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Jewish Community Studies

The Organized Jewish Community of Greater Chicago

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The Jewish community federation is American Jewry's invention to replace the historic Jewish *kehillah* in the open, voluntary, and free environment of the United States and, indeed, North America. It was developed a century ago out of earlier American Jewish experiences with federated organizations such as Chicago's United Hebrew Relief Association of the Civil War period and the following decades. Federations began as federations of Jewish agencies in order to secure more efficient fundraising through federated giving and more equitable distribution of those funds to those needs seen to be of interest to the entire Jewish community, primarily social service needs but also including some educational and recreational needs. In time, Federations grew to embrace overseas needs and some countrywide needs as well. For many years now, Federations have addressed needs in all *five spheres of Jewish community activity: religious-congregational, educational-cultural, communal-welfare, community relations, and Israel-overseas.*

In the process, the Federations themselves changed. From fundraising mechanisms they became Jewish welfare federations. Then they became the address for major fundraising for Israel and overseas relief. Finally, after World War II, they moved into community planning and, after the Six-Day War, into community leadership as what may be referred to as the *framing institutions* of the Jewish community.

The Federation idea itself is a product of American Progressivism. The Federations were born during the height of the Progressive era. They embodied the same understanding of efficiency and economy, philanthropic probity, community building, and civic involvement that characterized American Progressivism in all fields. Indeed, the Jewish community may have been the most successful of all American groups in its adoption and assimilation of Progressive ideas into its institutions and institutional culture.

The Progressive era encompassed the first years of the chronological twentieth century until World War I. Progressives represented the effort of middle-class reformers to cope with the problems of the new urban industrial society in the United States through the strengthening of local, particularly voluntary or public non-governmental institutions. The Progressives believed that communities, properly led, could contribute much to the resolution of the problems of urban life in an industrial age. In this they sought to restore the original meaning of public, which included both governmental and voluntary activity.

This provided an excellent form for American Jews to adopt. The traditional *kehillah*, whose origins were in Babylonia in the sixth century BCE after the destruction of the

First Temple, and which reached its apogee between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries, was autonomous and compulsory for all Jews. That is to say, Jews were recognized by their host nations as a nation in exile, subject to local rulers, on one hand, but with substantial rights of self-government, on the other. There was no single pattern for the *kehillah*. In some places the *kehillah* could even exercise the power of capital punishment under the charter granted by a local ruler. The local ruler granted the charter which defined the *kehillah* and its powers from the perspective of the host society, but the *kehillah* itself was governed by halakhah, Jewish law, as it had developed through the Bible, the Talmud, the Codes, and the rabbinical responsa that formed an ever-growing body of case law, 80 percent dealing with matters of civil government in the various kehillot.

Not only that, but every Jew had to belong to the *kehillah* in which he or she resided if they wanted to remain Jewish. Since there was no way to leave the Jewish people except by converting to another religion, this effectively meant that anyone who did not want to become a Christian or a Muslim was subject to the authority of the *kehillah*. Those who governed the *kehillah* were basically the wealthier members of the community who could afford to pay the taxes demanded of it by the foreign rulers. But kehillot ranged from medieval democracies to oligarchies. Because of the scope of their powers, most of what they did was civil in nature rather than religious, as we would understand the term.

The *kehillah* system began to break down in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries at the opening of the modern epoch as nation-states emerged and eliminated the idea of different laws for different groups in their boundaries in favor of the principle of one national law for all. Still, in Europe most Jews continued to be required to belong to their *kehillah* just as Christians were subject to the discipline of their churches. Only in the English-speaking world was this never the case because the Jewish communities in that world were entirely modern. Indeed, the most extreme example of this "free market" of identification was the United States.

Everything the Jews tried to do to modify that free and open market failed because of the legal and constitutional principles upon which the United States was founded. Thus, the Progressive offered a way to organize a Jewish community and to give it as much power as possible in a voluntary society while providing avenues for applying social pressure to those who wished to be connected with it.

This Progressive approach to the issues of Jewish community building and community service was successful for a century and a very exciting, dynamic, and historic century it has been for American Jewry and the Jewish people as a whole. Now, however, the Progressive solution is unraveling. As times have changed, the situation of the American Jewish community is no longer that of a community of immigrants but a community of pacesetters, fully integrated into American life. Not only that, but the world has changed many times over in its technology, in its social patterns, and in its political and moral expectations (e.g., the empowerment of women in organizational life).

While Jewish community federations have survived these changes better than most, still their situation has become more difficult as they try to implement the old models in a new environment. Realtors tell us that when it comes to buying property, the three most important considerations are "location, location, and location." This may be said for all human activities if we understand that for other human activities the three "locations" embrace *location in space*, *location in time*, and *location in culture*.

The Federations were born as the Jews had relocated themselves in space from Europe to North America at a time when America was becoming a world power and Progressivism was its dominant domestic ideal, in a very different cultural atmosphere than that which prevailed in America after World War I and that was again transformed in the 1960s. Consequently all of these locations have changed, even if our communities seem to be in the same general physical places that they were at the beginning of the twentieth century. The space of "Chicago Jewry" is no longer simply in Jewish residential ghettos in Chicago but is diffused throughout a metropolitan region only part of which is within the Jewish United Fund of Greater Chicago service area. The Jews of greater Chicago have been much affected by globalization. Many of them now reside in Florida, California, and other parts of the United States, perhaps even commuting back and forth between the Chicago area and those other places. Many are closely connected with Israel and quite a few have children who have settled there. Hence their spatial perceptions have been altered by these and other changes which in turn have altered their location in time, which passes whether we like it or not, and brings its changes whether we like them or not.

After a century of looking toward government or public nongovernmental activities for major initiatives, we have entered into an era of privatization. From federated giving, Federation's potential constituents have come to desire pinpointing their philanthropy and gain "hands-on" contact with the recipients of their contributions. Rather than seeking communal activities for their pleasure, they seek private ones, joining with the community only for certain kinds of "happenings" that appeal to them.

Not only have conditions changed, but now the Jewish public agenda is changing as well. As the twentieth century draws to a close, organized Jewry is in the process of concluding the great mobilizing tasks that have confronted the Jewish people for the past century and for which it organized itself into its present structure. Those great tasks are being completed with extraordinary success. They have revolved around a popular *rebellion* against the Jewish situation of homelessness, persecution, and impoverishment in the diaspora; *relief* from the conditions of poverty and oppression which were the lot of most of world Jewry then and throughout much of this century; *rescue* of Jews from countries of distress and danger to Israel and New World diaspora's where the Jewish people could survive and flourish; and *reconstruction* of Jewish life under new conditions of freedom and equality.

Those have been great tasks, greatly undertaken and well done. With all of our mistakes, we have much to be proud of as we draw up a balance sheet at the century's end. Indeed, this century should stand out, even in the long history of the Jewish people.

However, the completion of those tasks leaves a vacuum for organized Jewish life. Jews will continue to pursue their individual goals as they will, but to function as a collectivity they must be moved by important collective tasks. Hence we are at the moment in a hiatus as we turn to identify the tasks of the next century.

After a century in which the civil tasks of the Jewish people dominated the Jewish agenda, we have been witnessing a shift or return to the spiritual tasks of Judaism, sometimes in familiar ways and sometimes in new and even strange ways, but all directed toward matters of the spirit. The result is that the civil institutions which the Jewish people have built are almost all in difficulties at this moment. While those civil institutions may not provide the vision that will motivate Jewish activity in the immediate future, they must share that vision if they are to remain strong and vital institutions as we need them to be.

What are the basic principles of such a vision? We can identify three eternal ones: *maintaining and strengthening the solidarity of the Jewish people, maintaining and developing Jewish civilization in all of its dimensions including the spiritual, and the maintenance and strengthening of Jewish norms.* In recent years, American Jewry has seen these as constituting *Jewish continuity*.

Any vision for the Jewish people must rest upon four basic principles: *Torah*, a shared commitment to Jewish learning and the commanding obligations that being Jewish entails including *Tzedakah* and special responsibility, *am yisrael* (Jewish peoplehood), identification with the Jewish people as a whole in a great chain of Jewish tradition that stretches across the generations, binding Jews across time and space, and *clal yisrael* (the community of Israel), Jewish unity despite our differences and with mutual respect regarding those differences.

In the new globalized world, we must add another principle, that of *kiruv* (outreach), the commitment of those who affirm these principles to reach out as appropriate to other Jews, to non-Jews who seek to share the fate of the Jewish people, and to humanity in general, each in the appropriate measure, to touch them while strengthening Jewish life at its core.

The advancement of these principles must be based on what seem like two contradictory thrusts: one, provision for more plural expression in Jewish life than ever before and the other, the redesign of the framing institutions of Jewry of which the Federation is one of the most important, and two, to meet the challenges of a new era. All of these point us to the necessity for redesigning our communal institutions including the Federation and suggest to us directions in which we must look.

The development of the Chicago Jewish community reflects all of this. Individual Jews began drifting into Chicago in the 1820's and the 1830's before the new settlement on the shores of Lake Michigan had even acquired a political organization of its own. However, it was not until 1845, eight years after Chicago's incorporation as a city, that the first High Holy Day services were held. That same year an organized Jewish community came

into existence through the creation of the Jewish Burial Ground Society, which established a cemetery. In 1846 the first congregation was founded, Kehillath Anshe Ma'ariv (the Congregation of the people of the West, later known as KAM). The Jewish Burial Ground Society merged with it, and during the 1850's the congregation built its own building (1851) and established a day school (1853). The first generation of organized Jewish life in Chicago spans the period from the founding of Congregation KAM in 1846 until the fire of 1847 (not to be confused with the Great Fire of 1871), which burned the East European ghetto.

As a boomtown, Chicago began attracting Jews from other parts of Europe who wished to have their own congregational organizational identities. Kehillath Bnei Shalom was organized in 1849 to serve the Jews of Posen, who maintained a Polish Ashkenazic ritual, while the Hebrew Benevolent Society of Chicago was organized approximately the same time for the less Orthodox. Kehillath Bnei Shalom underwent a schism in 1876. In 1857 Ramah Lodge Number 33 of B'nai B'rith was organized, and that same year the Israelite Reform Society came into being, which in 1861 established Congregation Sinai. The United Hebrew Relief Association was established in 1859, and by the end of the decade the Young Men's Fraternity, the Clay Library and Dramatic Association, the Ladies Benevolent Society, and the Young Ladies Benevolent Society were all in operation, even though the Jewish population by 1860 was no more than fifteen hundred persons.

The first strictly East European congregation was organized in 1862 as Congregation Bnei Jacob. A year later Beth Hamidrash Hagadol was formed, and in 1867 the two congregations merged. The East European Jews organized many such congregations, either upon their arrival or as a result of schisms within established synagogues, at least as many merges took place as well. The United Hebrew Relief Association opened a Jewish hospital in 1868. Thus by the time of the Chicago fire of 1874, at the end of the first generation of the community's existence, it already had a panoply of organizations and institutions touching upon most aspects of Jewish Life, if only in a rudimentary way.

The next generation, which witnessed the great migration of European Jews and the increase of the Jewish population from 10,000 to over 200,000 Jews, saw an almost geometrical proliferation of similar institutions and the first efforts to create community-wide linkages between them. In 1900 the principal community-wide welfare organization federated as the Jewish Federation of Chicago, which remained the province of the German Jews for another generation and a half. The Chicago Rabbinical Association, one of the earliest attempts to create links across the myriad congregations and synagogues, was established in 1893. It was reorganized as the Chicago Board of Rabbis in 1959 with Federation support. The Zionist movement in Chicago dates back to 1886, when a branch of Hovevei Zion was established, but it received its greatest organizational boost between 1896, when the Chicago Zionist Organization Number One was formed, and World War I. In that same period, the new immigrants organized landsmanshaften, of which six hundred existed in 1948, a number that diminished to sixty by 1961 and is now approaching zero. Even so, by 1920 only 85 percent of Chicago Jewry was of East European birth or descent, an indication that German and Central European Jews still formed an important element. The East European arrivals came into a situation marked

by intense congregationalism and congregational factionalism. It was a situation they were very familiar with from experience, and they entered the fray in their new home with much zest. Tales of legendary synagogue fights form the heritage of Chicago Jewry to this very day.

Citywide Jewish educational and cultural institutions came into existence in the third generation, with two principal ones, the College of Jewish Studies (now the Spertus College of Judaica) being founded in 1925, and the Hebrew Theological College in 1922. The third generation, the period between the world wars, was the high point of communal activity in the field of Jewish education to date. Most of the independent Hebrew schools founded in that period have either disappeared, as the neighborhoods that supported them ceased to be Jewish, or have become part of the Associated Talmud Torah network. Following World War II, supplementary Jewish education passed entirely into the hands of the synagogues, except for the small Orthodox element affiliated with the Associated Talmud Torahs. Meanwhile, the division between German and East European Jews persisted and may even have intensified. One way that this was reflected was in the formation of the Covenant Club in 1917, to provide a downtown luncheon facility for the successful East Europeans, to parallel the Standard Club (incorporated in 1869), which maintained its German Jewish exclusivity.

Chicago's Jewish Federation was founded to provide joint fund raising for the hospitals and social-service institutions of the community. It never became interested in overseas and Zionist needs, however, and the Jewish Welfare Fund came into being for that purpose in 1936, supported primarily by the East European community. The two were not merged until 1968, when the Jewish United Fund of Metro Chicago was established; even so, both retained their separate identities within the framework of the latter for a number of years. Prior to the merger the two bodies were not only separate but also maintained the limited roles characteristic of pre-World War II day; however, since the merger their community-planning dimension has developed with a vengeance. The Chicago Jewish community's segmented style was maintained in the post-World War II generation as well. In the late 1940's and early 1950's the Jews evacuated Chicago's West Side, which had been the heart of the Jewish activity in the city for two generations, and then in the 1950's and 1960's, they began to abandon the city altogether, scattering over the northern and western suburbs and even into the southern suburbs in small numbers, so that geography intensified segmentation. By the 1970's the frontiers of settlement of Chicago's Jewry were forty miles distant from the Loop, with the majority of Jews concentrated in West Rogers Park, within the city limits, and Skokie just beyond.

By 1961 Chicago had forty-three Orthodox synagogues, twenty-five Conservative, sixteen Reform and five traditional (a uniquely Chicago category, consisting of congregations where the services is Orthodox but mixed seating is the norm). By that same year both Orthodox and Conservative rabbinical courts were in operation. The Jewish Federation and the Jewish Welfare Fund (the latter established in 1936 to meet overseas needs, something that did not interest the German Jews at the time) came together in 1968 to form the Jewish United Fund of Metropolitan Chicago, which became the umbrella organization supporting the Jewish Family and Community Service, a

number of child-development and care center, two Jewish hospitals, and a network of Jewish community centers, as well as the Board of Rabbis and other institutions. Jewish schools were united under either the Board of Jewish Education (Conservative, Reform and Independent) and the Associated Talmud Torahs (Orthodox). There were eight day schools in 1970, two substantial Jewish libraries, a Jewish museum, a Chicago Jewish Archives, and two Jewish city clubs (the Standard Club for the old families, dating back to 1869, and the Covenant Club, organized in 1917 for the East European Jews). In addition to these local organization, all the major countrywide organizations maintained regional offices in Chicago. The Orthodox, Reform, and Conservative movements maintain regional summer camps operated out of their Chicago offices, and Chicago is also the headquarters of B'nai B'rith District 6, perhaps the most powerful of all the B'nai B'rith regional groupings in the world.

As the decision to be involved in Jewish life increasingly became a voluntary one, the new voluntarism extended into the internal life of the Jewish community as well, generating pluralism -- even with previously free but relatively homogeneous and monolithic community structures. This pluralism was increased by the breakdown of the traditional reasons for being Jewish and the rise of different incentives for Jewish association. The situation demanded new federal arrangements to achieve a degree of unity within a community larger and far more diverse than any Jews had confronted in their long history. The pluralistic federalism that has emerged in the contemporary Jewish community substantially eliminated the neat patterns of communal organization that were common earlier, the kind easily presented on organizational charts. Certainly the model of a hierarchical organizational structure does not offer an accurate picture of distribution of powers and responsibilities in the Jewish community today. There are no functioning organizational pyramid in Jewish life, no national organizations that can order others within its "jurisdiction" to be toe mark. In sum, in most communities there is no central governing agent that serves as the point where authority, responsibility, and power converge, even in the local arena.

Chicago's Jewish community achieved its initial form as a result of the settlement of German and Central European Jews during the days of city's first boom. It's oldest and most prestigious congregations stem from that period and have survived numerous moves and social changes by means of judicious mergers. As in the case of most large cities, the Jewish settlers were a ployglot group from all parts of Europe. While the Germans and Central Europeans helped set a certain tone on one level, on anther there was no overall pattern established because of the great diversity of the mass of East European Jews who arrived subsequently. It was only in the 1960's the Chicago began to unify its institutions on the communal plan, and is still much closer to New York than to Cleveland and Detroit in the nature of relationships between communal and congregational spheres.

Most institutions serve only a small segment of the Chicago area's Jewish population. Synagogue affiliation was less that 50 percent in the city and reached about 60 percent in the suburbs, where it was generally the single point of affiliation for those Jews desiring any association at all. The rabbis in the city were either members of the Chicago Board of Rabbis, the heir to the Chicago Rabbinical Association, or the Orthodox Merkaz

Harabonim. There were separate Orthodox and Conservative rabbinical courts. Orthodox rabbinical training was provided by the Hebrew Theological College and a branch of the Telz Yeshiva, while the division between Orthodox and non-Orthodox schools continued to be institutionalized through the Associated Talmud Torahs and the Board of Jewish Education. Even the emergence of the Jewish United Fund, an obvious attempt at linkage and integration, led to new kinds of segmentation in the Chicago pattern, as the fund established a Jewish Education Planning Department in what seemed to be direct competition with the Board of Jewish Education, its own constituent agency.

At one time the third largest Jewish community in the United States, Chicago has been dropping in size both absolute numbers and in position since the end of World War II, and many Chicagoans began migrating westward. As a community, the division between German and East European Jews remained pronounced until the post war period, with the institutional balance reflecting the division. Its size tended to work against integration in the first place, although it's regional location somewhat canceled that out, since the Midwest, with its emphasis in a pluralism of associations, has tended to promote more integration than the Northeast. Chicago's general environment, with its tendencies toward individualism, also did not help the cause of integrated communal organization. Most recently, the metropolitanization of Chicago Jewry has added to the possibilities for segmentation rather than linkage among the local Jewish institutions.