# THE STRUCTURE AND LEADERSHIP ROLE OF THE NORTH AMERICAN JEWISH COMMUNITY

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*The North American Jewish community is one of the four great Diasporas in Jewish history, each of which flourished at a time when the host country itself was a center of intellectual thought and cultural achievements. It has a very extensive and well-organized structure and an unparalleled cadre of well-educated Jewish professionals. The key issue is whether the leaders of the North American Jewish community will address the challenge of continuity and give leadership to world Jewry in the twenty-first century.*

The focus of this article is on the structure of the North American Jewish community, which includes the Jewish communities of the United States and Canada. The designation—North American Jewish community—has come to be used increasingly in recent years to indicate that these two physically proximate countries are also very close in their history, values, and Jewish organizational structure. I concentrate in this article primarily on the Jewish community of the United States, recognizing that most of the material I present pertains to the Canadian Jewish community as well.

## A GREAT DIASPORA

"America is different," concluded the historian, Ben Halpern (1983), as he sought to explain the exceptionally welcoming and compatible relationship between America and its Jewish settlers. This article seeks to understand the distinctive qualities of America that have resulted in the emergence of the American Jewish community as one of the great Diasporas in the history of the Jewish people.

Yet, does the contemporary American Jewish community warrant the designation of a "great Diaspora community" in the tradition of Babylon in biblical times, Spain in the Middle Ages, and Eastern Europe from the sixteenth through the early twentieth centuries? Two eminent Israeli scholars who have studied Jewish communities across the ages are positive in their response to this question: Joshua Prawer describes the American Jewish community as "the largest and most opulent Diaspora in the history of the Jewish Nation" (1978). And Daniel Elazar, who formerly lived in the United States and now lives and teaches in Israel, refers to the American Jewish community as "among the most effective I have ever known. Its leadership, voluntary and professional, ranks with the best I have seen in government, whether of the United States or Israel" (1978).

Historians have generally identified four criteria of a "great Diaspora" (Prawer, 1978):

1. The community has persisted over a relatively long period of time (several hundred years).
2. The host community views its Jewish community as a compatible subpopulation and gives no sanction to anti-Semitism.
3. The community is of sufficient size to maintain a range of Jewish subpopulations, representing the major different Jewish ideological identifications.
4. The Jewish community operates as the modern version of the traditional *kehilla*, with an organizational structure that is both responsive to the needs of its Jewish residents and also represents the Jewish community to the general society.

Today's American Jewish community fully meets each of these four criteria. Its first settlers arrived in New Amsterdam in 1554, almost 4½ centuries ago. Jews have thrived in America both economically and politically

and have been treated with respect by each generation of American leaders. They have felt secure that American leaders would protect them from anti-Semitism, in the spirit enunciated by the founding President George Washington in 1790 as he welcomed the Hebrew Congregation of Newport, Rhode Island, one of the first synagogues built in America:

> The government of the United States...gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens....May the children of the stock of Abraham who dwell in this land continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other inhabitants, while everyone shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig trees, and there shall be none to make him afraid" (cited in Flohr & Reinharz, 1995, pp. 458–459).

The modern American Jewish community is unique among other current Diasporas in another important dimension—it is not as ideologically dependent upon the State of Israel for defining its national Jewish identity and the Jewish identity of its citizens as are virtually all of the other Diaspora communities. Certainly, American Jewish schools and organizations highlight Israel in their curricula and programs, and trips to Israel are strongly encouraged. But Israel is clearly much more prominent on the agenda of the other Diaspora communities. In large measure, this difference is explained by the lesser security Jews of the other Diasporas feel in their host society: These Jewish communities are smaller in size, and anti-Semitism has been more ingrained in these countries than is the case in America. As a result, Jews in these other Diaspora communities experience an underlying tentativeness or insecurity. Might there arise a new leader hostile to the Jews? Might there be an economic downturn that would adversely affect their lifestyle or lead the population to scapegoat the Jews?

As the nations of Europe were poised on the brink of the eighteenth century, a time when great societal changes were brewing, such as the onset of the era of enlightenment and the call for emancipation, the Jews in these lands had no legal status. Aside from several hundred Jews who were chosen because of their mercantilist skills to serve as "court Jews" to the emerging class of ruling princes in the Holy Roman Empire, the vast majority of Jews were "despised and disprivileged" (Flohr & Reinharz, p. 8). This negative image was the legacy of the Jews at the critical juncture of the onset of modernity. This tentative status of the European Jew later took expression in the basic tenet of Zionism—the inevitability of anti-Semitism and assimilation for Jews living in the countries of the Gentiles—and the corollary: Only in their homeland of Palestine/Israel can Jews be free of anti-Semitism and live an authentic Jewish life.

In virtually every Diaspora country, outside of America (to a lesser extent in Great Britain) anti-Semitism has been part of the platform of one of the national political parties. As Ben Halpern (1983, p. 16) notes, "American anti-Semitism has never reached the level of an historic, politically effective movement. It has remained a merely sociological or 'cultural' phenomenon." As a result, American Jews do not feel "in exile and whatever may be the case with other Jewries, the open doors of the State of Israel do not beckon to us." American Jews feel secure and at home in this distinctive Diaspora.

However, the threat of assimilation is ever present in this benign and prosperous land. Leaders of the American Jewish community have come to realize, ironically, that it is the open doors of America that pose the greatest threat to the continuity of the Jewish community. American Jews have become one of the most highly educated (secular) and economically prosperous of all the religious/ethnic groups in America (Reisman, 1997). In an ironic twist of the phrase, virtually all American Jews today have become "choosing Jews." Except perhaps for the approximately 10 percent of Orthodox American Jews, who maintain a full and separate Jewish lifestyle, the vast majority of American Jews choose to remain Jewish to the extent that identifica-

tion is responsive to their sophisticated interests and life situation. The vast majority of American Jews today are third and fourth generation Americans, which is a statement that their Jewish interests are holding up. It is also a statement that the vast network of American Jewish organizations and an extensive cadre of sophisticated Jewish professionals are effectively serving and playing a key role in sustaining the American Jewish community (see Ollander, 1995/96).

## THE STRUCTURE OF THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMUNITY AT THE END OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

The American Jewish community is a highly organized enterprise that seeks to respond to the full range of educational, religious, social, and cultural needs of its 5,900,000 Jews and to represent the interests and perspectives of American Jewry in their dealings with the general American society, as well as with their fellow Jews in Israel and other countries. The Jewish community must also attend to the reality of raising the funds needed to achieve its extensive agenda. Fund raising in a voluntary community is akin to governmental entities taxing the citizenry to fulfill their civic responsibilities. Therefore, all Jewish organizations develop some mode of fund raising.

Eight different categories of organizations are currently serving the American Jewish community. These categories are listed below with a summary statement of the nature of the services provided and the key organizations that are providing the services.

### I. Social Welfare/Informal Education

In 1554 when a boat from Holland with 23 Jews aboard was seeking entry into New Amsterdam in America, permission was granted only after leaders of the Jewish contingent assured the apprehensive Dutch official that the Jews would present no economic burden: "We will care for our own." Indeed, that pledge has been adhered to thoroughly and consistently up to the present time. From the first Dutch Jewish settlers to the current Russian Jews, Jewish immigrants have been welcomed and integrated by the American Jewish community.

The following are organizations under Jewish auspices that provide a full range of services to respond to the health and social welfare needs of Jews, as well as offer opportunities for social interaction for all age groups.

- Jewish federations
- Jewish Community Centers
- national Jewish youth groups
- Jewish family and children's agencies
- residential settings for elderly and youth with physical and emotional problems
- hospitals

### II. Religious/Educational

Each of the four major religious denominations (Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist) provide religious and Jewish educational services to their members in synagogues, schools, and camps staffed by rabbis, educators, cantors, recreation workers, and administrators. The synagogue for centuries had been viewed as the central organization in Diaspora Jewish communities, but that changed in America. The historian, Salo Baron (1950, p. 239), noted that "by the end of the Civil War the shift of the center of gravity of Jewish communal life from the synagogue and school to the charitable organization (the federation system) is one of the most intriguing facets of American Jewish history."

### III. Fraternal/Service

A number of important Jewish organizations have emerged in America with the stated primary objective of supporting a major Jewish social welfare program or service and at the same time affording their members with important social ties with other Jews of similar ages and interests. Some of these organizations also provide important social welfare benefits to their members at modest cost, such as health insurance, hospitalization, and cemetery privileges. Three of the largest such fraternal/service organizations are Hadassah,

B'nai B'rith, and Jewish War Veterans.

### IV. Jewish Community Relations

Because American Jews are particularly sensitive to any expression of anti-Semitism it follows that they have organized several major national Jewish organizations with the primary function of monitoring and combating any evidence of anti-Semitism. In the spirit of consistency these organizations have broadened their mandate to be alert and responsive to any expression of bigotry or prejudice from other groups. On a more proactive level the Jewish community relations organizations also seek to promote intergroup programs with people of color and other religious and ethnic groups. The five most prominent Jewish community relations organizations are the American Jewish Committee; the American Jewish Congress; the Anti-Defamation League; the Jewish Council for Public Affairs (formerly NJCRAC), the coordinating mechanism for Jewish community relations committees, which are typically organized and affiliated with the local Jewish federation; and the Council of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations.

### V. Jewish Culture

One of the largest categories of Jewish organizations in America is Jewish culture, which includes several important Jewish museums and libraries, a growing number of Holocaust memorial centers, and organizations devoted to the publication of Jewish books. Several national organizations coordinate Jewish cultural programs and help generate financial support to encourage graduate students interested in doing research on aspects of Jewish culture; they also provide fellowships to individual scholars and artists to support their creative initiatives.

Among the most prominent national Jewish cultural organizations are the following:

- American Jewish Historical Society
- Jewish Book Council
- Jewish Publication Society
- Leo Baeck Institute
- Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture
- National Foundation for Jewish Culture

### VI. Jewish Educational Programs

The American Jewish community has developed a broad range of Jewish educational programs for students in Hebrew schools, Sunday schools, and day schools, offered by the major Jewish denominations. There are also a growing number of Jewish high schools, several of which are trans-denominational.

Another set of Jewish educational institutions are the seminaries, typically sponsored by the denominations, to educate their future Jewish professionals: rabbis, educators, and cantors. In addition, there are five independent colleges, originally developed to educate teachers for Jewish schools, that more recently have expanded their function to offer serious courses in Judaica for adolescents and adults: Gratz College in Philadelphia, Hebrew College in Boston, Spertus Institute in Chicago, Baltimore Hebrew University, and the Cleveland College of Jewish Studies. Finally, there is Brandeis University in Waltham, created and supported by the American Jewish community and offering extensive programs in Jewish studies, as well as graduate programs in Jewish education and Jewish communal service.

Several important innovations in higher Jewish education have been developed in the past 50 years. Of significant importance has been the introduction of Judaica courses and departments of Jewish studies in American universities. Today such courses are being offered in over 365 universities in America. The professors who teach Judaica courses at the university level formed their own professional organization in 1969, the Association for Jewish Studies. By 1998 the Association membership had grown to 1550 members. The Association sponsors an annual conference for its members and publishes its own journal.

The proliferation of university courses and departments of Jewish studies offers an unanticipated endorsement of Jewish scholarship and Jewish thought. Given that over three-quarters of American Jewish young people

attend universities, this new resource not only offers them an attractive opportunity for serious Jewish study but also conveys a message to these impressionable young Jews that Judaism has received the imprimatur of the intellectual elite of America, the guardians and conveyors of postmodern values and thought.

Of particular relevance to the field of Jewish communal service are the specialized graduate programs that have been developed since 1969 at nine universities: Baltimore Institute for Jewish Communal Service (affiliated with Baltimore Hebrew University), Hornstein Program for Jewish Communal Service at Brandeis University, Case Western Reserve University with the Cleveland College of Jewish Studies, Gratz College Graduate Program in Jewish Communal Service in cooperation with the University of Pennsylvania, School of Jewish Communal Service of the Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute for Religion in Los Angeles, the Graduate School of the Jewish Theological Seminary in cooperation with Columbia University, Project STaR at the University of Michigan, Spertus College of Judaica in Chicago, and the Wurzweiler School of Social Work of Yeshiva University in New York.

### VII. Israel/Overseas

The American Jewish community has been consistently attentive and responsive to developments in Jewish life in the other Diasporas. The primary organization involved with these Jewish communities is the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee—"the Joint." The Joint provides financial and other services to these Diaspora communities. When a Jewish community is in distress, the Joint arranges a rescue operation and has indeed salvaged hundreds of thousands of Jews in the 84 years of its existence.

I discussed earlier the important involvement of the American Jewish community with the Jewish community of Israel. Indeed, these two communities are the major centers of influence in Jewish life in the world today. Between them they include 79 percent of the total population of Jews: the U.S. has 44 percent and Israel 35 percent (*American Jewish Yearbook,* 1997). The expectation is that the combination of continued migration of Jews to Israel plus a higher birth rate will result in Israel's Jewish population surpassing that of the United States by the year 2010. Clearly it is vital that there be mutual respect and open communication between the leaders of the American Jewish community and the leaders of the State of Israel, since the future well-being of the Jewish people rests in their hands.

The major American Jewish organizations serving Israel are the United Jewish Appeal, Jewish National Fund, Zionist Organization of America, and American Friends of...(many Israeli universities and other Israeli social welfare organizations).

### VIII. Jewish Family Foundations

A major new source of financial support for the American Jewish community is provided by Jewish family foundations. It is now estimated that there are over 3,000 Jewish family foundations in America (Mendelson, 1996). The *American Jewish Yearbook* conducted a study of 165 of the major Jewish family foundations in the years 1991 and 1992 and found that in any one year the cumulative contribution of the Jewish family foundations was over half a billion dollars, with about 60 percent of these dollars being given to non-Jewish causes (Wertheimer, 1997). It is likely that these independent Jewish family foundations will flourish and that they will assume an increasing and influential role in funding American Jewish programs and services in the future.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Since the first dispersion of the Jews from their native land of Palestine, and the destruction of the first Temple, in 586 B.C.E., Jews have lived in very many different countries. They indeed have been a wandering people. The length of time Jews remained in any of their Diaspora settlements and the nature and

quality of their lives have been a function of two key variables: the receptivity of the host community for their Jewish settlers and the quality of the leadership and communal structure developed by the local Jewish community.

This review of the contemporary American Jewish community has clearly established that the American Jewish Diaspora is one of four great historic Diaspora settlements. In the course of this analysis I came up with what I think is an original insight about these four great historic Diasporas: Babylon, Spain, Eastern Europe, and now the American Jewish community. Each of the four great Diasporas emerged and flourished at a time when the host country itself was a center of intellectual thought and cultural achievements. The interesting question that this insight raises and that warrants further research is the extent to which the presence of the Jewish community in these host countries not only resulted in the flourishing of the Jewish community but may have also made a significant contribution to the intellectual/cultural achievements of the host Diaspora country. The idea is that Jews serve as a leavening presence for their host society and spur change and creativity. That concept might also help explain the negative reactions to Jews by those historic Diaspora countries whose rulers primarily wanted to maintain the status quo and viewed their Jewish subcommunity as a destabilizing influence.

The American Jewish community has established itself as a great Diaspora community with a very extensive and well-organized Jewish structure and an unparalleled cadre of well-educated Jewish professionals. The achievements and potential of this Jewish community are as impressive as any of the prior great Diasporas. Yet, the irony is that very few American Jews, including the leaders, think of themselves as part of an outstanding Jewish community. They are much more likely to see themselves as a community in distress, with a bleak future. Certainly there are problems within the American Jewish community, the two most prominent of which are the high rate of intermarriage and the decline in membership in Jewish organizations. Yet, there is also much important evidence of resurgent Jewish interest and newly developing Jewish collectives, especially among the most highly educated and acculturated Jews. I conclude that Judaism has survived the snare not only of modernity but also the challenges of the current era of postmodernity.

The key question is whether leaders of the American Jewish community will take their Jewish community seriously. Clearly they have real challenges to address, but they also have a formidable resource and base in the American Jewish community. Will the leaders of the American Jewish community rise to the challenge and, in a spirit of confidence and pride in their achievements, give leadership to world Jewry as it enters the twenty-first century?

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