

The Changing Jewish Community and its Implications for Jewish Communal Leadership

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I take my task here to be twofold. The first task is a summary of where we are in the American Jewish community today: ten years into the discussion of "continuity" half a century since the founding of the State of Israel and the beginning of a new phase in the life of American Jewry, and some two centuries into our encounter, good and bad, with the set of factors we call modernity. My second task is a prescriptive vision of where we as a community should be going, and what this means for this organization and its leadership.

The two tasks need to be performed together, for reasons which I think are obvious. I also hope to show that both the American Jewish situation and my vision of its future arise out of the challenges and opportunities which Jews have been confronting for about two hundred years now, since the very outset of the modern period. American represents a unique situation for Jews (as for other minorities) in some respects, I believe. Constitutional freedoms and cultural pluralism have made a tremendous difference to Jews, and will continue to do so. In other ways, however, we are all still bound by the set of "rules" that have governed life in every modern Western Diaspora community over the past two hundred years. I, therefore, begin with those rules -- since we have no choice but to play by them, in my view, and so should know then well before we begin to plot strategy for the years ahead.

The modern world, I believe, has presented Jews with two and only two options for viable existence, let alone for our thriving as a people and a tradition. We have experimented with other paths, both conceptually and "on the ground," but only two have worked -- and neither of those is without risks. Jews have found one place in the world by securing a literal place on the map, a flag outside the United Nations signifying "membership in the family of nations". Let's call this path Zionism.

Statehood has obvious advantages for securing Jewish lives and for advancing Jewish culture. It also has obvious risks. The Jewish State, like every other, is protected ultimately by the strength of its military forces and by its ability to forge alliances with states more powerful

than itself. Both the advantages and the dangers of Jewish statehood are visible to us everyday, and certainly in recent days of terrorism and a faltering peace process.

The only other option available for modern Jewish life--which I call "Emancipation" -- carries very different risks, and holds out the possibility of very different but not less substantial advantages. It means taking one's chances on life in a democracy, benefiting from rights and opportunities, but suffering the attendant risks. Our life in America today--the very best case of the Emancipation option--demands that we, as a small minority (about 2% of the population, and sinking every day), work hard to protect our liberties and even harder to build and transmit our distinctive culture. Both efforts require enormous amounts of energy and financial resources. There is always the recurring danger of anti-Semitism, a problem at a low ebb at present: and there is the constant threat posed by assimilation, perhaps greater now than ever before. These "rules" have held true for every Jewish community in the modern West. We are no exception.

That does not mean we as a people are helpless in the face of modern challenges: not in Israel, and not here. We are helped first of all by opportunities which each option has made available to Jews and to Judaism, and we are helped no less on each side of the Israel-diaspora divide by the existence of Jews on the other side. The inter-dependence is too often not recognized, but it is too often not recognized, but it is to my mind a fact, one for which to be extremely thankful.

We should also be encouraged, as we turn to closer examination of where we stand as a community, that we are not the first to face up to this situation or to reflect upon it. Modern Jewish thought for the past two centuries--at least since Moses Mendelssohn's ground-breaking essay "Jerusalem", published in Germany in 1783--has concerned itself with the details of the modern situation and has fashioned imaginative responses to it. Jewish political or social thought has, from the outset, gone hand in hand with Jewish religious or cultural thought, and naturally so. We, as a people, have had to conceive and re-conceive the place for Jews in the new social, political and economic orders of modernity. And we have had to design forms of Judaism suitable to those places. It makes no sense to think about what Judaism should be if that vision cannot actually be lived in the world Jews inhabit every day. Nor does it make sense to imagine Jewish communities without some sense of the sorts of Judaism that Jews will live in those communities; what they will practice and believe, the Torah they will live and teach.

I have found it useful to think of the modern situation confronting Jews, and the Jewish responses to it, in terms of three issues in which our political/communal concerns and our religious/cultural concerns come together. Let's call community tradition, and self.

COMMUNITY, TRADITION, SELF

Mendelssohn began his essay with the transformed nature of the modern Jewish community. So did Mordecai Kaplan in his great work *Judaism as a Civilization* (1934). So should we. Like many others in the past who have taken up the task now facing us, we should reckon with the fact that--for better and for worse--our community is now voluntarist. We are free to choose in this respect as in others. None of us would give up those freedoms--to work at the job we choose, to live where we choose, to marry if and whom we choose. We will not give up this freedom either. Jew can choose to leave the community at any time, to belong to it only marginally, to enter for a specific purpose and a limited amount of time and then leave once more, to assign the tradition whatever role in their lives they choose. Jewish identity

which could, until now, be taken for granted (and could be taken for granted in America as recently as forty years ago when the intermarriage rate among American Jews was still extremely low) must now be selected and even constructed--not just one in each person's life, but on many occasions.

Jews make these choices, moreover, in a society which is probably the most individualistic the world has ever seen, and in which mobility--physical movement from place to place--is probably the highest it has ever been. How, in such circumstances, does one build community, let alone Jewish community: that of a small minority?

There is only one way to secure Jewish loyalties in such a situation, if one cannot force Jews to be Jews, and cannot expect them to remain Jews by dint of upbringing and circumstance, one must persuade them. We as a community expend enormous efforts every year attempting to humor, cajole, bargain with, and otherwise talk Jews into a commitment that for some of us seems thankfully inescapable. As long as Jews had no choice but to be Jewish, the meanings attached to Judaism by the group or that, this thinker or that, were not of ultimate importance. But beginning with unpersuaded, could and would opt out. That is the new significance of the second crucial factor that I want to mention here: tradition.

How does one explain Judaism to people who have not experienced it/ How does one get them to take on the tradition, in both senses of that phrase: to adopt and confront it? This is more and more our problem today. Mendelssohn's Jewish audience all came from insular Jewish homes, and had just made their first tentative steps into a wider world that was far from welcoming of their arrival. Kaplan addressed, for the most part, a "second generation" of American Jews raised in ethnic immigrant homes, people who knew Jewish life well from experience, and so were well prepared to "live in two civilizations," the Jewish and the American. Our situation is different. We are trying to reach Jews, many of whom received only a rudimentary Jewish education as children if they received an education at all, and who may never have thought seriously about Jewishness or Judaism as adults. They have little experience of what we are trying to teach them. How then shall we teach them? How shall we reach them?

Moreover, unlike Jews of earlier generations, who moved in a larger culture proud of its "Judeo-Christian" heritage, and sympathetic to the language of faith, American Jews today move for the most part in a high secular culture, whether elite or popular -- probably the most anti-traditional culture the world has ever seen, certainly a culture far less traditional than those of Europe, or even Canada, our neighbor next door. Persuasion in these circumstances becomes difficult indeed.

There is, finally, a third challenge, which deserves separate consideration even though it has been alluded to earlier. It concerns the selves who choose each week whether or not to join the Jewish community or to make the Jewish tradition an important part of their lives, selves who are very different from those of earlier generations. We all know this autobiographically, from the differences between ourselves and our own parents and grandparents. These differences are confirmed by numerous studies. It is not just that Darwin and Freud, Einstein and biblical criticism, are taken to granted parts of our operating mental equipment, what one teacher of mind has called the "furniture of our minds". It is also that we care so passionately about our autonomy. Robert Bellah's famous study, Habits of the Heart (1985); beautifully probed the problems posed to every strong community and inherited tradition in America by the reigning commitment to protecting options for the self individualism, Bellah and his colleagues wrote, is the "first language" spoken by American Jews. Community comes second. It is spoken far less naturally, far more hesitantly.

Let me note at this point that all three of these factors, the loss of integral community, the difficulty in embracing and inheriting tradition, and the jealous guarding of options by the self surfaced time and again in the interviews which Steven M. Cohen and I have been conducting over the past few years for a project on the construction of Jewish meaning in America. The voluntarism of Jewish commitment is taken for granted by every single one of the fifty or so "middle-range" Jews who were interviewed for our study ("middle-range" meaning those not in the most active 20-25%, nor among the 40% who are unaffiliated at the moment, but rather in the middle which comprises the typical membership of Reform and Conservative synagogues). The ability to choose for or against Judaism is precious to them. Time and again we heard expressions of the individual's choice and right to choose whether concerning affiliation, or philanthropy, or marriage partner, or ritual performance. Again and again our subjects voiced suspicion about the organized Jewish community, and the fear that one step inside the door would preclude their ability to walk out again if they so chose.

Tradition, among our subjects, is very much a matter of rituals selectively performed in the private sphere of home and family. Passover is, for many reasons, by far the most widely observed Jewish holiday. It is no coincidence that the Seder is celebrated in the home, is child-centered, involves participation by family and conjures up memories of other family members no longer present at the table, and stresses themes such as freedom which are universal i.e. persuasive because they present no conflict with the dominant American culture. High Holiday synagogue attendance, by contrast, has sharply declined, and our subjects do not mention it favorably. For these observances are public rather than private. They require days off from work. They are not family centered. And their religious themes of divine judgment and atonement (not to mention self-denial) are not popular.

Finally, the sovereignty of self, as we have come to call it, is on display in virtually every interview we conducted. Naturally so : people with a choice will choose what attracts them. Only the most committed among our sample expressed any sort of obligation to the tradition, and even they continued to articulate the "first language" of individualism for more than the language of community. Put another way; while indifference to Jews and Judaism among our subjects is virtually nil, ambivalence concerning Jews and Judaism is profound, Jews have powerful feelings, positive and negative, about the community and tradition they (except for converts) have inherited from the individuals toward whom ambivalence is the psychological rule: their parents. If these Jews are not joining synagogues of JCCs, or remaining on the periphery when they do affiliate; if they are not giving to Federations, and are withdrawing from ethnic attachments generally: if they are choosing some ritual observance while rejecting other expressions, it is because their feelings about Judaism run strong and deep.

That, I believe, is not only the source of our problem, but the key to solving it. American Jews are suspicious of community but hungry for it, in some cases desperately so. They live more and more isolated lives, all the more-so if they are single adults, many of whom are now raising children. American Jews are also thankful for the meaning tradition provides, the anchor, the sense of purpose, the beauty, the richness. Finally, American Jews are sovereign selves aware (and not only around Yom Kippur) that they lack the resources needed to live good lives, to be good parents or spouses or adult children to their own parents. If we can provide these people with compelling rich experiences of meaning and community -- and preferably, of the two together -- they will (and already do) return for more such experiences. And they will over time commit themselves to the communal frameworks and forms of tradition in which these experiences are found. We know this strategy can work for a significant number of Jews, because it already does. Not every Jew in America will seize hold of it, but tens of thousands more over the next decade or two -perhaps hundreds of thousands could become actively involved.

REBUILDING COMMUNITY

Work in that direction begins, for reasons which by now should be clear, with restructuring our community. We have to plan for the fact that affiliation is now voluntarist. No organization, religious or "secular", can any longer take Jewish loyalty (or the conditions that promote it) for granted. No less, we have to plan for the fact that Jews can and will choose what sorts of Jews to be. There will be multiple Jewish communities. Jews can and will belong to more than one at a time (as many of us already do), and indeed can and will maintain both Jewish and non-Jewish commitments at the same time. That means, in turn, that the American Jewish community as a whole must be pluralist : not only accepting the fact of multiple loyalties, but agreeing that there are multiple ways of being a good person and a good Jew. That does not mean that "anything goes", that all boundaries fall. But it means we have to practice the art of accepting and working with those substantially different than ourselves, even if they are not prepared to give us the legitimacy that we extend to them.

That much, I think, is straightforward. But there is a harder task; the imagination and building of Jewish communities much more solid and substantial than those to which we generally refer as "the Jewish community" today. To put it bluntly: the so-called "American Jewish Community" is a fiction to most Jews. They have never experienced it, and feel no loyalty to it. We should get the message. It does not make sense to speak of a community to which, at any given moment, 40% of the alleged members do not belong. Nor, for most Jews, is their "local Jewish community" a reality. They do not see it in action; at best they step through the doors, occasionally, of a particular institution such as a synagogue or JCC. The largest Jewish community of all - the Jewish people - is also a concept, at best, to most Jews, a history to which they relate emotionally. It is not a truth they know or have experienced.

I myself can, despite a good Jewish education, a strong Jewish upbringing, and better than average knowledge of Jewish history, I only came to know Jewish peoplehood as a fact when I experienced it riding busses in Israel in my twenties. The faces on those busses were diverse as could be -yet I knew they belonged to me, and I to them. I knew it all the more because the soldiers on those busses carrying guns, were on my side. I was grateful for their presence rather than afraid. We faced a common danger, a common enemy. It bonded us. It would not be much of an overstatement to say I discovered the intermediate level of Jewish community became a reality to me when I moved to the Upper West Side of New York in my late twenties, and joined a minyan that was a source of affection and obligation together.

The lack of such experiences among most American Jews is a problem that must be addressed first of all at the most basic level of community, face to face. We should offer every Jew who wants it the experience of palpable community: groups of Jews bound to one another in ties of tangible obligation and (this part cannot be guaranteed, but will come) affection. These communities will be Jewish, not only because they are composed largely of Jews (largely, rather than exclusively, because of the fact of intermarriage), but because they are actively engaged in serious dialogue with Jewish history and traditions.

The framework for such local communities can vary. One might find it in a small-ish synagogue, or in havurot within a large synagogue. It might be available at a JCC, or among the local leadership of a federation or organization. The hallmarks of local community - the ways one knows it is present - are likewise many: the ability to talk in shorthand, for example; to find oneself having meaningful conversation rather than chit-chat soon into a relationship, the knowledge that one can rely on the people in a group to be there if you need them (say, at a shiva) or to offer help in time of need (say, meals for the family during a period when one is hospitalized); the happiness of wanting them present to share a simcha, and of knowing that they will be equally happy to attend, would not miss it for the world.

This is basic stuff, the nuts and bolts of human relationship and satisfaction -- and woefully lacking to many American Jews of our day. We can provide it. Jews are good at this.

Moreover, every such local community carries with it entrée to the global Jewish community, which is both “horizontal” (worldwide) and “vertical” (stretching back over three millennia of history). This global character, an ineluctable part of Jewish peoplehood, is a source of strength and weakness alike. Every time we approach Jews to join Jewish organizations or contribute dollars to Jewish causes to take on Jewish ritual performance or set foot in Jewish spaces, we confront them with the powerful heritage of generations, the ambivalent associations with parents and grandparents, the connection to the Good and to God. The Jews that Steve Cohen and I have come to know express no self-hatred. They are proud to be Jews, proud of what Jews have accomplished in Israel, proud of the rescue of Jews from Ethiopia and the former Soviet Union, proud of Jewish achievement in the United States. But they are also troubled by the demands of Jewish peoplehood : worried about Israel and the impact of events there on Jewish life here; made anxious by the Holocaust, which many have thought about deeply; bothered by Jews who claim a monopoly on the tradition, or exclude other Jews from the community, or who judge them "bad Jews". On balance, this global level of community is a great plus, I Think, and can be made still more of a plus. It can and does draw people to community on the local level once the gift and blessing of the tradition are made palpable.

Finally, we need to strengthen communities of the middle-range: whether at the level of local or national leadership - meetings where shorthand is common after but a few moments-acquaintance because of shared experiences and commitments: or via media such as television and the internet; or through overlapping networks of face-to-face communities, brought together in the enactments of community: tangible obligation, dialogue with history and traditions. The JCC association can be one such network for its members, a very important bridge between the face-to-face community experienced at the local level of a JCC and the global Jewish community that comes of participating in the life of the Jewish people as a whole.

I repeat: we know we can provide community on these three levels, because for a significant number of American Jews - perhaps a million - we already do. We know that Jews respond to quality experiences of meaning and community; that "journeys to Judaism" of the sort Steve Cohen and I have studied are in progress every day. And while we should not exaggerate the possibilities of success in transforming the face of American Jewry, we should not belittle our chances of making a difference either. There is much that we can do.

AN AGENDA FOR LEADERSHIP

The job before us today in “The American Jewish community” as a whole is to fashion a variety of such communities, as we revitalize Jewish tradition in a number of different forms. Each segment of the community will have to do both those things in its own area of Jewish life, and work on a degree of cooperation with others that most now recognize is essential, for the reasons I have explained. The job of Jewish leadership in every organization is to make the program outline above operational in its special sphere, and to model the sorts of Jews we are hoping to attract and produce. Neither of these tasks is foreign to us. We already spend a lot of time planning, budgeting, training, and coordinating. No less, I believe, committed Jews already serve as models, whether we know it or not, to the countless Jews and Gentiles we encounter in the normal course of the week. The difference henceforth will be to work in a concerted fashion toward an agreed-upon goal, the goal of making the Jewish community in America more substantively Jewish and more substantively a community - and to model self-consciously the kinds of Jews we hope to attract self-consciously, even as we take steps to

attract them.

I should not in conclusion -because I have noted it when not addressing the leadership of the JCC movement- that JCCs are particularly well-equipped to take on the agenda I have set forth here. Just look at the organization's name. "Community" is at the heart of it and should be the heart of what JCCs provide, in the stronger sense of community I have tried to articulate. "Center" means a place Jews can come together, one where they can voluntarily choose as individual selves to join with others so as to find what they lack as selves alone; a public space where they can see their private commitments shared, writ large and expressed loud and clear. "Jewish" means a rich and profound tradition that offers more than enough meaning to live by, and offers it is a diversity of forms, "religious" and "cultural", the quotation marks indicating that these forms are distinct but hard to separate entirely one from the other.

The name, in Biblical fashion, tells us what the entity already is and should become. Leadership, on step ahead, has the job of taking it there.

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