant pun of the kind which abound in Hebrew. Tz-B-U-R equals *Tzadikim*, *Benonim*, u' *Reshaim*—righteous people, ordinary people and bad people, all bound together. It is the binding together of all which is vital.

Israel will be redeemed only when it forms one single band. When all are united, they will receive the presence of the Shekhinah. Therefore Hillel said (Avot 2:5), "Do not separate yourself from the community" (Tanhuma B., Nizzabim 25a)

Jewish tradition emphasizes that society is not simply a congeries of individuals pursuing their own interests as long as they do not hurt one another. As Maimonides put it:

He who withdraws from the ways of the community, even though he does not commit any transgressions, but merely separates himself from the congregation of Israel, and performs commandments not in their midst, . . . such a one has no share in the World to Come. (Maimonides, Yad Hilkhut Teshuvah 3:11)

The breakdown of the *public* is the first step in the breakdown of the *republic*. Republic is derived from the Latin words *res publica*, a public thing or commonwealth. A republic is a polity that belongs to its public, its citizens, and is not the private preserve of its rulers. If there is no public, however, there can be no *res publica*, and the polity returns to the hands of those few who take it in hand.

The Jewish public suffers from these same problems in its special way. The behavior of Jews has become so privatized that the needs of the Jewish public are ignored except insofar as they coincide with private interests. This is particularly ironic in light of the new ethnic-cum-civil Judaism abroad in the land.

On one level, American Jews have rediscovered Jewish peoplehood, that the Jews are an *am*, a people, or *ethnos* (Greek for people). As organic Jewishness (e.g. spiritual Jewish observance, a separate Jewish language and culture, a "Jewish street") had declined, Jewish identification has become first ethnic and then political. Jewish activists, seeking to clarify the character of their Jewishness, have developed a civil religion. That is to say, they act as Jews because of their Jewish public concerns more than because of their organic ties to Jewish tradition. The irony in this is that many Jews who do not know how to be Jews in their homes are actively Jewish in the streets, a reversal of the modernist dictum of Haskalah poet J.K. Gordon, who suggested that modern Jews must be just the reverse.

Nothing else so decisively demonstrates the end of the modern epoch and the beginning of a post-modern one. Modern Jews shifted from organic to associational forms of Jewish expression but their associations were continuous and their participation was expected to be continuous. What most Jews do today to display their Jewishness is to participate in what are essentially "happenings," not continuous activities, whether rite-of-passage "happenings" in their synagogues, the annual meetings of Jewish organizations which increasingly are organized as happenings, or whatever.

Jews must of necessity organize themselves in order to function as an entity. We have done so traditionally as an *edah*, an assembled people. We Jews, in rediscovering our ethnicity, have rediscovered the

reality of being an *am* but are in crisis as an *edah* because of our particular crisis of the public.

Those who have made an organizational commitment to Jewish life and thus are among the leaders of the Jewish people—in the sense of the vanguard, the people out in front—must be the first to come to grips with this problem of maintaining the public. Their responsibility is best expressed in the Midrash, in *Exodus*, Rabbi Yithro:

So long as a man is only a simple *haver* (member), he is not bound to the community, and is not punished for its sins. But when he is appointed to a post and receives the *tallit* of investiture, then he must not say, "I am concerned only with my own good; I am not bound to the community." On the contrary, all the burden of the community is upon him. If he sees a man doing wrong to his neighbor, or committing a sin, and does not stop him, he will be punished for his neglect. The Holy Spirit says to him, "You are responsible for your neighbor." God says to him, "You have entered the arena, and he who enters the arena must conquer or be conquered." And God says to him, "You and I stand in the arena; either you conquer, or I conquer you." (27:9)

Shifting Organizational Roles in the Jewish Community

In the course of the past generation it has become clear that the Jewish community federations and the synagogues are the two basic institutions of the organized American Jewish community. As cosmopolitan entities, Federations frame the communal arena, collecting the largest single share of its funds, mobilizing its best people and, increasingly, defining its agenda. As local-istic entities, the synagogues are the major membership organizations of the Jewish community. Simply put, the synagogues have the troops. All other organizations must fit into the network which the Federations and synagogues define.

The community relations organizations, including the Conference of Presidents

which once competed with the Federations for the framing role, have had to fit themselves into this network, no matter how reluctantly. Compounding their problem is the fact that the community relations field is in need of seeking new directions for a new generation. The NJCRAC plan has become obsolete in many of its assumptions and accordingly, its prescriptions. At the same time, the Conference of Presidents has found an issue for autonomous action in the form of fighting for Israel's interests in Washington. Important as that task is, it is a limited one within the community as a whole.

Another new development is the emergence of a new world Jewish leadership, drawn principally from the Federation leadership in North America, their counterparts in Europe, and those whose ties are with the Zionist movement. The reconstituted Jewish Agency has provided a new arena for that leadership. The importance of this new phenomenon has yet to be recognized and developments on that front will bear watching as this new generation enfolds.

The impact of inflation on all Jewish organizations is very serious. There is an irresistible tendency in inflationary times to increase staff compensation out of necessity and to cut programs in order to find the funds to do so. Most Jewish organizations have been in this position for several years now. In a sense, this means that the same number of people do less and less of substance. Organizations are maintained while their contributions to Jewish life are reduced. What does this do to the balance between substantive programs for the general good and activities, especially fund-raising, essentially for organizational self-maintenance? What does this mean for the future of fund-raising itself?

All the foregoing lead to the conclusion that this is the appropriate time for major communal re-assessment, for a self study which we should undertake for ourselves.

It is also an opportune time, given the fact that this decade will bring with it major changes in communal leadership for biological reasons. The present leadership of the Jewish community can give their associates and successors no better legacy than such a self-study, a systematic re-examination of, by and for ourselves in which we would examine the policy areas of concern, some of which I have delineated here. Such a self-study should address questions of:

- **the role of the organized Jewish community in the maintenance of a Jewish public;**
- **the structure of the organized Jewish community, local, regional and country-wide, and the relations between all of its components;**
- **the range and character of organizational activities;**
- **relations with the larger Jewish *edah*, Israel and other Jewish communities.**

The modern epoch is ended. Its cherished visions, insofar as they were particularly modern, leave us confused at best, or at least dissatisfied. The Jewish people as *am* and *edah*, in all its parts, is undergoing crisis and reconstitution of the kind that occurs once every 300 years or so. The last such reconstitution reached its resolution long ago, before the living memory of any of us, so we have only history as our guide. For that, history is in our favor since it tells us that we Jews have survived such changes in epoch after epoch in the course of our record as the oldest continuously organized public entity in the western world.

Talking in terms of centuries may seem out of place after practical consideration of budgets and fundraising, but I do believe that it is very Jewish to combine the two. How Jewish it is was brought home to me because of a very special privilege I had recently. I have been a consultant to a Spanish policy studies center working for the Spanish government in its efforts to reorganize Spain into autonomous regions reflecting its historic diversity—in essence,

its restoration as a kind of federal system. At my first presentation in Madrid, in November 1980, I was asked to lay out and explain federal principles and practises to an assembly of the key people in Spain responsible for implementing this regionalization. As a Sephardic Jew, I could not resist indicating that it was the first time in 626 years that a member of my family had been engaged in such an effort in Spain, since 1354, when one of my forebears, whose Hebrew name as well as family name I coincidentally bear, was a leader in the movement to establish a confederation of Jewish communities in the kingdom of Aragon (which includes Catalonia, a traditional hotbed of federalist sentiment.)

In one sense my forebear's efforts did not succeed. Indeed, a mere generation later (1391) Spanish Jewry entered a period of

persecution which culminated in its expulsion in 1492. But what he and his colleagues did there, coupled with similar efforts in Castille, provided a basis for the post-expulsion re-constitution of organized Jewish communities throughout the Mediterranean world, in western Europe, and in North America—wherever the Sephardic exiles went. They provided the basis for reconstituting the Jewish community in Jerusalem, organizing the Jewish presence there for at least 400 years, until the Zionist enterprise brought with it another reconstitution.

None of this happened inevitably. We Jews do not believe in historical determinism. Generations of our people have had to work at the tasks of the *edah*, of the Jewish public. It is our privilege to be able to continue that work.