

Increasing Public Awareness of Demographic Trends and their Implications

Awareness of Demographic Issues and their Consequences

Daniel Elazar

In striving to increase awareness of Jewish demographic issues, the question is how the Jewish people, as an organized community, can affect a matter that is ultimately extraordinarily private and personal. Yet it is our task not only to increase public awareness, but also to do this in such a way that it will bring action.

The four principal areas of awareness are as follows:

- (a) Awareness of changing conditions and trends in marriage, fertility, aging, and demographic losses caused by assimilation. The problem is in fact that a lot more awareness of these questions exists than we necessarily give credit for. It is very difficult to be in the Jewish world today, even if one's only contact with Jews is through reading a weekly Jewish newspaper, and avoid encountering that reality.
- (b) Awareness of the implications of these trends on the individual, family, and community at world levels. If there is an awareness, it tends to be one based upon some kind of sensationalist approach, rather than a solid understanding.
- (c) Awareness of the possibility of influencing existing trends.
- (d) Availability of information on Jewish population issues and curricula for Jewish studies at various levels.

First, the demographic issue has figured on the Jewish agenda as a subject of discussion, but has not been one for action. Perhaps we do

not know how to go about it, at least through institutions, in a public way. But without consciousness of an issue, there is no likelihood that people will try to deal with it. So what can be done to increase Jewish consciousness of the demographic situation and its implications for Jewish survival, including the survival of Israel, is to keep the issue on the agenda.

Second, with regard to increasing the birth rate, the evidence suggests that there are only two ways to increase the birth rate. The first is by enabling those who want children, but cannot produce them unaided, to do so through modern medical means, and thus increase fertility; and the second is by motivating couples of normal fecundity to bear children through an ideological vision or new perception of their interest in doing so.

How can the organized Jewish community in the State of Israel foster the commitment necessary for couples to consider having more children? The Orthodox community, especially the ultra-Orthodox one, for reasons which seem to be ideological, through their desire to produce a new generation of Jews committed to Torah, as they understand it, have an astounding birth rate. The Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs estimates that, whereas in the diaspora most Jewish couples have a fertility rate of considerably under two, and in Israel they have a rate of something above two (2.7), the rates for modern Orthodox Jews are 3 to 5, and for ultra-Orthodox Jews between 7 and 10 per family. This is a powerful piece of evidence of what ideological motivation can achieve, and we need to take it seriously.

With regard to the third question, that of strengthening the Jewish family, the evidence suggests that strong families are necessary for Jewish survival and continuity, yet the family is under siege in contemporary society. Indeed, families that are more affluent, and therefore one would expect more cognizant of demographic issues, tend to have fewer children, unless some other motivation such as ultra-Orthodoxy comes into play. Thus, when affluence is combined with other factors which weaken the family, the issue of strengthening the family is a serious one. The question is one of how the organized Jewish community should counter those forces weakening the family, such as cohabitation without marriage, delayed marriage, divorce, single parenting, and homosexuality, and at the same time encourage the factors that make for stronger families.

A Minority View on Increasing Public Awareness of Demographic Issues

Daniel Thurz

There is room for disagreement with Professor Elazar's view that the way to increase the Jewish birth rate is to increase public awareness. Giving out information will affect only those who are already involved with the Jewish community, and are already committed. The problem is how to reach beyond the core of committed Jews to those who are neither active nor involved, a group which comprises at least half of the Jewish community.

What is needed is not more exhortation, because apart from the Orthodox, people do not make decisions as to whether to have children on the basis of ideology. Only 5 per cent of Israeli Jewish women, a group which one would expect to be ideologically motivated, it seems, give an ideological basis for their decision to have children. Rather, they decide to have children because they want to have a family.

It is necessary to recognize the voluntary nature of the Jewish people outside Israel, and the fact that people make decisions for themselves. What is needed is not exhortation, but magnets to attract people and involve them in Jewish life. Involvement means, firstly, a minimum participation in one organization, be it synagogue, federation, or Jewish community center, a national organization, or some kind of group or, secondly, participation by giving money, which is an important way of identifying. The majority of Jews, as we know, do not participate in any way. The efforts of federations and their agencies, synagogues, community centers and national organizations have been devoted and well-funded in the United States, so that there has been no lack of reaching out to the unaffiliated. B'nai B'rith, for example, has used varied activities for young people, including sports activities such as bowling, to attract students on campus to its youth movement. The goal is to cement and develop a strong allegiance to the Jewish people, without a narrow ideological commitment. There are institutes, trips to Israel, and leadership training seminars for young people, the goal being less imparting learning than creating an attachment to Jewish peoplehood. Synagogues, federations and national organizations have so many programs, and attract so many people to them, that one cannot say that they have failed in the United States. At least, they have only failed with the half of the Jewish population which does not join in at

all. The Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture is about to begin a study of an experimental outreach program for such Jews in Saint Louis. The program will probably not try to bring new members into B'nai B'rith, but rather would have a person go into people's homes and talk to them on non-establishment grounds. Such unaffiliated Jews may not really have dropped out of being Jewish, and may be thinking about Jewish life, but have simply not found the magnet that attracts them. The goal should be to develop new, different magnets, that will attract that part of the Jewish community which so far, despite valiant efforts, we have not been able to reach.

Panel Discussion

Stella Rozan

As president of the International Council of Jewish Women (ICJW), it strikes me as imperative to consider the new status of Jewish women, insofar as it is self-evident that this is an essential role in any project to increase the birth rate. Without renouncing the family unit, or the fundamental values it embodies and transmits, women want to attain higher levels of education and profit from more extensive training. They are seeking more specialized positions, yet they wish to share the joy and the burdens of raising a family. However, the services they require and which should be provided by government or social services, are often insufficient and almost always costly. Individual Jewish communities and Jewish social agencies might take it upon themselves to supplement those services which are most obviously lacking, and even envision creating new ones.

Reinforcing our educational programs, transforming them if necessary, and improving our service network, can certainly help today's men and women to become more aware of the dangers of a further weakening of population size among our people, and thus sensitive enough to view their role on a personal and historical level.

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Belle Simon

We need to think on two fronts, to deal with the problem in very practical ways. People who are already committed as Jews need to be

helped by the services that we provide in the Jewish community, to be able to have larger families, through the provision of scholarships for Jewish education, and day care facilities for children, so that the phenomenon of working women does not rule out the increase in population that many families would like to consider if they could. We need to develop a serious outreach program on many levels, for the Jews whom we do not see. We need to develop a system for identifying such unaffiliated Jews, and to provide, through our organizational structure and through Jewish communal services, ways of reaching them.

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Rabbi Wolf Kelman

We should not ignore the people whom we are not reaching. A revolution has been taking place over the last twenty years: instead of communities drifting and disappearing, we have a new trend of hundreds of thousands of Jews of all persuasions, turning toward Judaism. *Baalei tshuva*, closet Jews, whatever the metaphor one uses, the fact is that the opposite phenomenon to the erosion of Judaism once predicted is now occurring on a large scale. We must prepare institutions, projects, imaginative ideas, to bring in such people, not ignore them.

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Stephen Roth

I do not think that any more children are being produced, or anything is being changed, through public awareness. However, there is a small area in which public awareness can help.

We are in the fortunate situation today in which we can say that there is very little pain in being Jewish. But while it is painless to be a Jew, it is also painless to cease to be a Jew. So relieving pain is not the problem. The problem is restoring the will to live. The situation can be compared with the one which existed around the turn of the century, when we had a similarly strong decline in Jewish population. However, there was a vision then which could be offered, one which gave the Jewish people a new will to life, and that was Zionism. Obviously it touched only a small number of people, its impact was not on the birth

rate, and on the fact of assimilation its effect was marginal. But there was a vision. Zionism no longer fulfills this role, and only the ultra-Orthodox have a vision now. The conditions have changed, and Zionism has evolved from an ideology to a mere sense of solidarity, which requires much less commitment.

Unless we can find something that revolutionizes Jewish thinking, we find it very difficult to make being Jewish worthwhile. But if we need not relieve the pain, we can relieve the cost. Speaking of cost, social welfare organizations would do well to make the problems of children and of couples with small children their highest priority. Jewish education should be, if not free, then inexpensive. There must be couples who, in deciding whether to have more children, think of the cost of education. I would like to influence couples before their children go to kindergarten, by teaching them how to bring up their children in a Jewish way. Entry into the Jewish community should be cheaper. Joining a synagogue is very costly for a young couple or single person. It would be a good idea for synagogues to give free synagogue membership for a few years to young couples, particularly those with children. We can reduce the cost of being Jewish. This is where public awareness comes in. I agree that personal decisions are not made because of public awareness, or propaganda. But public awareness can influence people in the organizations, welfare organizations, synagogues, and educational organizations, in whose hands are the decisions for the kind of measures just suggested, to which others are welcome to add. All public awareness can be important.

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Nicole Goldmann

I do not believe that a broad campaign for public awareness will actually change behavior patterns. But one can affect the thinking of those who make decisions at a community level and run the programs. The European Council for Jewish Community Services [Conseil Européen des Services Communautaires Juifs] has been conducting a campaign for awareness in three areas – the social, the cultural, and in education. The council includes nineteen member organizations from both Western and Eastern Europe, and thus embraces a large number of Jews: one million three hundred thousand, excluding the Soviet Union.

We decided to pinpoint our audience very precisely. One aspect of the campaign was aimed at community leaders, presidents of

communities and organizations, those who are decision-makers. These leaders have been exposed to the importance of academic approaches and tools – through a visit to Israel to meet with Israeli academics (Professors Bachi and DellaPergola). So far Britain and the United States are the only countries with permanent institutes for Jewish demographic research. An effort is being made to persuade these leaders of the practical usefulness of research.

Another target group was professionals within the Jewish communities. And the third was young community leaders: they defined the issues which concerned them most, i.e. acceptance of children born of mixed marriages, and the definition of cultural policies for a broader public, in other words, Jews who are marginal to the communities. The last aspect of our awareness campaign concerned perhaps the most serious problem, that of the aging of the Jewish population. This topic was the subject of both research and action. Response to the questionnaire was gratifying, showing that communities are aware of the importance of the issue, and showed that about 20 or 25 per cent of the Jewish population is elderly in some communities. The challenge is to improve services to the elderly while also upgrading those for children and younger groups.

The campaign may not be exemplary, but it can serve as an example of what institutions can do. We should not aspire to change individual behavior. But community organizations can make use of professional communicators and the media to publicize our concerns. Jewish institutions cannot modify the behavior of Jews who live like other citizens of diaspora countries. They can, however, do better what they do now, which is intensifying the sense of Jewish identity of individual Jews.

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David Singer

Somehow there is an assumption here that we are engaged in a process of propaganda. My concerns (and those of the American Jewish Committee) are much more modest. I am concerned about communicating accurate information. And even to the degree that it is negative, one should be concerned less with modifying people's behavior than with telling them the facts. If the Jews want to commit demographic suicide, then let them at least do so in full consciousness of what the facts are. The key element here is to communicate serious

information about Jewish life to a broad Jewish audience, an intelligent lay audience. The challenge that we face here, the problem that exists, is in the area of communication.

There are four basic points. First, demography is not an attractive subject. It does not easily arouse interest and passionate concern in the average Jew. Second, American Jews are extraordinarily ignorant about things Jewish. Though they care deeply about Jewish issues and about the State of Israel, when it comes to solid knowledge the level of ignorance is appalling. Third, American Jewish cultural life is very thin. There are very few vehicles for communicating accurate information. Serious journals and periodicals, serious works of a popular or semi-popular nature virtually do not exist. Something must be done to address that situation. Four, there is a special challenge in the American Jewish community that may not exist in other diaspora communities. There is a psychological resistance in the American Jewish community to hearing any bad news. American Jews at the moment want to believe that American Jewish life is built on a solid foundation, the future is clear, and they certainly do not want to hear about the demographic problems of the Jewish people. Putting all these elements together, it seems that there is a tremendous challenge for communication of accurate information. Beyond that, it is up to the Jews to deal with the information in any way they think fit.

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Rela Geffen Monson

We may be taking a dangerous path by over-emphasizing the importance of the birth rate for Jewish demography. In the diaspora, money spent on this issue will be wasted. Even if the birth rate can be raised by a small percentage, Jews are being lost in many other ways which are more serious numerically. Jewish organizations should concentrate on the issues of conversion and of outreach to the intermarried. All surveys have shown that converts make good Jews. Mixed marriage in which conversion takes place produces good Jews. We should therefore concentrate on educating converts and the children of converts. We have to talk more about conversion, and increasing the substance and numbers of the Jewish people in that way. If we cannot stop intermarriage, we will have to talk about encouraging conversions in such situations.

The second issue we should address is Jewish parenting. We have to talk about raising Jewish children and creating Jewish children as a

cooperative decision between husband and wife. We need to discuss Jewish family life education as a reality in the community, and in order to counteract the great alienation of secular society, we need to emphasize the positive aspects of Jewish family life: the satisfaction of a family observing the Jewish calendar, together, and the enhanced quality of life which results.

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Doris Bensimon

I would like to emphasize one fact: that many Jewish communities overestimate their population. Overestimating the Jewish population of a particular community makes its leadership happy, but masks the eroding factors at work within it.

The question is how to increase awareness of the factors eroding Jewish population.

First, schools, youth movements, and community centers can make an effort to educate positively. This effort should be coordinated. Information that we provide on marriage, on the role of men and women in transmitting Judaism and helping it survive, should be presented in a positive way, and emphasize the beauty and value of Jewish marriage. Young people will respond to a form of Judaism which they perceive as open and living.

Second, it is necessary to provide education for young Jewish women. Their education is often incomplete, particularly in France, which has doubled its Jewish population due to a large influx of immigrants from North Africa. Traditionally, parents did not need to explain what they taught to their children. Today, children do not accept the traditional method of education, and so women in order to teach their children must understand why they do things in the same way as their ancestors. Thus the emphasis should be on Jewish education for women. Studying and teaching are supreme Jewish values, and thus explaining Judaism to less educated Jews is of paramount importance.

Another suggestion is that the decision to have children is the concern of the couples themselves. But information may have a role in it. The birth rate is not a specifically Jewish problem in France, and social services exist to encourage childbearing. However, some Jews – as recent immigrants – may not be fully informed about all the means now available to overcome infertility, social benefits for having a third

child, and social services available for mothers and children. Professionals should be available to advise young people when decisions concerning marriage, or a possible abortion, are about to be made. Doctors, rabbis, educators, social workers could all be involved.

My main point concerns mixed marriage, which has been discussed very little. It is difficult in a democratic country to confront the new forms of conjugal relations, such as cohabitation and the marriage of divorcees who have not received a religious divorce. Children are born of these couples. In Europe as in Latin America, despite the Halakhic rule that a child is Jewish if born of a Jewish mother, Jewish identity is transmitted by the father. What, in this case, are Jewish communities doing to educate such children and integrate them into the Jewish community? At least a portion of the thousands of children and adolescents born of mixed marriages wish to be Jewish. There might be even more of them if the Jewish communities were more welcoming.

The main problem, then is how to integrate marginal Jews. A way must be found to influence those Jewish parents in the diaspora who decide against sending their children to Jewish schools, because their own attachment to Judaism is too weak.

A Jewish Leader's Perspective

Charlotte Jacobson

I would like to express a few important philosophies quite contrary to some of the things you have heard.

First, in the session we strongly felt that we should not go out with pessimistic reports on the situation of the Jewish community. It will not serve our purposes to say and write that the Jewish community is diminishing, dying and facing a catastrophe. On the contrary, the challenge is to create a positive atmosphere about Judaism and to try to plant it in the community.

Second, not enough has been said about the fact that we are living in a generation in which women are not solely responsible for decisions on the size of the family. This should be a decision shared with husbands. And it is possible to have a large family in this day and age when most women have careers or have gone back to work, as is certainly the case in the U.S., only if the husband is willing to share in a special kind of life style that goes with having a wife who also has a

career or is working. And in this connection not only the husband is requested to cooperate but also the community is requested to provide services to working mothers.

We are living, in the U.S., in a decade where we are proud of what our communities have done for the older part of our population. We have recognized that people live longer, and they need to have creative living environments and creative programs. And the American community has done excellent things for people who, we know today, are living longer.

We now face the other end of the spectrum. We have to create conditions which will make it possible for women to have children and to be able to leave them in a proper environment, so that they can work and have their careers and have children at the same time.

We members of the Hadassah delegation think that in the U.S., and in every country of the world, we have to press our governments for legislation to provide services for children, for education and all the things that are necessary for us to have a feeling of safety when we go out to work.

Mr. Narkis, who is the head of the Department of Information of the WZO, made a very strong plea to all of us to use what he called the Anglo-Jewish press to further our case. He said that in the U.S. there are hundreds of papers, in every community of the world there are Anglo-Jewish newspapers, and that we should use those papers to present the issues, to present the challenges and to see to it that we reach out to the entire Jewish community in order to present the problems we are facing and positive ways to solve them.

We are living in an era of television and radio, and many communities have today Jewish television and radio programs. It is our obligation to use all these facilities at our command in order to educate the community.

Most of us who came from the Diaspora, came to this conference out of a sense of duty. But we were skeptical. We said we are going to hear about problems with which all of us are familiar, but will we come out with answers? I cannot say that we have come out with a long list of anything except suggestions. But one thing I do want to say is that the conference did light a fire within us. We no longer, any of us who came here, feel we have the right to sit back and just be complacent and say we know the problem, but we do not have the answer. I think we all come away with the feeling that we have a challenge, and just as the Jewish people and the Zionist movement has found answers to challenges in the past, we must do so again now.

People do not have children because of Zionist ideology. They have

children because they want to have families, to continue their culture and their family life. And speeches such as those made here about a Zionist commitment will not make anybody have one more child. It will happen only if the family wants to grow and have children.

So our obligation is to take all these recommendations we have heard here and to bring them to our respective communities, and do the best we can with what has come out of this conference. And hopefully, when we meet again, we will be able to show that in some areas we have moved forward.

A word to our rabbis: It is your obligation to listen to the voice of the people. You are here to serve the people and therefore help us solve our problems. It is not enough to learn Torah and Hebrew. You have to show that you have a commitment to the Jewish people, to the totality of Jewish life and not just working for the sake of a little bit of learning and knowledge, and I do not minimize that contribution. But you have seen that learning and knowledge has not been sufficient to tie all those to the Jewish people.

A Scholar's Perspective

Roberto Bachi

We have already received enough explanations on the general conclusion related to demographic trends and therefore I shall not repeat them. But let me stress that the conclusions we submitted to policymakers are not, in any way, designed to spread despair or more concern than necessary. But there are reasons to worry and the truth must not be concealed. I support scientists, who have the duty to tell the truth, but I must also stress that the truth must not cause despair but serve as an impetus for joint action to deal with the problems.

Our round table was requested to examine the extent of available information and I have to confess that we know very little. We have reached the conclusion that a good policy should be based on sound facts. In Israel much concrete progress has been made in the field of demographic policy planning, but here too we were surprised by the findings of the large survey we are conducting on marriages and fertility. The survey returned many things we did not know, despite having dealt with demography for many years. Therefore, we demographers should recognize the fact that we do not have the kind of information needed in order to establish good policies.

We therefore suggest the creation of data collection centers, such as those existing in the United States, in regions and countries which have a Jewish population. We suggest establishing small groups to systematically collect data. This information will be sent to a center to be created here in Israel.

Finally, we scientists are motivated and driven by a scientific curiosity without which we would not be able to work. But the research we are talking about must serve as a guiding basis for action and policy. Therefore, our main proposal is to conduct a coordinated survey on the demographic situation of the Jewish people throughout the world in the 1990s.

Suggestions for a Demographic Survey in the 1990s

Sidney Goldstein

Our meetings in Jerusalem constitute, I believe, a milestone in the development of Jewish demography worldwide. This is the first time that an international conference has focused exclusively on the demography of the Jewish people, and the first time that demographers from around the world have joined planners, communal leaders, representatives of national and international agencies and Jewish organizations, in order to scientifically assess the situation of the Jewish population worldwide, and its relevance to Jewish identification and continuity. We have also gathered in order to review possible policies that could affect the size, composition, distribution and growth patterns of the population, and to identify gaps in our knowledge and ways to close them.

I think all of you who have participated in these symposia will agree that these have been hardworking, and highly productive days. The chance to interact with colleagues from different regions of the world has served to impress us with the worldwide character of the Jewish people and with the different concerns we face about our present and future conditions.

It is clear from our discussion that we have much to learn from each other since many countries face similar situations with respect to the role of fertility, high rates of intermarriages, ageing of the population, declining household size, increasing rate of non-married individuals and increasing migration and redistribution.

But we also have much to learn from the many differences in the demographic situation that characterizes the Jewish population in various countries and within particular countries. Studies that are comparative in character promise therefore to be particularly rewarding. They provide insight into the dynamics, the population change among Jews, and therefore a sound scientific basis for developing policies more likely to be effective in achieving the desired goals.

But before such comparative studies can be undertaken, it is clear that we need cross-national data sets on the Jewish population in various countries. Data should be comprehensive in the attention given to key socio-economic and Jewish identification variables, and responsive to the planning and service needs of the communities.

These considerations have led to our recommendations for a worldwide series of surveys of the Jewish population, around the year 1990 and for complementary and innovative research that is more qualitative in character, thereby providing the opportunity for in-depth assessment of conditions that warrant special research on the dynamics of the demographic change.

I think we have, at this Conference, laid the foundation for a major advance in our knowledge of the Jewish people. In so doing, we have initiated the basis for more realistic planning for more effective Jewish community life in the future. At the same time, consistent with one of the Conference goals, the basis has been laid for stronger relationships between Israel and the Diaspora, and among various parts of the Diaspora, in the field of demographic research.

Conclusions

Daniel Elazar

At the opening of the session, I said that in this conference we are facing a serious problem: How can we, as an organized nation, deal with such a private and personal question as the increase of the number of children in a family? How can we give the children the feeling that they are Jewish, how can we cause them to be Jewish, to understand the meaning of all this and to take upon themselves the commitments involved in being Jewish and part of the Jewish people?

Listening to the reports by the study groups, I almost reached the conclusion that it is easier to do than talk – a rare occurrence in Jewish life – but this was also the general opinion among the participants of

our round table and we constantly “warned” each other not to call it a “crisis”, not to exaggerate the seriousness of the situation but also not to underplay it. Any evaluation on this subject seems to me accurate. Our task, with respect to this question, is to transform it into a desirable thing, a possible mission, and to improve Jewish life quantitatively and qualitatively. In our round table there were differences of opinion on the magnitude of the problem. We are concerned not less with fighting assimilation and with the difficulty of reaching out to remote communities, than with the problem of the decrease in the size of the Jewish population. Although these two questions seem to be different, one cannot deal with them separately. We have to maintain what we have and at the same time increase what we have. This is not easy, since individual decisions are motivated principally by considerations of convenience and such motives contradict at times the general needs of the Jewish People.

Other peoples too, like the Jewish people, face the problem of low birth rates motivated by the desire to enjoy the fruits of prosperity. This pattern of behavior disregards national policies which sometimes profess higher birth rates as a national interest.

In our discussion we asked ourselves if ideology has the power to turn the scales. A spirited discussion followed. Despite the declaration of Charlotte Jacobson that nobody will be willing to bring more children to the world as a result of a Zionist speech, most of us agreed that a certain measure of ideological commitment does exist without regard to superficial ideological imperatives formulated by the spokesmen of the nation. An example of this is the Orthodox and especially the ultra-Orthodox community which have an excellent demographic balance in their favor. These examples led to disagreements among us: some of us felt that we are praising the Orthodox, others held the opinion that the examples should serve as a challenge to the non-Orthodox. At any rate, the fact remains that Orthodox families, despite their very limited resources, have a high birth rate and the ultra-Orthodox have even higher rates. This fact stems from the existence of an internalized ideology, a commitment towards a certain aspect of Judaism. The number of children in an Orthodox or ultra-Orthodox family is 3 to 5 times greater than the number of children in a non-Orthodox Jewish family. In the opinion of our group this stems from the fact that the demographic need did not become part of the general ideological vision of non-Orthodox Jews, but not because of lack of motivation as Jews. Therefore, the task of the awareness factor is to transform this element into one of the ideological visions which animates committed Jews in our time.