

Building a Community of Torah and Tzedek: A New Paradigm for the Jewish Community of the Twenty-first Century

by Barry Shrage

“The password of the Jew is hesed--kindness, compassion-to his fellow Jews and to his fellow man. He shares in the travail of man in general and of his people. The Jew is a responsible being, he is responsible for society. Abraham's prayer to God was related to total strangers--the people of Sodom. The Jew must share in the destiny of his people and be concerned with the destiny of mankind.” -Rabbi Dr Joseph B. Soloveitchik

“The question for Reform Judaism was 'How do you make changes in Judaism to adapt to the modern world?' The question today is how do we take modern people who happen to be Jewish and bring them to a living and loving and caring encounter with Torah? In his final interview, Zimmerman was asked: 'What changes would you make at the college?' Zimmerman's answer was 'Torah, Torah, Torah. “ - From a Jewish Telegraphic Agency report on Rabbi Sheldon Zimmerman's selection as President-designate of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion

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BEYOND SACRED SURVIVAL

We are entering a crucial time in the history of the American Jewish community--a time that will define our future, and perhaps the future of world Jewry, for decades to come. It is a time when many are feeling that the ideas, answers, theories and institutions of the past aren't quite adequate to the current challenges and questions that are before us. Our leaders seem to know that something is wrong, but they are not quite ready to abandon the existing paradigm for an uncertain future.

This is a time that Thomas S. Kuhn described in his 1962 classic, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, as a “crisis” that precedes a paradigm shift. For Kuhn, the crisis occurs when an old theory fails to answer the questions posed by new developments, observations, or realities. A crisis is always “a necessary pre-condition for the emergence of novel theories.” Kuhn also tells us that “once it has achieved the status of paradigm, a scientific theory is declared invalid only if an alternative theory is available to take its place.”

And so it is with us. For one hundred years, two paradigms have dominated Jewish institutional and intellectual life in America. The first was the paradigm of materialism, security, and assimilation. Economic and political security achieved through secular education and hard work were the core values of our grandparents and great grandparents and for the institutions they created.

The second era-triggered by the Six Day War-was described by sociologist Jonathan Woocher as the paradigm of “sacred survival.” During this time the survival, rescue and protection of Jews became the civil religion of American Jews. In this paradigm fundraising, fighting anti-Semitism, and political and financial

support for Israel became the central rites of American Jewish life.

In each of these paradigms the traditional values of Jewish existence were marginalized or ignored by the mainstream institutions that dominated American Jewish life. Serious Jewish learning, Jewish literacy, an encounter with the transcendent, and a meaningful commitment to social justice beyond the confines of our own community became marginal goals for American Jewry and the preoccupation of a small minority of American Jews. As a result, being Jewish lost its meaning for many American Jews.

We are at a turning point. The sacred survival paradigm is now crumbling. It is crumbling for two reasons. First, the conditions that called it into being have changed: Israel is becoming an economic powerhouse and may yet achieve peace; most Jews are now free to leave countries of oppression and return home to Israel whenever they choose. Second, and ultimately more important, sacred survival was never an adequate answer to the very personal question of "Why be Jewish?" And fundraising, which dominated our institutional life, eclipsing other Jewish values, was never a purpose that could sustain us as a people.

If being Jewish is to regain its meaning for Jews today, the Jewish community must be transformed. While it's impossible to "know" the exact shape the new paradigm will take, we must begin, with humility and respect for alternative proposals, the difficult, yet crucial task of proposing new visions. Here in Boston, 10 years of open discussion and experimentation are leading us to propose a community of Torah-serious Jewish learning, and tzedek--social justice for our Jewish people and all humankind.

A NEW PARADIGM: A COMMUNITY OF TORAH AND JUSTICE

Torah and tzedek are inextricably bound. They are the theory and practice of our continuity. The study of Torah links us to our ancestors, provides a foundation on which to base our actions in the world, and leads us to an encounter with the transcendent. The practice of tzedek grows out of our understanding of our tradition and our role in the world. Through tzedek, we fulfill our spiritual destiny of repairing the world. Without Torah, there can be no uniquely Jewish vision of social justice; without social justice, learning has no meaning.

To build a vibrant community based on Torah and tzedek we must expand our notions of both. To survive, Judaism must be a living tradition, one that is made relevant through the process of engaging with its laws, its stories, its people, through drawing connections between the past and the present. To survive as a people, Jews must take responsibility for making this religion, which is 3500 years old, very new. We must create opportunities for serious Jewish learning that speaks to the lives of our people. We must once again become "the people of the Book."

We must also expand the boundaries of tzedek beyond the confines of our own community. While during the period of "sacred survival" we focused solely on assuring Jewish welfare, security, and survival at home, in endangered communities overseas, and in Israel, we must now work to create a just world for all humankind. We must do this work because our tradition commands us to, and because we must respond to the ideals of our children who want to be a part of a community that is committed to changing the world.

At the heart of this new paradigm, I believe, is the possibility of giving new life to the dream of the great rabbis and thinkers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries whose goal was a serious encounter between classical Judaism--with all its intellectual, spiritual and ethical energy, discipline and depth--and modernity--with all its

scientific and technological wizardry, intellectual ferment and rigor, and shining promise of freedom. Out of this encounter must come a serious, non-fundamentalist Judaism, that engages both the heart and the mind, through which we can fashion in Arnold Eisen's beautiful words, "a just and democratic community with God in its midst."

AN ACTION PLAN:

CHANGING THE VALUE SYSTEM OF THE COMMUNITY

While all our efforts in Jewish education have focused on our children, we have failed to understand that we are trying to teach a value system and a culture that we and our society have explicitly rejected or trivialized. At the core of our effort to create a community of Torah and tzedek must therefore be a conscious effort to change the value system and cultural norms of the American Jewish community. To do so we must reclaim and reassert the importance and centrality of our tradition for our lives and our world.

UNIVERSAL JEWISH LITERACY

Establishing universal Jewish literacy as a communal norm for adults as well as children must be our highest priority. The values and culture of Judaism--its commitment to social justice, to ethical monotheism, and to community--can only compete with other values and cultures if Jews are as comfortable with Jewish texts and knowledge as they are with those of the broader world within which they live. We must, in essence, create a Jewish world that places the same value on understanding the basic works of Maimonides as on understanding the basic works of Shakespeare. The continuity of Jewish life requires knowledgeable adults who can understand and live Judaism in the context of community, with all its beauty, intellectual energy, and spiritual and ethical values. Judaism cannot "skip a generation." It requires adults who can be role models for their children and grandchildren.

In Boston, the Commission on Jewish Continuity (a partnership between CJP, the synagogue council, congregations and congregational movements) has instituted basic parent and family education aimed at engaging a critical target population--young parents in synagogues and JCCs--in serious Jewish learning. More recently, in conjunction with Hebrew College and our major congregations, we initiated a two-year program of Jewish learning for adults. The first class of students has just completed the program, with programs starting at additional sites each year. Our goal is to bring a full-time parent and family educator and a two-year learning program to all of our larger congregations and JCCS. In five years, 40 percent of our community will be touched by these programs, and family by family, congregation by congregation, the value system and cultural norms of our community will change.

SOCIAL JUSTICE

Torah without tzedek is empty principles. Expanding opportunities to put Jewish ideals into action must be at the core of our communal agenda. In Boston, the Federation, in partnership with the Jewish Community Relations council, is piloting a program to engage young adults in Jewish learning and community service within the Jewish community and in some of Boston's most disadvantaged neighborhoods. Jewish Interaction--a program created to reach Boston's vast single population--is a prototype for engaging the larger community in the work of tikkun olam. Over the next five years, CJP and the JCRC will create a community-wide volunteer corps, based on congregations, JCCs, and on college campuses, to give increased life to our vision of tzedek.

REDEFINING THE ROLE OF FEDERATION

If Federations, “the central address of the Jewish community,” are only “the people who call once a year to ask for money” and nothing more, then for many it will seem that the central value of the Jewish community is fundraising. While fundraising is essential for Federations to carry out their life-saving, community building work, it cannot be allowed to define our Federations or continue to dominate the value system of the American Jewish community. The existence of our Federations and, more important, their ability to be useful in the current crisis will depend on their ability to reinvent themselves.

At the end of the twentieth century, Federations must use their resources to bring institutions, people and ideas together to define and implement the next paradigm of Jewish life. Providing vision will be their key role, and engaging communities in serious learning and social justice will be their most important work.

This will mean creating a more open, more democratic, more egalitarian Federation with a much broader institutional base. Active partnerships with congregations, congregational movements, havurot, JCCS, and Jewish day schools because they most clearly represent the grass-roots of the Jewish community, and because Jewish learning and Jewish spiritual life must be at the heart of the revitalization of the American Jewish community-will be of critical importance.

Similarly the intellectual resources of our universities, including Hillels and Jewish studies departments, must be included in this new partnership and strengthened in order to reach the next generation of Jews, and to utilize the extraordinary intellectual resources of our universities in pursuing the goal of universal adult Jewish literacy.

The Federation that chooses to build a community of Torah and tzedek will have five key tasks:

- 1. Creating a Vision**

The first task of the Federation is to bring the community, in all its diversity, together to wrestle with the critical question raised in this volume: What should the Jewish community of the twenty-first century look like? Clarification of core values will provide a solid platform on which to build the community of the future.

- 2. Strengthening Community Through Gateway Institutions**

Our grassroots institutions--JCCs, Jewish day schools, havurot, and especially synagogues-are the gateways to participation in the Jewish community. By advocating, supporting and funding serious adult learning and social justice programs within these institutions we strengthen their ability to reach and involve Jews in living meaningful Jewish lives.

- 3. Becoming a Community of Communities**

Federations have an important role to play in keeping our eyes on the larger goals and needs of our community, by facilitating dialogue among communities and across institutional lines. Continuing dialogue helps build consensus, strengthen the ties that bind us, and keep us headed in the right direction. Federations will also assure that larger communal needs are met by organizing grassroots communities to respond effectively to Jews locally, overseas, and in Israel.

- 4. Meeting Local and Overseas Needs**

Consistent with the belief in Torah and tzedek, Federations will continue to raise money and fund programs for those in need within and outside our Jewish community.

5. **Israel and World Jewry**

Defining a new relationship with Israel based on partnership, a common quest for a definition of Jewish life in the twenty-first century, and economic development is a top priority. Israel will clearly become even more central to far more Jews if we succeed in changing the value system of the American Jewish community. A serious encounter with Judaism places Israel and Jerusalem at the center of Jewish life.

While our commitment to Israel remains strong, Jews of the former Soviet Union will likely be our highest overseas priority for the foreseeable future. One and a half million Jews are now poised between assimilating into the emerging culture of post-cold war Russia, leaving for Israel, and giving birth to a new Jewish tradition in towns our grandparents and great grandparents came from.

CONCLUSION

There is a resurgence of spiritual seeking in America-people are looking for meaning in their lives, for spiritual answers to life's questions. For Judaism to survive, Jewish leaders and communities must be able to respond to this yearning by speaking from the heart of tradition about the meaning of being Jewish in the modern world.

We must come up with compelling answers to the question "Why be Jewish?" We must answer that Judaism is based on Torah and tzedek, on learning, on compassion, and acts of lovingkindness. And we must become a "holy community" whose institutions embody these values, and make opportunities to pursue serious Jewish learning and social justice accessible to the broad diversity of Jews.

Rabbi Soleveitchik tells us that Judaism paradoxically "requires of the Jew to be... both young and old. Like a tree whose roots absorb their nourishment from the soil and whose foliage is caressed by sunlight flowing from a distant and unknown future, the Jew must be deeply rooted in his past and inspired by a vision of the future." Like that tree, we must build the foundation of our Jewish community on our tradition, and nourish its branches of learning and lovingkindness as they seek out the future.

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