



Jerusalem Letter / Viewpoints

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Back to the Future: Jewish Awakening and Renewal

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An "Ever-Dying People"

We Jews have seen ourselves as the "ever-dying people" for many centuries, and certainly, depending upon how one views Jewish history, the "lachrymose" approach held by so many would make that case. There have been others, including the present day transformationalists, who see naught but cloudless and sunny skies awaiting Jews in the twenty-first century. Before formulating some responses to dealing with the hemorrhaging of Jewish affiliation and physical continuity, a few reminders from the past might be helpful to provide a context for our concerns.

Demographers have reminded us that we probably constituted one-tenth of the population of the Roman Empire, some three million strong, and thus a significant percentage of the "civilized" world at that time.

From the beginning of the first millennium of the common era to the nineteenth century, we escalated in number to an estimated high of six million, and then fell to an estimated low of three-quarters of a million around the sixteenth century.

As we all know too well, we had swelled our ranks to a high of eighteen million by

the time of our grievous nightmare and the loss of six million in the Shoah.

The first point to remember, then, is that we have never been as countless as the stars but have remained, with oscillations, a relatively insignificant group when measured quantitatively.

In the 1920s, Ruppin estimated that had there been no autos-da-fé, forced conversions, or voluntary assimilation, we would have numbered some 250 million.

The blandishments of assimilation are thus not new and no hermetical sealant will work in stopping the "leakage" problem. The price of an open society is assimilation. That admission price for Jews as a collectivity far outweighs in number those unwilling to "pay" by reaping the benefits of the society. We, therefore, must begin with the premise that stepping away from modernity and isolating ourselves physically in the process will continue to be an option chosen only by a few. Therefore, strategies born of our goals and objectives to continue as a people must focus on how to more effectively achieve a better ratio of success to failure in our efforts to maintain a dynamic community into the twenty-first century.

We must face the reality that we are today much more the choosing people than the chosen people, and have entered fully and, I would argue, willingly into the period of volitional Judaism. Thus, threats about the consequences of interdating and intermarriage, and strictures to hear and obey God's commandments, are doomed to fail for all but a small percentage of Jews in the Western world.

The laudable and desirable, some would say imperative, Jewish teachings that emphasize interdependence and boundary-setting of self and community behaviors born of commandments and God's path, by themselves will have little effect. The sociological realities are such that the blandishments and potential which the Western world offers to Jews are too available and beneficial in material ways to be counterbalanced by the threat of Jewish extinction or God's wrath.

Simon Herman has demonstrated to us repeatedly that we are all products of, and producers of, many identities. We are male or female, single or married, parent or child, and sometimes all simultaneously. For many, we are shaped by our vocations, our jobs; for yet others, our class defines us. For yet others, it is nationality or age. We possess a multiplicity of identities which wax and wane depending on the appropriateness of that identity to our existential realities. And these identities can be combined. Thus, for example, at a given moment or period, being a British Jewish feminist will manifest itself in its importance and attractiveness by the time and place one finds oneself. How often have we seen men put on kipot *after* getting on an El Al plane bound for Israel and watched them

disappear as the plane landed in London or New York.

Have we noted that language itself may change, depending on where we find ourselves? Herman demonstrated that those in Israel who spoke their "mother tongue" in their home with their children, "slipped" into Hebrew as they got closer to the school their children were attending.

Herman's premise was that the dominance and attractiveness of an identity had to be nourished and encouraged by the communal environment created by those for whom the continuity of identity was important.

Remember, identity is ultimately the sorting out of who we are and identification is the way we manifest our identity(ies). Perhaps it can come to be clearer than it is now that Jewish institutions - the family included - must be shaped and reshaped to offer attractive and desirable ways of being Jews. (It is an irony of language that we speak of Jewish identity - Jew?like identity - rather than the identification with Jews and Jews' institutions, so that we are more intensively Jews rather than more Jewish.)

A careful and thoughtful application of Herman's theories of identity (drawn from Kurt Lewin) can help guide those who shape institutions and their responses to Jews in the *fin de siècle* of the twentieth century.

No one set of proposals is surefire. We will continue to lose Jews who choose not to choose. As long as a critical mass remains which is vibrant, thoughtful, energetic, dynamic, welcoming, persuasive, attractive, sincere, and fulfilled as Jews, we will continue to live and flourish as a community. Our significance as a people has never been measurable in quantitative ways. The ore we have mined the most has been that of ideas and values. As long as a core hold to them, the world will continue to benefit from the presence of a community of Jews. Our physical continuity then is a tool, not an end goal.

What follows are a series of suggestions. None of them is magical, most of them are not new. All of them in combination are responses most likely to focus on and/or enhance the desirability of being Jews in a significant way.

Strategy #1 - A New Kind of Brain Trust

In the West today, a significant number of Nobel prize winners, political leaders, national journalists, novelists, poets, performing and creative artists, media moguls,

directors and producers, scholars, academics, and Forbes 400 are Jews. For some, their ties are tenuous; others are seriously engaged in exploring and living seriously as Jews.

For most, their sense of obligation to the Jewish community and its institutions is occasional, inconsistent, and/or non-existent. Today there is rarely the discomfort born of being identified as Jews, but rather the indifference to the positive ramifications and obligations which could or should ensue as Jews.

We, within the Jewish establishment, talk with and among ourselves. Our wailings, dreams, fears, nightmares, aspirations, hopes, and frustrations are shared by a few of us with a limited number. Dialogues with others, opportunities to listen and learn from those inside the establishment, are rare.

I would use the contact we have to reach into the groups listed above (not students) in an effort to engage them. Using all means possible I would seek a representative sample of these successful people to pursue jointly with "establishment" Jewish counterparts a series of issues and questions.

Are there Jewish teachings which influence them? What are they? Would they consider a world without Jews consequential? Why or why not? Do they feel any desire to help shape Jewish institutions which are dedicated to helping Jews live evermore significant and identifiable Jewish lifestyles? How would they contribute to that goal? What are the criticisms they have to make of present day Jewish institutions?

If a representative group of 10 or 20 would give a day to contemplating such questions, I believe their creativity would contribute fresh insights for Jewish institutions.

Strategy #2 - Expanded Use of Media

We are a small people. In America we constitute fewer than 2 percent of the population, in England less than 1 percent. We are a media-oriented people. We go to plays more than others; a greater percentage of us have cable; a growing number are addicted to Web sites and Internet.

There are many creative yet seriously underfunded efforts geared to using the new media - CD-ROMs, Web sites and the like, as well as long established cable TV systems. The insufficient funding for further projects is appalling. In some instances,

as a result, the talent of the creators is lost to the Jewish community. Today the cries about the inadequacy of much of Jewish education efforts can be traced to the disparity of what most Jewish children are exposed to in their day-to-day education as contrasted with their after-school or weekend Jewish education.

It is imperative to appeal to people such as Steven Spielberg, Michael Eisen, Michael Ovitz, Jeffrey Katzenberg, David Geffen, Edgar Bronfman, Jr., and others who have the wherewithal to help develop the technologies for enveloping the rich Jewish past and present into the "packages" used by so many Jews today for everything except Jewish edification and identity enhancement.

Strategy #3 - Emphasize the Integration of Discrete Jewish Experiences

Cumulatively, a remarkable percentage of Jews who are not engaged in intensive Jewish experiences on a day-to-day basis have had significant Jewish experiences. Thousands upon thousands have attended Jewish summer camps over the decades. It is estimated that over 150,000 Jews from America and ten of thousands from England have had study experiences in Israel. No one can even estimate accurately how many were influenced positively by Hillel or a Jewish youth experience in their lives.

We have never developed the means to attempt integrative and follow-up experiences for those who did not subsequently become life-long affiliates of synagogues, or supporters or adherents to Jewish life.

While all institutions speak about Jewish community, the proclivity is to act atomistically as if one person only will or can experience Jewish life through the auspices of one organization.

The beginning project in England of computerizing resources must be extended. It is positioned to be a catalyst (not a controller) in helping to effectuate the exchange of names between organizations, and to follow up on experiences between and within organizations. After young people return from Israel, it should be possible to track them and help them link up with on-going Jewish organizations which could build upon their experiences. Synagogues and Hillels could be inter-linked to track the comings and goings of young adults.

The list of possibilities is endless. The principle is what needs emphasizing. All through Jewish history the interaction of home and community proved the most effective method for reenforcement of teaching and behaviors. High congruence of

the shared values and intentions between the home and Jewish institutions has a far greater likelihood of producing positively engaged and committed Jews.

Some scholars even claimed that the communal institutions were *more important* than the home. In any case, the law of entropy is always at work. Reinforcement of *any* experience is the key to integration of values and production of desirable behavior. Stand-alone Jewish experiences are doomed to fail if the reinforcement factor is not made a part of the efforts. Two examples from America demonstrate the concept:

The San Francisco Jewish Community Center Nursery School *requires* parents to take part in Jewish parenting and study experiences which parallel the experiences their children are exposed to at nursery school. The expectation is that the reinforcement of home and JCC will affect the home and the child much more strongly than would be the case if no parental requirements were in force. (Dare we conjecture about how much incongruence might exist in some circles between what a child is being taught in a Jewish day school and experiencing at home?)

A second example is one of a brilliant failure. The late Robert Bergman z"l, a rabbi in Orange County, California, evolved a different kind of synagogue. All who joined had to agree to meet a number of requirements:

1. To study the subjects their children were studying.
2. To help in the *physical* maintenance of the synagogue by participating in clean-up days, repair and painting projects, and the like.
3. To give *tzedakah* to Jewish and general causes on a level commensurate with their incomes.
4. To attend up to three town meetings a year devoted to synagogue affairs.
5. To pay dues on a sliding scale, making income no barrier but requiring significant giving from those able to do so.
6. To visit Israel with their rabbi on a regular basis; being subsidized to do so by the congregation if they could not afford the trip.

This brilliant effort failed after a few years when the wealthy few who had underwritten this noble experiment began to disagree among themselves, with some withdrawing their support. The approach begs to be replicated.

Strategy #4 - Setting Standards

The examples above are samples of experiments that need to be broadened. In the Wexner Heritage program in America, identified volunteer leaders are asked to engage in an extended period of serious Jewish study which integrates travel to Europe and Israel, highlighting the rich Jewish heritage they can draw upon. They are committed to service to the community upon completion of the course.

The Wexner Foundation funds a leadership program for a limited number preparing for careers in communal service, Jewish education, and the rabbinate. It also underwrites a special education program for Israelis who are identified as key leaders for tomorrow's Israel. They are exposed to organized Jewish life in America, which results in myth-breaking, on the one hand, and intensification of relationships, on the other.

These programs are reminders that the community must always set forth standards of expectations which are qualitatively superior and demanding of the participants. Unfortunately, they only scratch the surface and need extensive expansion to impact upon Jewish life in a significant way.

Strategy #5 - Personalize Jewish Institutions

Unfortunately, anomie, distrust, and suspicion of organizations are normative attributes for more and more Jews. Study after study demonstrates that most Jews are not even aware of the purposes and work of many fine Jewish organizations. What is required is to put a human face on the organizations by demonstrating the reasons for their existence.

Three examples here should suffice. A number of years ago, a New York area Jewish Center realized that it was experiencing a high membership turnover rate. Many members had joined so that a child could attend nursery school or day camp, using the Center as a Jewish cafeteria rather than a place where they themselves could enrich their lives physically and culturally.

Each staff worker was assigned 100 families. It became the worker's responsibility to contact each family by phone two or three times a year. The focus of the phone call was to ascertain if the family had any needs which the Center could respond to. The engagement process was of and in itself a great bond builder between the

Center and the home. Membership turnover dropped drastically and involvement in the Center soared.

A number of years ago a group of rabbinic students was trained in outreach techniques. They were sent into areas of low Jewish affiliation and high Jewish density, going door to door offering their services as educators and facilitators for matters of Jewish interest and concern to those they contacted. No charge was made for the services. The results were positive and resulted in increased involvement. The project, which was funded by a time-limited grant, was discontinued and has not been repeated. Habad and Aish HaTorah have appreciated the efficacy of outreach and have raised much support as a result of their successful efforts. The Reform and Conservative movements in America still seem to find this impossible to replicate, short of one or two attempts at circuit rabbis in outlying areas of sparse Jewish population.

The Los Angeles community has experienced a number of disasters, man-made and natural. After the earthquake, which was the greatest natural disaster ever experienced in the United States, thousands of Jewish homes and apartments were damaged or destroyed. Many Jewish institutions suffered major damage. In the face of all this, the Federation organized a community-wide outreach program. In a matter of less than three weeks, 30,000 to 40,000 Jewish homes were called by volunteers to ascertain the extent of need of each family. Service centers staffed by representatives of all Jewish agencies were set up to expedite the distribution of food, bedding and clothing, to fill out forms for government aid in rebuilding, to be relocated if need be, for vocational and psychological services, and the like.

I would maintain that we not wait for disasters and that at least once a year every known Jewish family be called by synagogues, centers, and Federation staff and volunteers. They should be asked how they are and what they might need from the Jewish community. Every effort should be made to then follow up if the family indicates a need or interest in some connection with a Jewish organization, regardless of what that request might be. Somehow on Super-Sundays we call hundreds of thousands for money. We need to expend as much effort to give of ourselves as community representatives.

Strategy #6 - Research and Evaluation

There are what the late Yehudah Rosenbloom called pockets of Jewish energy. Experiments abound and so do success stories. Unfortunately, very little money or energy is devoted to research and evaluation on that which is taking place, that

which is needed, and that which works.

Tens of millions of dollars a year is being expended on Jewish education, informal and formal, and on human services and organizational activities for Jews. A national research and evaluation bureau with 1 percent of the money could provide an enormous amount of knowledge, find experimental programs, share success stories, and provide training opportunities at levels not even dreamed of until now.

This is only possible if all organizations would submit to a voluntary taxing system of 1 percent to make this possible. If only 25 percent of the funds spent were so "taxed," the results would still be a fund far outstripping the amount available annually to perform these research and development programs which are so desperately needed by all Jewish organizations.

Strategy #7 - Jewish Guidance

Many Jews have grown up lacking the Jewish living tools required for significant Jewish lifestyles. Successful business people and professionals do not find it easy to admit they are Jewish illiterates.

Twenty-four hour 800 (long distance) lines devoted to access to Jewish information are needed. A national referral and information system for professions can now easily be computerized and made available. The Internet Web is already replete with reams of materials, but the efforts are fragmentary and uneven. No one has seen this as a communal obligation, yet it is an imperative.

We must accept the reality that the technologies of today are but a beginning of new ways of communicating. It behooves us as a community to move artfully, forcefully, and with focus, to be proactive rather than reactive in mastering the new role of communications, to the end that access to Jewish knowledge is available at as many levels as is the case for general information.

All of these strategies and proposals are more or less easily doable, given a commitment of leadership to reorder priorities and act in a more cooperative way in problem-solving. The individual entrepreneur and risk-taker is still needed, for tomorrow's conventional solutions come from today's radical innovations. My list has not been exhaustive. I made no mention of many that are now accepted as desirable responses, even if not yet achieved. Expansion of serious Jewish camps for young adults, expansion of programs like March of the Living, the Exodus reenactment, a Jewish service corps, a Jewish voucher system, Open Jewish

University, access to an Israeli-based diaspora-focused university, are but some of the ideas which have been expounded upon during the years.

Jewish Outreach

Let me discuss just one of the above in more detail, though I would not claim it more important than any other on the list: a Jewish outreach corps.

The Lubavitch hassidim have taught us that outreach works. The non-traditional community is faced with a dilemma. The strict vows of penitence which young hassidim take find little resonance in the non-hassidic community. Yet as an extension of some of the previous proposals, teams of Jewish resource people can bring teaching materials to train families and volunteers in ways of expanding Jewish experiences. I would experiment with teams of rabbis, educators, and communal workers. I would have some available for "chat rooms" and other Internet opportunities. I would have another group of teams available on a rotating basis for 800 call-in telephone numbers related to problems, program ideas, or education discussions, which are available through conference call technology. I would have satellite services with two-way capability set up throughout the country and beamed into a nation-wide network of synagogues, community centers, and other community buildings. Traveling teams should be underwritten to make themselves physically available in smaller communities.

If the team members would pledge one week of service a year, a small staff could coordinate the use of time in relation to the target groups and activities identified above. The most prestigious of our Jewish communal professionals should be asked to organize the effort and give of their own time. New graduates from the seminaries should be approached, as should returnees from Israel studies, Jewish camp counselors, youth leaders, and part-time Jewish educators.

Their goals should be focused: to engage with all who are ready to expand their Jewish horizons and intensify their Jewish knowledge and skills to engage in Jewish study and service.

Conclusion

Panic is no answer to dealing with problems. Not all problems have solutions, yet many problems present opportunities. Those opportunities are present now and

leadership is focused as never before. A consensus is evolving as to our long-range needs as a Jewish community. Never have so many thoughtful thinkers and planners devoted as much time and energy to problem-solving. The calls to action must now be directed to those most able to respond with the material support for the creative providers of Jewish renewal opportunities among us.

Many of the wealthy do care. By their nature more often than not, being entrepreneurs, they operate unilaterally. The outcomes as a result are most frequently innovative and fruitful, and such efforts must not be blunted. They must somehow come to be convinced that there is an agenda which demands concerted and coordinated planning and action. It is our task to make the case why this must be so.

We are not an ever-dying people. We are an eternal people. Our numbers will continue to wane and wax. But we must capitalize on the historical reality of how much is in our own hands.

When the last anti-Semite dies, we confront our essence as Jews. Why wait? Why not move on our positives, our imperatives, and marshal the will now to share this marvelous reality we call Judaism - share it with more and more of those who have become so indifferent, amnesiac, or ignorant of the glories of living as Jews. The pleasures and fulfillments are too enriching to keep to ourselves.

Let me close with nine clichés, using the word in its classical meaning - to clench or hold fast. I list them without commentary, leaving for others the gloss, the interpretation, of what the author really meant, the division between those clichés which are time bound or gender free, those which are between individual and friend or friends, and the reasoning behind the negatively and positively cast clichés.

1. Hope for everything; expect little.
2. Do not be seduced by the power and wealth of those you may be called upon to work with.
3. Remember you do not own the communities or institutions in which you will serve.
4. Live a professional life of full disclosure, confident that once they have the facts, people will make the best possible decisions much more often than not.
5. Do not try to achieve unity by insisting upon conformity.

6. Respect and listen to the voices of difference and dissent, for they may have tomorrow's solutions.
7. Do not destroy your own family as you attempt to serve the Jewish people.
8. Remember the holy and humane reasons which brought you to choose your vocation in service of the Jewish People.
9. Remember if you truly touch and teach one other person in your life, you will have been blessed far beyond the level of most people in the world.

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