

Changing Jewish Communities

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SOME PARADOXES IN AMERICAN JEWISH LIFE

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The Cost of Jewish Education / One Generation Supports Three / Tapping Public Funds / Our Grandparents Gave More / Uneasy Acceptance in America / Involving the Best Jews / Supporting American, Not Jewish, Arts / A Cosmopolitan People with a Localistic Perspective / Controversy or Consensus / A Jewish Career for Someone Else's Child / Israel -- Reality vs. Ideal / Where are the Intellectuals? / The Passing of the Immigrant Phase / Hiding the Elderly / Need for Jewish-Jewish Dialogue / Needed: Patience and Strength

During two decades of Jewish communal service, I have been continually confronted by the numerous paradoxes I see in American Jewish life today. The following list of fifteen paradoxes represents my personal assessment. The list is not exhaustive but, for me, intriguing.

The Cost of Jewish Education

The first paradox: No other people has so celebrated, elevated, or held in high esteem the concept of education and learning as a desirable norm for everybody, yet the American Jewish community is the first community in history to charge such high fees as to keep most people from being able to make use of it. The "people of the book" in becoming the "people of the buck" have put in a screen between past, present and future by virtue of introducing the concept of self-sustaining Jewish education while supporting the concept of free public education.

One Generation Supports Three

The second paradox: We are a people who revere the elderly in our teachings and yet probably are facing the first generation of Jews who resent the elderly because there are now two generations of elderly to support. How will the American Jewish community deal with the elderly in light of the double and triple bind of one generation supporting at least two others?

I have discovered seven Jewish homes for the aged where there are two generations of one family living in that home, where 65-year-old widows have asked to live out their lives with their mothers and are sharing rooms in homes for the aged. That is a new phenomenon. Couple this with the fact that, as a rule, the young do not go out and become economically viable until the end of the first third of their lives. These learning adults are economic leeches who send home laundry instead of money. Coupled with the longevity of the elderly, one ponders the paradoxes that arise from the sandwich generation that must support four generations.

Tapping Public Funds

The third paradox: All American Jewry was admitted into America on the basis of an oath to Peter Styvesant, namely that there would never be public funds utilized to support Jews. Today, of all the dollars spent under Jewish communal or organizational auspices, there are far more third-party payment or government dollars than Jewish dollars. While rhetorically we revel in our independence, the reality is that we as a Jewish community have become very dependent upon funds from outside of Jewish sources. And this does not include the overwhelming support of Israel from U.S. government funds, which now far outstrips traditional Jewish support sources.

Our Grandparents Gave More

The fourth paradox: We are a far wealthier community than we like to admit publicly. This is not meant to ignore the Jewish poor, but putting that reality aside for the moment, in the latest listing of the 400 wealthiest Americans by Forbes magazine, at least 30 percent are Jews. One had to have \$180 million to get on the list. Now in 1935 there were proportionately more Jews in America on relief than any other ethnic community. Look how far we have come! The paradox is when one adds up all the money that these Jews give as a function of the percentage of their wealth, our poor grandparents were giving proportionately more money for tzedakah from their resources than the Jews today.

Uneasy Acceptance in America

The fifth paradox: For all practical purposes, Jews have broken about every barrier that exists in America with really very few exceptions -- Jews are presidents of universities that excluded Jewish students not too long ago; United Jewish Appeal drives are conducted in the White House among the Jewish staff; Jewish members of the United States Congress are elected from districts without Jews, etc. Gallup polls indicate that 93 percent of Americans would vote for a Jew to be president if they saw that Jew as being a good person. At the same time, most Jews in America think the biggest problem in America is anti-Semitism. If the Jews were ever to disappear in America, they would disappear because they were loved to death rather than killed by Nazis or Ku Klux Klan or hurt by serious anti-Semites. This paradox influences the sources and extent of funds contributed for Jewish life. 350,000 different contributors can be counted on to contribute to a "Nazi watch," "Shoah business" and "Shoah-ology." On the other hand, all the Jewish museums in the United States do not collectively have 50,000 people supporting them.

Involving the Best Jews

The sixth paradox: We can rarely classify, categorize, discuss, or identify change and innovation in the West without coming up with a highly disproportionate number of Jews at the heart of these innovations. As proof is a story told by Rabbi Hugo Gryn of London. Rabbi Gryn came out of Theresienstadt and Auschwitz to England where he was sent at age 15 to Cambridge to study, without even knowing English. He got his first degree in science and only later the late, great Rabbi Leo Baeck talked him into becoming a rabbi. Gryn kept in touch with some of his friends who graduated with him at Cambridge. A few years ago one of these friends was in England, involved in a very esoteric scientific exploration of the theory of implosion and explosion and the beginnings of the universe. A convention was held in Moscow of all the people doing work in this very esoteric field. Some thirty-seven people came to that meeting. There were two Chinese, a Japanese, and thirty-four Jews! The paradox is that it is rare to have those same Jews involved in Jewish life. We do not know how to bring the most innovative Jewish minds of our generation into the ongoing processes of the Jewish community.

Supporting American, Not Jewish, Arts

The seventh paradox: There is a disproportionate support of the arts by Jews in America. Brendan Behan, the famous author, once said "one more Yom Kippur [War] and Broadway would be dead." One can visit city after city and note the disproportionate contribution to the world of general arts by Jews. The paradox is the low priority that culture has within the Jewish community itself. There is almost no serious funding of comparable arts -- symphonies, plays, music, etc. -- under Jewish auspices. (I am aware of the American-Israel Cultural Foundation, the annual playwright awards, etc. which in the scheme of things are a pittance.)

A Cosmopolitan People with a Localistic Perspective

The eighth paradox: When the Jews are accused of being an international Jewish conspiracy, thank God, we are. We truly have learned, sometimes very secretly, how to transfer funds and personnel, to do magical, mysterious things across the borders of countries throughout the world

on behalf of Jews. But in America we do not know how to transfer dollars across state lines to follow changing social concerns. An older woman moving to Israel has a greater chance that some American money will somehow get to help her than if she moved from Los Angeles to Miami. We can cross water, we can cross space, we can cross air, but we cannot cross state lines. In such a "congregational" mode in America, we are the cosmopolitan people with localistic approaches to problems once we leave the international scene.

Controversy or Consensus

The ninth paradox: Traditionally, Jewish life has thrived on controversy and debate. In America, the mechanism we have chosen for solving problems is consensus so that debate must always be muted and private and civil. Those three words, if not an anathema, are certainly alien to the Israeli experience. So it means that dialectic as a mode for sharpening issues is absent. Indeed, one who engages in dialectic is somehow seen as anti-establishment, anti-Jewish and inauthentic, and is not seen as contributing to the betterment of Jewish life. We have lost our roots, and perhaps our direction for consensus dulls the clarifying of issues.

A Jewish Career for Someone Else's Child

The tenth paradox: In America, Jewish life has probably developed the most comprehensive set of institutions for training and educating communal workers and communal staff, rabbis, educators, social workers, and administrators that has ever existed in the history of the Jewish world. Yet almost nobody wants his or her child to go into these professions. Money is given by people to support these institutions as long as their own children do not attend. "What, you want to be a rabbi? Are you sick or something?" "A Jewish educator? ... No job for a yiddishe boy or girl." Whom do we honor? Whom do we reward? Certainly not those who serve Jewish life as a life-long career.

Israel -- Reality vs. Ideal

The eleventh paradox: Jews in America love Israel as an ideal and have used that ideal to shape American identity. They cannot stand Israel when it becomes human and real rather than ideal. And the more human and real Israel becomes, the more uncomfortable American Jews become with its being human. The myths sustain us and reality gives us despair. The most reality-oriented people in the world have yet to learn how to live with this generation's abiding reality -- a real Israel.

Where are the Intellectuals?

The twelfth paradox: Forty years ago there were almost no jobs for Jewish scholars in the universities. Today in the 10 major American universities, 25 percent of the academics are Jews. Almost none of them have anything to do with Jewish life in a serious way. America is the first Jewish community in history to have effectively eliminated the intellectual in the governance of the Jewish community. Money is almost the sole criterion for admission to Jewish governance. Los Angeles is one of the exceptions.

The Passing of the Immigrant Phase

The thirteenth paradox: In analyzing whatever United States Jewry has become, until this point the bulk of the accomplishments were revived or renourished by immigrants. For the first time now in three hundred years, the American Jewish community will be on its own. Whatever the number of Israelis, Soviet Jews, [Iranian](#) Jews, and South Africa Jews who have immigrated to America, numerically speaking there will never again be an in-migration where in each instance the new wave exceeded the numbers in place. Is there life after immigrants going into the fourth generation?

Hiding the Elderly

The fourteenth paradox: America is probably the first community in our history to try to hide away our elderly and our aged by using institutions and single-generation communities as a way of serving the elderly away from multi-generational living. We wonder why the young fear the elderly and fear aging. Thus at a time of the greatest likelihood of living long lives we have yet to evolve adequate forms of inter-generational life which could take advantage of the opportunities for transmission of wisdom from the elderly to the young -- and the hope for the future from the young to the old.

Need for Jewish-Jewish Dialogue

The fifteenth paradox: In America we spend far more time in fruitful dialogue and discussion between Jews and Christians than we do between Jews and Jews. Rarely, if ever, has there been a more vital and fruitful time for the flourishing of the Christian-Jewish dialogue, even as there has never been a more desperate time and need for the flourishing of dialogue between the denominations within Judaism. The destiny of all Jews calls out for this dialogue to close gaps, to agree to agree and to disagree, amicably and with respect, even as this happens between Jew and Christian.

Needed: Patience and Strength

This list of paradoxes is in no order of priorities. It simply presents an agenda of concern and of opportunity. It presents an agenda of reality to which one could add and contend with, but it indicates that the difficulties for American Jewry are as follows:

Most of these paradoxes cannot be solved or resolved within short time frames. They cannot be solved or resolved with easy, pragmatic responses. The difficulty with abiding paradoxes is that American Jews have become so used to instant coffee, instant dinner, instant teas, that they seek instant solutions or decide the problem cannot be real if it is not easily solved, so it is ignored. This perhaps is yet another paradox: whether or not the American Jewish community can work hard enough over a sustained period of time to resolve some of these paradoxes.

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